Strange Mercy

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Strange Mercy

by TheWanderersWanderingDaughter

Summary

Early on he discovered that nothing comes without cost. Silver and gold, he was used to. A few times, blood. He gave his oath to a Lord who demanded it and pledged his loyalty to the cause, but what happens when it begins to demand more and more of him? The Boy Who Had No Choice--will he let it ruin him, even when he's stopped believing? Or can he trust a former enemy to save him? This is the story of the redemption of a Pureblood young man who never thought he would ever want it, the Muggleborn witch who changed everything, and the new and terrifying romance that sparked amidst the infancy of war.

Notes

Sequel to Power and Control. Please refer to that for context.

Longer summary:
Summer break should have been enough to clear his mind. It wasn't. He made his decision, not that he had much choice. Can he cope with what he has to do now? Can he cope with what he did then? What happens when it all threatens to tear him apart, starting in his mind? And what about her, why can't he stop thinking about her? What does she have to do with it?
He has the Mark on his arm, but all he wants is forgiveness. Is it too late for him?

This is gonna be dark, but ultimately is about forgiveness and redemption. Expect angst. A little romance too, later on. Expect a slow burn. I don't know how long this one will be. Probably longer than PAC
"It is good to see you, Miss Granger," the Headmaster said, shaking Hermione's hand.

"It's good to see you, too, Professor," she said, smiling. Harry and Ron burst through the door on the other end of the room, and nearly turned her into paste with the weight of their joined hug. She laughed and stumbled, as they'd thrown her off balance.

Dumbledore chuckled behind them.

She had just arrived at Grimmauld Place and Fred and George had just gone to take her trunk to the second floor, to the room she'd share with Ginny for the rest of the summer. Mrs. Weasley had greeted her warmly and then bustled back off to the kitchen to watch the soup. Ginny, too, had flung herself with arms wide open around Hermione and was in the process of inviting her up to her room when Mrs. Weasley called back for her to come help in the kitchen.

"Er, hello Professor," Ron said as he and Harry stepped away. "We didn't see you there."

"I won't stand in the way of a reunion among friends," Dumbledore said, smiling. "It is rather heartwarming to see."

"Has something happened at Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

"There is no reason to worry," Dumbledore replied. "I am here for tonight's assembly, although I am tempted to stay for dinner. I could recognize Molly's French-onion soup anywhere."

"Do stay," Mrs. Weasley said, beaming as she entered the room again. "We've always got a place here for you, Albus. Now that I mention it, Bill's got a question for you about something he found in Egypt."

"I'd be happy to hear it," Dumbledore said, bowing his head. "Is he here now?"

"No, he's due in an hour."

"Well in that case, I shall stay."

Molly beamed again, then looked at Ron.

"Dear, I need you to clean your bedroom," she told him. "You've got to make some room for Harry."

Harry looked down at himself.

"There's enough room!" Ron protested. "It's not that big a mess, mum."

"You are allowed to keep your room as big a mess as you like whenever we don't have guests," Molly said pointedly, and Ron sighed.

"I don't mind it," Harry said quickly. "Really."

Mrs. Weasley frowned. "Well, I suppose I could have you degnome the garden again," she said to Ron. "It's really getting out of hand."

Ron's smile fell.
"Yes," she said, "I think that'll do. Would you please?"

Ron looked like he might argue, but seemed to remember Dumbledore was there in the nick of time. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "fine," in a voice that suggested it was anything but.

"Thank you, dear," she said, and left.

"I'll help," Harry said.

"Me, too," Hermione added.

"Ah," Dumbledore said suddenly, "I was hoping I could speak to you first, Miss Granger. I'm afraid it's urgent."

"Oh—" she looked at Harry and Ron, wondering if they knew what this was about. Had he talked to them, too? "Alright."

"I won't steal too much of your time," Dumbledore said. "There is only an important matter we must discuss, and I think it best if we do it privately."

Harry nudged Ron.

"We'll be upstairs, Hermione," he said. Hermione nodded, and they went up the stairs.

Dumbledore gestured for her to walk alongside him, and nervously, Hermione did so, wondering if she was in trouble. The narrow walls of Grimmauld Place loomed tall over them, and a couple portraits eyed Hermione disdainfully as she passed by. At the end of the corridor he turned to the left and opened the door to a small study crammed with moldy books that they had yet to clear out. They both entered it and the Headmaster closed the door behind them.

"Would you like to sit down?" he asked, his tone light. "Myself, I prefer standing, these days. My knees aren't as strong as they once were. It grows tiresome to sit for too long a period. That being said," he added as he sat down, "I had quite a long walk through the nearby park here. I do love sightseeing in Muggle neighborhoods, especially in the summertime."

"Is there a problem, Professor?" Hermione asked, taking the seat he offered before the desk in the dingy office. "You implied this was about a serious matter."

"And so it is," he said, nodding. "As you know, I was hardly present last year, unfortunately, and Dolores Umbridge took control of the school."

Hermione nodded. The scars on the back of her hand itched.

"I was far removed from the school and with little hope for frequent contact, but I did suspect the experience would be unpleasant." He paused. "I didn't imagine it would grow so severe. I learned too late of the mistreatment and abuse you suffered at the hands of Draco Malfoy, and I would like to apologize for the fact that nothing has been done over it."

"I appreciate it, Professor," she said. "I was disappointed as well, but it wasn't for a lack of trying. Professor McGonagall did her best to see him expelled but Umbridge overruled it." She paused. "I did take matters into my own hands to make sure he wouldn't try again, though."

Dumbledore smiled. "I would love to hear about it, but I am afraid it would put me in a position where I would have to discipline you as well, if it turns out what you did was too severe."
"If I may be honest, Professor, it was much less violent than I would have preferred," she admitted.

"Very good," he said. "I do not condone or accept violence between my students. What he did was atrocious and I was grieved to learn it happened." He paused again. "His parents have made many efforts over the past month to contact me and plead for him to be allowed back into Hogwarts. I had messaged them at the end of last term that I had no intention of admitting him again. They did not take to it kindly."

"I can imagine," Hermione said drily.

Dumbledore brought a letter out from his robes and handed it to her.

"Lucius has written me as one last attempt to plead his sons' case. He assures me that his son is contrite and has been punished for what he has done, though he doesn't provide particulars. He says Draco has promised to be on his best behavior should he be allowed back, and that he will take extra measures to check his temper and make sure there will be no repeats of what happened last term. He even asked me to speak to you and assure you that he will compensate you for your injuries, if you so wish."

Hermione scanned the letter, frowning.

"I don't want anything from them," she said, looking back up. "It's insincere. They're trying to buy my silence.

"It does seem that way," Dumbledore agreed. "But we cannot be sure if we are not face-to-face. I agreed to speak with Draco on the first day of term to see if he means to keep his promise. Of course, I would not accept him back without your word on the matter. I want to my students to feel safe in Hogwarts, and if you think you will not feel comfortable having him back in the castle, he will not be admitted back, regardless of his sincerity."

Touched by the gesture, Hermione handed the letter back.

"I'm sure he won't approach me again," she said. "I don't mind if he comes back, Professor. I doubt that he's sincere but as long as he keeps a distance, I can manage. Thank you for asking me."

"I admire your fortitude," he said, smiling. "Please remember, if I make the final decision of readmitting him to Hogwarts, and he breaks his word, I will not hesitate to take action."

"Thank you, Professor." She stood from her chair. "Is that all?"

"For now," he said, smiling. "I'm sure Harry and Ron are waiting eagerly for your return." He stood and they exited the study.

[a few weeks later.]

The great scarlet locomotive hissed; the smoke it emitted hung in the air with no current to drive it away. The scene was hot and bleak, the air still and heavy with the promise of rain. The humidity of the air made his pressed, clean clothing feel limp and dirty; he shrugged his shoulders uncomfortably, trying to separate the damp fabrics from his skin. It felt good to be standing, the long voyage always left him yearning for a good stretch and a long walk, but now that he was on the platform he wished he were back on the train.

The platform was almost empty-he'd purposely waited until most everyone had stepped off so he could have a carriage all to himself. In the past years he'd always ridden with Pansy, but she'd been
one of the first to leave. He supposed it was all for the better. What was there to say to each other?

The very last carriage waited for him—he unbuttoned his robes and walked to the front of it, where the patient thestral waited for its cue to move. The sickly gray hue of its coat was dotted with rain, he could see its ribs protruding, the great black orbs it had for eyes looked straight ahead, indifferent to his presence. Draco stroked its bony head softly, and its ear twitched.

The ride to the castle was long and winded. Everyone had had an earlier start and were most likely already inside the castle for the start of the welcoming feast. As if aware of this, the thestral moved along at a quick clip but he'd already decided to skip the food and go straight to bed. What little he'd eaten on the train had been enough for the day and the thought of having anything else filled him with distaste. He didn't want to sit there anyhow and see everyone's smiling faces, or even listen to the Headmaster's opening speech. What he wanted was rest, and above all he wanted quiet.

Perspiration ran down his back underneath his robes. A shower wouldn't be frowned on, either.

Rain began to fall more heavily, and the roof of the carriage ascended over him, forming a cozy box complete with windows and a door. The static wash of sound was welcome to his ears, it drowned out the restless parade of thoughts that trampled through his mind. A look out the window revealed there were no other carriages in sight—he could see the gates of the castle through the mass of trees. Good. That meant everyone had already assembled at the feast and he would be free to slip into the dorms unnoticed, unless Filch was skulking about.

The carriage stopped at the gate and he was forced to exit. The thestral whickered behind softly and resumed its route behind him, the creaky little carriage followed, swaying with movement. It was a long walk to the entrance doors and by the time he actually passed the gate he was soaked through. It didn't strike him until then that he could have used a water repelling charm to spare himself this fate but in the end, didn't care. The rain was cold and hit him with force; invisible fingers tapping him over and over again, never ceasing. Reminder after reminder. The weight of the water in his clothes felt like little hands pulling down, his lashes were heavy with rain and no amount of blinking eased it—it simply kept falling. His hair was disheveled and dripping into his eyes so he pushed it back, walked up the steps and came to a halt.

"You're late."

Draco stepped past him. ""Professor."

The Potions professor followed him silently. He took in Draco's rumpled state with some distaste.

"You'll dry yourself before joining the rest, surely."

Draco walked faster, his mood rapidly becoming more sour. "I'm not hungry."

"Then kindly rid yourself of that foul temperament and get going before Argus finds you." With that, Snape strode off, robes fluttering behind him.

Draco continued to slog his way down to the dungeons, but at the midway point he finally dried himself up so Filch would have no way of tracking him to the common room. Either the spell didn't work as well as he remembered it to or he'd done it wrong—his clothes and hair had stopped dripping but were still most definitely wet. He ran a hand through his hair and descended a staircase, jaw clenched tight.

After a quick shower and a fresh change of clothes he was in bed, trying to sleep but found himself not quite able to. It came as no surprise, he'd been waiting for it. He found himself slightly nervous and couldn't figure out why. Classes started the next day and while he was glad to have those
familiar distractions back again, he knew they wouldn't be enough to be the answers to his problem.

He thought back to the previous months, frowning. Summers for him were usually a bore. There wasn't even much to do around the Manor so he'd spend his time flying around the grounds, practicing with a Golden Snitch or reading in the library. Often there'd be visitors and parties, sometimes Pansy would come over and they'd go to Diagon Alley together and meet up with other friends, but not this time. Whenever she went on holiday abroad, they'd send letters back and forth—his always short, hers shorter, but it was was their own form of communication and it was comforting. Now, however, there hadn't been a single letter, not even a note. He'd sat himself down at his desk, intent on penning her a note of apology too many times to count, but the parchment always ended up crumpled in a ball and tossed into a bin. He was still angry and not sure of anything anymore. Words, which used to come so easily to him, guttered and died before they could hope to formulate what he meant. He missed her terribly, but felt that he could not change what had been done. If she truly was friends with Granger then she would want no part of his society, so he ignored his quills thereafter and spent most of his time alone doing almost nothing.

Not to say there hadn't been any activity at all in the Manor in those previous months. The skull and serpent on his arm was proof enough. He pressed his lips into a tight line, blocked out what was trying to resurface. His temples were aching.

He remembered that other night instead, when a battle had occurred at the Ministry while he and so many others were oblivious in the castle. Pansy's news, his reaction after.

There'd been the absence of shock—it had never been a secret to him what his father did, even as a child. No one had ever attempted to hide from him the dealings his family was tied into, who they were loyal to. When they spoke of it they said it with pride, they filled him with their opinions and he'd grown to mirror them, came to accept them as his own. They were powerful and they were in the right, and so he'd grown with that mindset, although the thought remained that a day would come when their luck with the investigations would run out. Not everyone could be bought, and there were always those who had suspected them from the start. The searches of the manor were infrequent and fairly unsuccessful, but each time the authorities grew more unfriendly in their treatment towards his family.

Still, he'd never once entertained the thought it would be Potter of all people who would manage it at last. There hadn't been any triumph on Potter's face when he'd seen him last, no malicious glee. Just exhaustion and a raw sort of edge in his eyes, as if wanting to attack something. He'd never seen Potter with that look before, and was both intrigued and apprehensive of it.

When he'd boarded the train this morning he'd seen him sitting next to Granger in their compartment. Silent and still, but comfortable with each other. Her hand was the only part of her he'd seen, recognizing it at once by the scars he'd chosen for her, and it was resting on Potter's arm. Not for the first time, he wondered how he'd ever been driven to kiss her. His face had gone warm with the memory.

He closed his eyes. He was dry now. Why could he still feel the water on him?

Draco saw her eyes again, stunned but furious after his kiss. Her lips, darkened by his blood.

It had happened so long ago, he felt, and still sometimes he could still feel how his own lips had felt after kissing her. Warm. Tender. Bleeding and sore from the vicious bite she'd given it. Aching with the desire to do it again, before her anger invoked his and chased that want away.

How many months had it been since it had happened? Shouldn't he have moved past it by now?
He willed the memory away, shaking his head.

A momentary lapse of judgment, that's what it had been, and he'd learned his lesson. His last words to Granger hadn't been a lie—the moment his lips had touched hers he'd realized he had to get as far away from her as possible—she'd burned him with her rage, her lips, left him among the ashes. What he'd found in that kiss was all he needed to know he had to keep his distance. Her blackmail was a strange relief—now he had to stay away from her or incite further ruin upon himself. It didn't matter to him if she came through with it, but if the Dark Lord found out somehow the punishment would be severe, if not fatal.

She knew too much, had strong ammunition. While he'd been under her spell she'd taken down his guard and crawled into his veins without any welcome. He stared at the ink on his arm—here was the price he'd paid to cast her out.

Only, it wasn't just because of her. It was expected of him. He could not say no when the time had come. The Dark Lord would have taken resistance or any hesitation as contempt or betrayal. Besides, this was what he'd wanted since he was a boy. To be alongside his father fighting for the cause. To take back what belonged to them.

Except now his father was in prison. And he wasn't a boy anymore.

As quickly as that last thought had come, he pretended it had never come at all. These thoughts were dangerous. He could not listen to them. Doubt was deadly. The Dark Lord did not tolerate doubt within his followers. Draco had known this from the start, but still the niggling thoughts crept up and through the cracks of the wall he'd built. Every night he dreamed of red. Every night, ever since that green flash of light had emitted from the end of his wand, since that curse had left his lips.

He remembered the applause after. And then they'd branded him.

He shut his eyes again, forced himself to think of something bright and colorful. Anything but green or red.

An image popped up briefly—the way her hair had looked in the fierce glow of the sun, burning like gold. He ignored it.

This was what you wanted, he told himself. A chance for revenge. Power. You did what was required.

Yes, he thought, but was it worth it? What's more—has it actually worked?

There was no telling, mostly due to the fact that nothing had been done yet to complete that special task, the one he was so desperate not to think about.

As for Granger. He felt nothing. He would feel nothing. She'd been right—crushes were involuntary and could not be helped. It would go no farther than this.

Before his thoughts continued on this treacherous path Draco forced himself to think of something else. Anything. There were a thousand and one thoughts spinning round and round like tops in his mind, some faltering and some rolling on their edges but they all moved, growing faster, and it was impossible to focus on one specific thing without being hyper aware of the others still spinning, the oddly maddening whirring noise that came from them and his focus leapt from one to another, too confused to settle. It was the same every night, but he still hadn't found a way past it, and now he knew what came next. Blindly, he tried grasping at one as a last resort and failed.

A quick succession of images—blonde hair turned dark with blood. A hand lying limp, half
submerged in water. The Dark Lord's voice like gnashing teeth, directly into his ear. Horror filling him from within, toxic and preventing him from breathing properly. The Mark stirred on his arm, he watched it with a repulsed sort of fascination as the snake flicked its tongue. Another couple of flashes. Fire. Blood. His hands, coated in it.

Draco forced himself to keep absolutely still but his face gave him away. His eyebrows lowered and his mouth shifted into a grimace. He tried to take a deep breath, compose himself. The tops still spun, faster and faster until they were only blurs of color.

No.

No.

He could not afford to think like this. He could not let these thoughts take form, half completed as they were. Not now. He struggled to push them away. His neck seized, his breathing became shallow but in the end he managed it and he sank back into the mattress, breathing heavily. The images were gone in a blink, but not by his power. He ran his hand over his face.

Sometime throughout this people had begun coming back from the feast—he heard them distantly, moving about, preparing their things and was glad the curtains around his bed were closed and warded off.

His heart had just begun beating normally again by the time everything stilled. He closed his eyes and longed for sleep, but it never came.
Recollections and Remembrance

When the door opened to the Headmaster’s office Draco was hit by a beam of sunlight pouring in from the windows at the far opposite wall where he stood. He fought not to scowl in the glare of the light; it warmed his face immediately to the point that it felt like he’d just suffered severe embarrassment.

Within seconds he was overheated, beginning to sweat inside his robes, and he hadn’t even stepped foot inside yet.

“Ah, welcome, Draco. Please,” Dumbledore, who was standing behind his desk, waved him in and then gestured to the chair before his desk, “sit.”

Draco entered the room stiffly, no smile or expression of greeting on his face. He lowered himself into the chair and waited apprehensively for the Headmaster to explain why he had summoned him. He suspected he already knew, and wondered if he would be sent home that very day, although he wondered why the Headmaster could not have scheduled their meeting for the previous day.

Dumbledore sat back down into his chair as easily as if he were only twenty rather than however old he might really be. He looked at Draco rather seriously through his spectacles, his stare nonthreatening, but a little unsettling all the same.

“I trust you had an enjoyable journey yesterday morning,” he said rather measuredly.

Draco had hardly spoken a word since the day before. The only other person he’d spoken to was Snape. Over the summer, he’d gone through days at a time where he hadn’t said a word in between. He licked his lips and opened his mouth.

“Yes, sir.”

“Excellent.” The Headmaster nodded. “I expect you know why I summoned you, Draco?”

“I’ve got a good idea why.”

Dumbledore paused to study Draco for a moment, his eyes never wavering.

“I had not the mind to allow you back into Hogwarts after the events of last term. I believe you are aware of that.”

“Yes, sir.”

The sunlight was still heavy on his face. Draco wanted to tell the Headmaster to close his damn curtains, for heaven’s sake. He would be blind by the time the interview was over.

“Your father and mother pled your case very passionately,” said Dumbledore. “They were insistent that you remain here at Hogwarts.”

Draco nodded.

“However, I have heard nothing from you,” the Headmaster said. “I would like to know your thoughts on this matter. Why should I allow you back into my school after attacking another student?”

You shouldn’t, Draco thought.
When Draco took too long to reply, Dumbledore added, “You understand my hesitation, do you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You have a history of losing your temper, as evidenced from last term,” Dumbledore said. “If you continue to be a danger to your peers, I cannot in good judgment allow you to remain here.”

Draco opened his mouth to speak. The words felt stiff and forced on his tongue but he hoped that the Headmaster could tell that he actually meant them. “I understand, sir. I deeply regret my actions.”

Dumbledore might have been surprised by his words, but it was difficult to tell. The only reason Draco suspected it was by the way he hesitated a moment too long to reply.

“That is welcome news, indeed.”

Draco didn’t smile back.

“I would like to know that you are being sincere.” Dumbledore asked, and Draco shifted in his seat. “Is there any way you could think of that could prove it?”

Draco frowned. “I don’t know, sir.”

The Headmaster studied him through guarded eyes.

“Would you be willing to take some Veritaserum?” he asked.

Draco’s mouth had gone dry. Uneasy anger bubbled inside him, and he had to tamp it down, reminding himself that obviously Dumbledore wouldn’t have believed him straight away. Anyone who did otherwise was a fool. Given his record, it was no wonder he doubted him.

“If it’s absolutely necessary, yes.”

The Headmaster said nothing for a moment, and Draco stared back, wondering if he should have refused instead. It was probably not ethical for a Headmaster to ask that of a student, but he wasn’t too concerned about legality when he wanted to be as far from his home as possible. If Dumbledore had asked him to jump through the eye of the needle, he’d have done it, never mind the fact that he had been ordered to kill the wizard not two months prior.

“I believe that won’t be necessary at all,” Dumbledore said at last, and Draco felt himself relax a little in relief. “It is actually illegal for me to ask you that, not that I ever had the intention of doing so, although I do appreciate your willingness to cooperate.” He stood rather heavily from his chair, his long sleeves getting tangled in each other as he reached up to adjust his wizard’s hat.

“You are granted permission to stay,” he said, and Draco felt himself relax a little.

“…Thank you, sir,” Draco said.

“I trust you will be on your best possible behavior, however,” Dumbledore said, looking at Draco from above his spectacles, perched precariously as they were on his crooked nose. “If I find you have lied to me, or are repeating your actions from last term, I will not hesitate to expel you, and you will have to find someplace else to continue your education. Have I made myself clear?”

“Of course.”

As he left the office, Draco found himself feeling grateful towards the Headmaster. He ignored the feeling at once and focused on the trek back to the Slytherin dormitories.
He could not afford to feel anything besides apathy towards him. Anything less and anything more than that would spell nothing but trouble.

"How much time have we got left?" Ron asked from behind her. Hermione, who'd been totally engrossed in a book, jumped. Harry was sitting on the opposite side of the tree, quiet as he'd been since the end of last term.

Hermione sighed, looked at her wristwatch. "Ten minutes. We should leave now, actually."

"Now? It's ten whole minutes!"

"Yes, and it's ten minutes to get back inside the castle, get our things, and get to the fourth floor before the bell."

Ron crossed his arms. His wrinkled tie hung loose around his neck. "Harry and I usually manage it without all the worrying."

Hermione was already standing, straightening her robes. "That's also why you have so many detentions." She picked a piece of a leaf off of her sleeve and gave her hand to Harry, whose leg had gone numb. She hoisted him up and he stumbled as he tried to stand, wincing.

Ron was still scowling by the time they got to class. Hermione paid him no mind and sat down in her seat, brought out her text and some parchment.

Happy consequence of their rushing in early was they were the earliest in the room-a rare occurrence for Harry and Ron. The latter gave her a sour look, displeased to have ended his lunch hour so soon. Hermione smiled and tapped her fingers on her desk gently, eager to start.

As everyone else began trickling in, red faced and winded from the climb, she rifled through her older notes, just to make sure she was on track. That day's particular topic was already written on the board in the front of the room in McGonagall's stiff hand, and just because she had nothing else to do she began to copy it all down. The Professor entered just as she started, and Hermione straightened in her seat, just as Neville came in and sat down in front of her, wheezing.

Most of the Slytherins came in right as the bell rang, sliding into their seats quickly. Hermione caught glimpse of familiar blond head and looked back down to her notes, suddenly too aware of how tightly she held onto her quill. When she finally looked back up she could discern without looking in his general direction that he'd sat in the farthest side of the room from her. The pale blond of his hair was barely visible in her peripheral vision, and as the time passed he never once looked anywhere else than the front of the room, and Hermione allowed herself to relax.

The lesson passed quickly. At the end of it, Hermione packed her things and waited for Harry and Ron by the door. Pansy met her there, looking grim.

"Dreadful lesson, wasn't it?"

Hermione laughed. "Hush, you. Did you pay attention at all?"

"Yes, and that's how I know it was dreadful." Pansy's deadpan tone broke away as she laughed. "But Transfiguration has always been my worst subject, so I ought to study rather than complain."

Hermione tucked her wand away inside her robes. "I'll help, if you like."
Harry and Ron had caught up, they greeted Pansy awkwardly.

"I think you'll have to, unless you want your poor friend failing this class," Pansy said. "Right then. I'm off. I know we're due for dinner in an hour but I'm starving. I'll be in the kitchens if anyone needs me." She waved and left.

Harry, Ron and Hermione began their walk to the dungeons for their next class.

"Bit of an odd one, her," Ron said.

"How so?"

Ron made a face. "She always looked so cold to me. Haughty, you know? It's strange seeing her like this now."

Hermione laughed. "Is that all? Some people can't help the neutral expression of their face. Either that or she was in a foul mood whenever you happened to see her."

It was clear by his expression this was something he'd never considered before. "Hm."

Harry was busy riffling through his battered secondhand copy of Advanced Potions.

"This thing's all marked up to hell," he muttered. "All the margins are full of notes. I can barely read any of it with my glasses on."

"That's a good thing, usually. The margins thing, that is," Hermione replied. "They could be useful."

"Yeah, or maybe they're full of shit notes and bad drawings," Ron said, and shaking his head, Harry closed the book.

"Who've we got Potions with today?" he asked.

"Hufflepuff."

"Oh, good," Ron said as they came in view of the doors. "Ernie Macmillan owes me five sickles."

"For what?" Hermione asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

"We bet on a game of Wizard's chess. Cormac McLaggen vs Padma Patil."

"And who won?"

"Padma, of course. Ernie's been avoiding me since."

The moment they entered the classroom Ron spotted Ernie and made a beeline for him, and managed to steal back to his seat just in time, pockets clinking, as the Potions Professor entered the room.

This class passed more slowly than the others. Hermione hated it in the dungeons, and she hated Potions class too, no matter how well she did in it. Professor Snape had a special gift for making others feel uncomfortable, and it was for that reason the room was almost always silent during his lessons. It was as if he wanted everyone to be as miserable as possible—which wasn't too wild a guess when Snape was the subject.

The dungeons were always the coldest parts of the castle—if it weren't for the prepared cauldrons already warming up the rooms, she would have been able to see her own breath. She wondered how Snape could tolerate spending most of his time in such conditions, but as she didn't care much for the
Professor, the thought was forgotten instantly and replaced by something more important.

They were to work on a Pepperup potion, as Madame Pomfrey was running low on stock and had asked him for more. The recipe was easy enough to her so the work came smoothly and she had time for idle thought as it brewed.

So strange—he could still feel the sharp, cold air from that night, pricking at her lungs. She remembered how his hands had felt, pressing into her back, occasionally slipping a little lower by accident when she’d stumbled or slowed. There were nights that she’d wake from some blank dream, clutching at her hand, where the scars stung as if they’d just been cut fresh into her flesh while she’d been asleep.

Much as she wanted to put all that behind her, she’d realized unhappily that it was quite impossible.

After she’d abandoned Malfoy in the Forbidden Forest that night she’d rushed into the castle and found Harry. He’d told her what had happened to Umbridge, how she’d insulted the centaurs and how they’d carried her off somewhere deep inside the forest. She’d felt sick at first, thinking of what she’d done and if she’d be in trouble, but then her hand had inexplicably begun to sting and she’d looked down on it and remembered how she’d got it, and why. The feelings of guilt had gone at once.

_I'm glad_, she’d thought, distantly horrified with herself.

It was frightening how that part of herself had been so fully revealed in one night; that dark, angry part of herself that she rarely paid attention to, much less knew that existed inside her. There’d been times it’d made a brief appearance—she thought of Rita Skeeter as a beetle, trapped inside her jar— but never to this degree.

That whole year felt like a fabricated memory, but none so much as that moment when Malfoy had kissed her. It resurfaced sometimes, the memory, and she still wasn’t sure what to think of it.

He’d denied it, but she was positive of his attraction to her. How hadn’t she noticed it before? It was almost comical how blind she’d been to it. The few encounters where it’d been almost glaringly obvious—when he’d scared her in that very storeroom that was only a few feet away from where she stood now, the way he’d looked at her while he’d had her cornered by the Room of Requirement. The way he’d looked at her after the kiss, his eyes half closed, tongue darting out to lick his lips as if still wanting to taste her there. She shivered.

It shouldn’t have surprised her, it really shouldn’t have. She should have known, should have seen it coming. But fear had blinded her. That and the silly notion that such a thing was impossible. Well, she’d been proved wrong. And now what?

He had kept his part of the deal so far. She saw him frequently every day, in between classes, during meals, even outside on the grounds while they had their free periods. Sometimes she’d see him moving through the library whilst studying. But he never once looked at her or came near her, and so she was content.

When the news had broken out that his father had been arrested at the Ministry, she’d immediately wondered what his reaction had been. More rage? Or the stone-cold silence that he was sometimes prone to?

She had not seen it happen. Lucius Malfoy had attacked them at the Ministry for a brief moment before a larger group of Death Eaters rushed in, and she hadn’t seen him at all after. Bellatrix Lestrange had been there too, so she’d been informed, but she hadn’t seen her at all. Or perhaps she
had, she didn't know. There'd been too many faces there and too much going on to concentrate on each one, and she'd been half blind from the sparks and curses and hexes flying around the rooms they'd fought in. She remembered running without thought, deeper and deeper into the Ministry. The sounds of so many footsteps behind her, and not always knowing if the source was from friend or foe, everyone kept getting split up. Harry ran ahead too quickly, tangled in a duel with Lucius Malfoy for the Orb, and she'd thought it had ended at last when she saw him with Lupin, stunned and shouting something, until she'd looked closer and saw the grief in their faces. Ron joined her moments later, and whatever he'd started to say died at once in his throat.

And Sirius...she glanced at Harry, who was reading his textbook and stirring his cauldron. The pain he must feel, even months later. The way he'd been screaming...it still hurt to think about. Their summer had been so tense and at times, hostile. It was awful to see what grief turned people into, especially when it was your best friend. He'd been so angry for so long, had kept to himself for long periods of time, snapping at her and Ron even when they knew he never meant to. She remembered his outbursts and wished she still had her Time Turner, that she could go back and somehow prevent him all this pain. The only problem was she'd given up her Time Turner long ago, and all the remaining ones had been accidentally destroyed before her eyes that very night.

He's coping, though, she thought, staring at him from the corner of her eye. He's getting better.

She hoped she was right.

At the end of class Snape walked around the class, judging everyone's potions. Neville had been working in secret with Parvati Patil, and had managed not to make a mess of anything. Snape looked into their cauldrons and left without saying a word. Neville let out a squeak of an exhale and Parvati grinned.

Lavender Brown's potion received a disdainful sniff, and Ron's was ignored completely once he caught sight of the ominous trail of smoke coming from it. He paused beside Hermione, gave the faintest roll of his eyes, and then went to Harry. The class went still, as it usually did when they awaited a confrontation between the two. Hermione turned carefully, not knowing what to expect.

Snape was looking into Harry's cauldron. There was a pause, so brief but then he moved away.

"Passable," he said coldly. " Barely."

Harry looked shocked. The rest of the class stared blankly. Hermione shot him a grin and turned to face the front.

"That was a bloody miracle, mate," Ron said after class as they climbed through the entrance to the common room.

"I don't think I've ever gotten such praise from Snape," Harry said jokingly.

"The way he looked, you'd think Neville had just become the Professor!" Ron said, laughing.

"Well you're getting better at Potions," Hermione said, putting her schoolbag down on the floor. "It was bound to happen! He can't fail you for that."

Harry had a funny look on his face but he nodded. Hermione didn't notice, she was rubbing her shoulder where the strap to her bag had dug in.

"Dinner?"

Ron dumped his bag beside hers. A pot of ink rolled out and with his foot he kicked it back in.
"Lead the way."

Dinner was the usual noisy affair. Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan recounted what had happened during Potions to the others, who were just as surprised as everyone else. Harry received some congratulations uncomfortably, and insisted it had all been a fluke.

After she finished eating Hermione pulled out a small book from her robes and tried to read to pass away the time but couldn't. She tried again to absorb the words she was looking at but her attention kept wandering so she closed the book and put it away.

"You ok?" Ron asked her.

"I'm fine," she said, standing. "Just tired, I think. I'm going to the common room."

"Alright."

She rose and began to move, but looked over her shoulder to bid them goodnight. Without meaning to, her gaze locked onto Malfoy, who was sitting farther on down the room. Something about his appearance gave her pause and she frowned.

As if he sensed her stare, he looked up, and she quickly averted her eyes, fighting her guilty blush. Harry and Ron hadn't noticed.

"See you in the morning?" They nodded and she left.

What the hell was that?

An accident, she told herself. I didn't mean to stare. I don't even know why I did.

At the very least, she'd been the one who'd been staring at him, not the other way around. She'd instigated it. He hadn't broken the rule.

Draco watched her leave and went back to staring out the window.

He didn't look at her. Well, yes he had, but he'd caught himself just in time before meeting her eyes so his gaze had stopped abruptly at the lower half of her face. And then she'd turned away. He wondered if she considered that violating her rule. Would she be delivering on her threat now? He wasn't sure. Why had she blushed? She had no reason to, if she thought he was guilty. Over the comforting calamity of the background sound that was dinner hour, he heard the heavy doors close at her exit. He resisted the urge to follow her, and turned back to his meal.

"I still can't believe they let that git back in," Ron muttered, kicking at a bit of rubbish on the floor. "Dumbledore should have expelled him the second he set foot off the train. It would've been amazing to see the look on Malfoy's face when he realized he'd have to take the train all that way back again."

"Apparently his parents were very persuasive in getting Dumbledore to reconsider," Hermione said drily.

"That, and they pulled a few hundred strings, too," Ron added. "And everyone knows they've got all the right ones."

"It's bloody ridiculous," Harry said, shaking his head. "I really didn't think Dumbledore would have let him come back. He's got to have some reason why."
"He probably doesn't want to get smoked out of the school again and forced into hiding by Lucius Malfoy and all the other important idiots he's got up his sleeves," Hermione said. "From what you told us, he's been extremely busy this summer, and I don't think he wants to be set back any longer."

They reached the Fat Lady's portrait. She was not there. Ron sighed heavily and sat on the floor. Harry leaned against the wall beside him, and they began to wait.

"We could always push him out a window," Harry said, and Ron burst into laughter.

Hermione fought back a smile. "I'd rather you didn't."

There was a drip somewhere in the corridor. It was so faint, but it echoed around them. Ron reached up from the floor to knock on the portrait in vain, knowing nobody could hear him through the other side. Harry cleaned his glasses.

"Off the Astronomy Tower, then?" Ron offered. "Or his broomstick?"

"He deserves worse than that, I think," she replied, "but I'd rather not focus on him anymore."

Harry and Ron traded a look between themselves.

"What if he comes after you again?" Harry asked.

"Oh, he won't," Hermione said with the barest of smiles.

"Now how are you so sure?" Ron asked, crossing his arms.

"I just do. I don't have to worry about him, thankfully, so I can focus on more important things."

"If you're sure," Ron said a little dubiously. He took out a roll from a pocket in his robes and bit into it, then offered some to Harry and Hermione. They both declined.

The Fat Lady stumbled suddenly into her portrait, breathing heavily. In her hands she clutched a new bottle of wine and sported several stains on her dress that suggested it would not last long.

"About time," Ron said, standing quickly.

"Yes," the Fat Lady slurred. "About time! But none for a 'how are you?' or 'good evening,' as always!" She hiccuped, and sat down into her chair looking quite cross. "You would get bored too, and always be going off for a look around if you had no place else to be but here!"

Ron had turned bright red. "Er--sorry."

"How are you?" Harry asked quickly.

The Fat Lady smiled graciously, her cheeks pink covered in powder. "Very well, my dear, thank you."

She reached out to place her new bottle of wine on the small table beside her, and missed. It fell to the painted floor and smashed into pieces. The Fat Lady looked at it in shock for three whole seconds before she slumped backwards into her chair, one palm covering her eyes. They heard her whisper an obscenity.

"May we go in?" Hermione asked after a moment of silence.

The portrait swung open without their even having given the password, but not being ones to look a
gift horse in the mouth, Harry, Ron, and Hermione scrambled inside without another word, Ron stifling laughter all the while.
Morning dawned cold and he found himself shivering long before he awoke, drifting in that comfortable space that lay between consciousness and unconsciousness. That he'd gotten any sleep at all was surprising and pleasant; though his eyes still felt heavy and his thoughts struggled to form, as if he'd been drugged. Still, it was better than being trapped in the currents of his regular train of thought so he remained there trying to fall back asleep.

Except the cold. It was too cold, and he was still shivering. Draco frowned and twisted on his bed, only to discover that his blankets were at his feet, knotted into a lump. With his eyes still closed and mind carefully blank, he tried with his feet to bring the blanket up to cover him more fully, but at one point something went wrong and the thing slid to the floor and he opened his eyes and swore. When he realized what he'd done he swore again, and sat up, noticing for the first time that the curtains around his bed were swaying from a breeze.

He pushed them open at once, and found the culprit of his misery. Someone had opened the window next to his bed and either forgotten to close it or left it on purpose. He shut it quickly, and was left in the cold swept room. Everyone else had gone to breakfast, it seemed, and he was glad to be alone. The sound of his bare feet against the cold floorboards was somehow comforting, the muted creak and light thud of each step. He stretched, threw on some warmer clothes, and went back to the window, unsure of what to do next.

He wasn't hungry and had no wish to go down to the Great Hall or anywhere else. The sky outside was a bleak shade of blue, riddled with clouds stretched thin like a threadbare blanket draped across the heavens. There was the dullest pounding in his head and he was still tired, but class started in-he shot a glance at his wristwatch on his bedside table-thirty minutes, and there was nothing to do.

Not quite nothing, he thought, staring at his pillow. The room was only just getting warm at last, and he felt his eyelids becoming heavy again.

"Has anyone seen Mr. Malfoy?" Professor McGonagall asked the class. Everyone shook their heads, and she scribbled something down onto her parchment before resuming roll call.

Hermione looked over at Pansy, who looked slightly troubled.

"Is something wrong?" she asked her.

"He's never skipped class before," Pansy whispered, raising her hand as McGonagall called her name.

Hermione doubted this. "Really?"

"Yes, of course."

Hermione shrugged her shoulder. "I'm sure he's all right." She said it without feeling, in truth not caring about Malfoy's absence even though it seemed to alarm Pansy.

"Malfoy's not here, is he?" Harry asked, scanning the length of the Slytherin table.

"No," Ron said. "Why?"
"He wasn't in class either. What do you think's happened?"

"He probably didn't feel like going to class," Hermione said, and took a long drink of pumpkin juice.

"But why not?" Harry asked, and Hermione shrugged.

"How should I know?" she tried not to sound as irritated as she felt.

Harry went quiet for a moment, looking pensive. Ron and Hermione exchanged a glance. Harry opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off when Ginny came in and sat down beside her brother.

"I feel like I haven't seen you lot since we stepped off the train," she said, immediately reaching for the platter of sandwiches. "I even missed you, Ron."

Ron glared at her, but couldn't speak through a mouthful of pasta. Ginny grinned, then turned to Hermione and stuck out her wrist.

"Fred and George sent me a perfume they made," she said, motioning that Hermione should sniff her skin. She did, cautiously. "They won't say what it's made of, but I think it smells nice."

"It does," Hermione agreed, "but what does it do?"

"It's supposed to make me faster," Ginny said, "As in walking, running, flying, etc. Even talking." She grinned. "You should have seen me in Potions earlier. That new professor Slughorn's always talking, this time it was my turn. He couldn't get a word in edgewise."

"You're testing it?" Ron asked incredulously. "Are you mad? Don't you remember the last time you tested something for them?"

"Of course," Ginny said, flushing slightly. "I reminded them, too. Made sure it's past the testing phase. They'll think twice about fooling me again, even if I was a little girl then. Besides," she added, "It works. I ran here from the fifth floor and I still smell nice. And they paid me ten galleons."

"Why didn't they ask me too?" Ron asked, scowling.

"I asked them first. They needed a last trial run and wrote to me about it, and I needed a little pocket money."

"Will you show us?" Hermione asked.

"Sure." Ginny looked around the room. "Let's go outside, though. It's not quite a love potion, but it's still contraband." Quickly, before they left she grabbed a little plastic container from inside her schoolbag and loaded it with food from the table and stood. They followed her and left.

At her own suggestion, Ginny ran two laps around the entire Quidditch pitch. She did it easily, and accepted their cheers graciously, even went for a third lap, but by the time she finished it her face was glowing red from physical exhaustion and sweat, and she'd slowed down considerably. Grinning, she jogged back to them at her own regular pace.

"Wears off quick," she said between gasps, wiping the sweat from her forehead. Hermione handed her a handkerchief, which she promptly took to blow her nose.

"It's still very impressive," Hermione said. "Although I imagine some people would want to use it to cheat at Quidditch."

"Not me, that's for sure," Ginny said stoutly, and grinned at Harry, who blushed. "You don't have to
worry about that, Captain. I don't need it."

"Er-good," was all he managed to say, and blushed again. Hermione bit her cheek to hide a smile.

"So you tried it out inside the school," Ron said, "and you didn't get caught?"

"I felt it kick in in the middle of class, and Slughorn didn't seem to think it strange," Ginny explained, "After class the corridors were full of people so no one could have caught me anyway. I did accidentally run into Malfoy, though. He was just out of the kitchen so I didn't see him until it was too late. Almost knocked him down. He didn't look too happy."

Everyone laughed except for Hermione.

"So no side effects, then?" she asked.

"None. Aside from the fact that I haven't stopped eating since I took it," Ginny said, picking a drumstick from her container and biting into it without fear of judgment.

"How was Slughorn, anyhow?" Ron asked.

"Oh, loads better than Snape," Ginny said. "He might not be as clever as Snape or as quiet, but you wouldn't believe how cheerful class was without Snape as Professor."

"I think I'd be even more cheerful if they'd given him the sack instead of let him teach the Dark Arts," Harry muttered.

"Ah, cheer up," Ginny said. "Slughorn's eager to see you in class, he told me. He wants to see how good you are at Potions."

"Whatever his expectations are, they're too high," Harry said grimly, and Ron guffawed. Hermione frowned.

"That's not true, Harry, you've gotten better."

"You haven't burnt a potion in ages," Ron said, nodding. "And all our paired assignments have gotten good marks, even if it almost gave Snape an aneurysm to do it."

They all laughed. Harry grinned.

"There's the bell," Hermione said, and they started their walk back up to the castle.

"I have free period now," Ginny said, and brought out a small block of cheese from her container, which she ate quickly. "Anyone else?"

"Charms," Harry and Ron said together.

"I have free period too," Hermione said, and turned to Ginny. "Mind spending it in the library?"

"Sure, I'll just have to eat faster, or Madame Pince will bar me from the library before I even set foot in it," Ginny said, and produced a fork from her pocket. Hermione laughed.

The sky had gone dark. He sat in the library, accompanied by a small pile of books. He'd chosen a secluded area to sit in, one that was closed off on three sides by bookcases and still shielded by a long row of bookshelves that led straight down to it. Blaise had told him the assignments that were due the next day from their classes after dinner, and thankfully hadn't asked why he hadn't attended.
He ran a hand through his hair, scribbling messily on his parchment. The work was simple, so it was easy for his mind to wander, to his frustration. It led to many mispelled words and smeared blots of ink., and since the thing was ruined anyway, he grew careless in his writing. At the end of it, he would have to rewrite the whole damned thing.

He hadn't meant to skip all his classes. He'd meant only to sleep for at least twenty minutes and then have ten left over to make it to class on time, but when he'd woken the sun was setting and he found he wasn't as distressed about it as he thought he'd be. It was only one day, and certainly the first time he'd ever skipped class. A mere fluke, and it would not happen again.

He'd gone to pilfer some food from the kitchens, and was just returning when the Weasley girl had run headlong into him, almost knocking him to the ground. She'd yelled out a hasty apology, unsuccessful in stifling her giggles, and it'd taken a moment to catch his breath and walk on as if nothing had happened. No one had seen and it didn't matter, though he couldn't help but wonder what she'd been galloping for.

Finishing at last, Draco took out another piece of parchment from his bag and began to write more slowly, copying from the first draft, annoyed that he'd been so sloppy the first time. He paused only to gather more ink, and when he was done he pushed it away, and began to think.

The library was silent as death, as always. Every now and then he thought he could hear a hushed whisper or some soft muffled sound, but it was gone as fast as it'd started and he found himself doubting he'd ever heard it.

"Kill the Headmaster," the Dark Lord had told him, "and you will prove your worth to me."

He'd made it sound so easy. 'Kill him.' As if he could just press a thumb to his image and wipe him from existence.

So this was the special task his mother had told him of. Although when they'd both heard it they realized it was anything but. His poor mother had been so miserable for the rest of the summer, and although she tried to hide her pain from him he knew what she felt, since he felt it too.

He does not expect me to achieve it, he thought dully. He's punishing my family by assigning me that task.

There was a very slim chance that he might prove the Dark Lord wrong. But it was very small, and the chances of him failing were so very big in comparison. For all he liked to pretend, Dumbledore was no frail old wizard. Draco had heard everyone's recounts of the Headmaster's duel with the Dark Lord at the Ministry, and had been impressed despite himself. If the Dark Lord could not have managed it when the chance was so ripe, how could he himself ever hope to?

It's not a matter of hope or chance, he reminded himself. I have to do it. I have to.

The Dark Lord's words slithered into his thoughts, oily and cold—Draco heard his voice as if he were right beside him, and forced himself not to flinch.

"If you accomplish it, young Draco, I shall be very proud of you and you will be rewarded handsomely... Fail me, and I will be forced to realize that you and your family are of little use to me."

Gooseflesh rippled over his skin. Draco pushed the memory away, shaking.

No room for failure. I have to do it.
"But how?" he whispered anxiously.

Frantically, he began to think, gathering up one solution after another, each so weak and improbable that he grew angry with himself. He struck at the pile of books beside him and they fell to the floor with a bang. His heart stopped, and at once he became aware of footsteps heading his way. It would be Madame Pince on her way to screech at him and probably ban him from the library. Draco bent down to pick them up, shoved his previous thoughts to the back of his mind and tried to calm himself.

The footsteps grew closer, and as the persons they belonged to appeared at the end of the aisle he calmed considerably. They were too far away and it was too dark for him to be able to make out who they were. Their silhouettes suggested they wore skirts. That was all he could discern. But as they drew nearer he saw the red shine in the first one's hair in the dim glow of the lamp nearby. He felt his insides twist.

*Of all the luck...*

"Are you alright?" The Weasley girl called out. "Sounded like you fell."

"It's none of your business," he snapped. His ears burned, red and he was glad he was in the dark where it made no difference. "The books fell, not me."

"Oh, it's you," Ginny said, turning to the other girl, who he at once realized was Granger, by the gleam of her Prefect badge. At once he remembered the last time he had found her in the library, covered in the gold of the sun. He hadn't looked at her directly, but to be safe turned away from her. She did the same.

"Let's go," she said to her friend. "He wants to be alone."

On instinct his mouth opened to reply but catching himself in time, he said nothing instead.

The redhead stepped forward, to his annoyance. "I didn't hurt you when I ran into you earlier, did I?"

"Weasley, a sack of flour could deal me more damage than you could with bricks in your robes," he said. "I'm fine."

"Doesn't hurt to make sure," she said, sounding nonplussed. "I don't want to have to deal with an investigation from the school board if you cry wolf like you did third year."

"I had no plan of it," he said irritably, thankful that the shadows cast over him by the tall bookcases hid his shameful blush. "Leave me be."

"Merlin, but you're in a sour mood," Ginny said. "I apologized, didn't I?"

"Weasley, you're giving yourself airs if you think I'd lick my wounds and have a cry over you. May I work in peace or must I move?"

"Fair enough," she said, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "I only wanted to make sure you'd heard me."

"Goodbye," he said with a tone in his voice that indicated he was done with the conversation. He turned his back to them.

"Alright, don't fall off your broom," the Weasley girl said, and he listened to the sound of their footsteps growing distant as they walked away.
"I wonder what's got his wand in such a knot," Ginny mused as they headed to the Gryffindor common rooms. "He reminded me of Percy a bit, there."

"That's a strange comparison," Hermione said. Indeed, it was hard to imagine either being anything like the other.

"It was the way he said goodbye," Ginny said, "before he went to work for the Ministry he started getting snappy in the same way Malfoy was just then, and he'd dismiss mum and dad like that if they got into an argument."

"Oh."

Ginny laughed. "They're both pricks, that's how they're alike."

Draco, in the meantime, had decided to leave the library. All his work was finished (and rewritten) and the library was set to close for the night. Madame Pince watched him with those narrowed eyes of hers as he exited. He gave her a half-hearted wave, to see what she would do, but by then she had looked away and he left feeling rather foolish.

He'd only eaten once that day, and feeling hungry again, went down to the kitchens, where the babbling, fastidious little elves were only too happy to wrap him a little meal to take to his dorm. Draco ate very little, the only part of the meal he actually finished was the four bottles of Butterbeer he'd managed to slip into his robes. The cheap drinks were certainly nothing compared to what he was used to back at home, but he was feeling warm and a little bubbly by the time he crawled into his bed, too lazy to change into his sleepwear. Upon feeling too warm, however, he stripped himself of his robes and trousers, and shutting the curtains around his bed, took off his shirt too. The air around him was cold, but he was still feeling the effects of Butterbeer on a nearly empty stomach, so it hardly registered on him, except when he let his hand lay on his stomach, he felt his skin was quite cold. His other hand went under his pillow, and met with paper.

Surprised, Draco sat up and pulled it out, wondering from who it was from and why they'd have cause to leave him a note. He opened it and recognized the perfect penmanship at once.

We need to talk.

It was from Pansy.
Shame

Pansy waited impatiently at her seat, constantly resisting the urge to twist and look to the door to see when Draco came in. Most of the Hufflepuffs they shared Herbology with had arrived already and were suiting up for the greenhouse lesson, chattering jovially and jostling each other to find a good pair of gardening gloves that were not too big or worn through.

To busy herself Pansy went to pick a smock. She was among the first to do so (everyone always rushed for the gloves first, since the majority of the stock were full of holes and dead bugs-she had her own pair sent from home) so she got the best one-cleaner than the rest and still tough as it probably had been in the shop-most of the others were threadbare and offered little to no protection. She picked the second best for Draco—he would have to fare for himself on the gloves—she refused to touch any.

Once she reached her place she tied her hair into a small knot at the base of her head, and then pulled the smock over her head. After she'd made sure her hair was still in order she tied the strings of the smock snugly around her waist, and just as she'd finished Draco came in.

He walked in smoothly, looking regal as always in that insufferable manner he always had, but effortless, which so many envied him for. Even in the old, dusty greenhouse, shabby and earthen as it was, he looked like he belonged. All the green surrounding him was reflected in his eyes, making them appear green themselves. The other students unconsciously made way for him—or consciously—she could never tell. He didn't notice, just walked past them without saying a word.

He scanned the room casually, and when he caught sight of her she held up the smock and gave him a look to summon him. He went accordingly, and stood beside her without facing her.

There was a moment of silence as she pulled on her custom-made gloves, and he was busy in putting on his smock, doing this also with that dignified manner that made known he would be embarrassed by very little. She remembered when they were both small, and he'd protested violently about wearing the smocks, and smiled.

There was an awkwardness between them that had never existed before, which she hated. They'd been best friends since they were infants, and though their mothers had hoped they would marry (a notion she'd very briefly entertained when entering her teen years) she only saw him as a brother. Since the argument around the end of fifth year, they hadn't talked once. Not even over the summer, which had never happened before. She'd figured he wouldn't reply, or that because of their argument, he simply would not want to be her friend anymore, which hurt her to think about. Even during fifth year there'd been that easiness between them and now she felt its absence like a knife in her side. She almost regretted having left him that note—would he still be her Draco? Or had that change manifested him into something she could hardly bear to know anymore?

She'd heard of his initiation, and had desperately wanted to talk to him but by then it had already happened. As children, when they'd spoken of it, he'd said he would wait until he was seventeen to join, but he'd apparently not wanted to wait, and she couldn't help but wonder why.

Her father had come home the day it had happened and she'd asked what happened, despite knowing they were forbidden from speaking of what happened in those ceremonies. He'd smiled at her, however, meaning it had gone well, and she knew he was thinking to himself when she would take the Mark.
Would she? It was an honor, everyone said. She'd believed them for so long, until she'd begun having the smallest of doubts. And when she'd learned Draco had done it, she'd been so terrified. What had they made him do? Did he like it? Was he really going to turn into one of them? Would she join him? It wasn't as much a rite of passage or even a requirement for women to join the ranks—Bellatrix had been the first woman to ever take the Mark, and from then on few women had followed suit.

Pansy pictured the crumpled up letters she couldn't send him over the summer, each one bearing the same message—Don't do it. Why hadn't she sent them after all? Maybe he would have listened to her.

But the more she thought about it the more she realized how little her pleas would have affected anything. It had been inevitable for him. She'd dreamed she could talk him out of it but knew it could not be. With his father in Azkaban, someone needed to fill his place. Her father had said as much several times. And he was just the right age, and in Hogwarts no less, where he could spy and infiltrate whenever the Dark Lord chose. Suddenly she was filled with dread. If he couldn't say no, what about her?

Professor Grubbly-Plank had begun the lesson, and she paid attention as best as she could, given her current state of mind. She and Draco worked together as she talked on, collecting the sap from some hairy plant and cutting the thorns off another. Their classmates were wincing; some drew blood. She felt none of the thorn's sharpness in the safe confines of her dragon-hide gloves. Draco worked swiftly, almost with rhythm, as if he worked with silk rather than thorns. She caught the annoyed glance some of the Hufflepuffs sent them, and pretended she hadn't.

By the time class ended she hadn't had the chance to tell him anything. They took off their gardening gear quickly, stepped around Lovegood, who was draping a handmade scarf over a potted sapling, and exited the greenhouse.

Outside, the air was sharper, suffused with cold. The sun shone colorless in the grey sky, bereft of its cloud playmates. The group of students were making their way back to the castle, where the bells for lunch had just begun to ring, startling birds from their perches in the surrounding trees.

"You wanted to speak to me," Draco said quietly, startling her, who had been taking her hair down.

She was afraid of his reaction, what he would say, but she had to get through with it. Else there was no point to having sent that note.

"I'm worried about you."

"Still?" he didn't sound angry. "You said as much last year. There's nothing to worry for."

"I'm not so sure," she said. "How are you? How have you been? I've missed you."

He inclined his head towards her in acknowledgment. "Me too."

"But how are you?"

"Sleeping poorly, but I'm well," he lied, knowing that she could see right through it immediately. She stepped closer and felt his forehead.

"I believe the first part, you look like you haven't slept in months."

"I've managed."
Pansy tsked. "Still devilishly handsome though. No hope for the rest of us."

The corners of his lips lifted. "Shove off."

"There's no need to lie to me, Draco," she said carefully after a short pause. "Tell me how you feel."

They were at the front doors, stepping through. Groups of students were entering the Great Hall, the sound was almost deafening. The place was so full and swarming with people they chose to wait until it all thinned a little.

"Tired, mostly," he said distractedly, his voice barely carrying over the din, "but I feel nothing out of the ordinary."

"And your Father?"

He took a moment to respond, and when he did, there was a biting tone in his voice.

"As well as he can manage, I suppose, being locked up and surrounded daily by Dementors."

Pansy edged away from the door-someone had just pushed past her to step out into the grounds, and she looked after them, frowning, but turned back to Draco after a moment.

"I know you blame her for your father being in prison," she said carefully. There could be no doubt as to whom she referred to. "She had nothing to do with it."

Draco kept his eyes trained on the wall opposite them.

"And how can you be so sure?"

"She told me herself what happened at the Ministry. She was in another room with Weasley when the Dark Lord and Dumbledore fought. She didn't see any of it until the Minister had come and your father and aunt had already been taken away."

"And you believed her?"

"What would she gain by lying? She didn't tell me all of it at first, but from what I heard from the other's and Potter's own account I put two and two together." Her hand found his shoulder. "What made you think she did it?"

Draco thought of the kiss, her threat. The way she'd looked the morning after the breach of the Ministry, weary but content and surrounded by her friends and admirers. The warning look she'd flashed in his direction when she'd felt his eyes on her. He felt himself deflate suddenly, and remembered how very tired he was. There was the tiniest sense of him being relieved at Pansy's news, too, but he squashed it out.

"I thought she might have done it perhaps to get back at me for how I treated her last year," he said. He caught sight of dark brown hair, and followed it, but when that person's head turned he found it wasn't her. "I was angry and irrational. It was a misguided thought."

"Do you hate her still?" Pansy's tone was offhand, her delivery careful. Draco looked at her from the corner of his eye.

"Why does it matter?"

"I want to know if you're my best friend again, not the power-obsessed fool you turned into last term."
Her words were blunt, but hit their mark, and Draco looked away.

"I wasn't-I'm not..." he trailed off, tried to keep from scowling. "I don't know what happened. I'm embarrassed at how I acted. I should have listened to you. I was so angry all the time, and latched on to her to let it out."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said after a short pause. "All of it, not just the last part, though it's always refreshing."

"Umbridge brought out the worst in me," he said, grimacing.

"Yes, she has that effect on everyone. I couldn't look at her without feeling angry...Even being around her, felt like standing beside a Dementor, almost. She was less vile to our House, but classes with her were always hostile."

"I let it all go to my head," he said quietly. "The Inquisitor Squad, the immunity from the rules, her favor. And having to constantly interact with someone who hated me as much as I hated her made me more irritable than ever."

"You've always been of risible temper," she said, leaning against the wall. Someone else went outside, and as the door opened and closed after him a gust of wind blew Pansy's hair in disarray. "But I'd never seen you quite like that. You were like a whole different person."

"I don't like talking about it," he said. "I'm not proud of what I did. Nor should I ever have been."

"You may not like remembering it, but the fact of the matter is that you did do some very horrible things," Pansy told him sternly. "I'm happy to hear you've come out for the better but I think you owe someone a very great apology. I'm sure she doesn't like remembering it as much as you do."

"She wouldn't speak to me so much as she'd step on a House Elf."

"You've got to try, at least. She deserves that much."

"I meant it, Pansy. She's blackmailed me into never speaking to her again. I can't even look her in the eye without repercussion."

"What would that be?"

"That's none of your business."

Pansy tsked, shaking her head. "Gods, Draco, what else did you do?" He could hear the implication in her voice—Did you hurt her?

"No, of course not," he said quickly, but then fell silent, remembering the ring of bruises he'd left around her throat. The altercation outside the library, when she'd punched him and he'd knocked her to the floor. The way he'd held her arms so tight she'd screamed to Umbridge, of all people, for mercy.

Pansy was watching him. She sensed his thoughts. Perhaps Granger had even told her of the things he'd done. Suddenly he felt sick with shame.

"You need help, Draco. But you also need to make things right."

"How?" he snapped. "Nothing will change her mind. I made her very angry and she got me back and I learned my lesson and I won't bother her again."
"You're afraid of her." Pansy tried to keep the goading tone from her voice, and failed.

"I'm sure she doesn't even want an apology, so long as I follow her rules."

"Well," Pansy said, crossing her arms. "I love you, and you're my closest friend, but I won't defend you in what you did. I'll even be a brute and say that you brought it on yourself." She made a face. "What an awful taste those words leave on the tongue."

She was so relieved to have her best friend back that she couldn't help herself—she laughed.

Draco said nothing.

"Hungry?" she asked, jerking her head towards the Great Hall's doors. Draco looked around the room and realized it was nearly empty. Though the doors leading into the Great Hall were thicker than the gamekeeper Hagrid, a muffled sort of noise seemed to emanate from it, and he thought of all the people that were seated inside, the raw noise held within. The very subject of his thoughts, smiling and chattering along with her friends, the scars on her hand as prominent as ever.

So quickly, the image of his own hands covered in red flashed through his mind, and his stomach knotted with fear. All trace of appetite disappeared.

"No. You go on-I've got something I need to do."

"Alright then," she came forward and embraced him briefly. "I'll be in the library after, if you need me. I might have a few friends with me, if you'd like to join."

Draco knew who one of those friends might be. He'd seen them sitting together more often in the library and sometimes, to everyone's astonishment, in the Great Hall.

She wouldn't want me anywhere near her, much less seated at the same table, mutual friend or not.

Pansy had already gone past those great doors, and he made his way to the Slytherin commons, where he intended to have some time alone.

That he'd finally reconciled with Pansy was relieving, but there was still much to think about, and this was currently the least of his concern, no slight meant to her.

He'd dreamt of his initiation again, and had woken feeling so agitated it had taken some time to slow his breathing and calm his heart, though it still pounded forcefully for several minutes afterwards. It was every night now, that it came, and every attempt he made to block it out worked for only a short period of time. A Dreamless Sleeping Draught would have been just the thing in ordinary circumstances, but the thought of having to rely on it every night for who knew how long was exhausting, and he didn't want to make Madame Pomfrey suspicious and call attention to him.

The images from that night flashed through his mind not only in his dreams, but had even begun to bleed through into his thoughts while he was awake, and it was everything he could do appear unaffected and calm though his heart skipped beats and his skin grew both hot and cold and broke out in sweat.

It's manageable, he told himself. I am in control of myself. I will conquer this, and it will go away.

But his hands were shaking.

He had to be strong. There was no time to dwell on what he'd done. If he began to regret it, the Dark Lord would know, and he would suffer for it.
I wanted this. I made my choice.

A voice spoke softly in his head. *But you didn't think it would be like this.*

Draco flinched. Poisonous, doubtful thought. He had to be careful.

*What I thought doesn't matter. This is the reality. I am not a boy anymore. I must serve.*

The voice returned, faint. *Or die.*

Draco pretended he had not heard it. That night, there was no sleep.
"Truths"

"What did they make you do?"

They were sitting in the Slytherin stands in the Quidditch pitch, an irksome wind blowing all around them. Pansy flicked a dead leaf from her shoulder, and rewound her scarf more tightly around her neck. Draco took an almond from the container of snacks sitting between them, and broke it between his thumbs.

"You know I can't tell you."

Underneath his coat and thick layers of clothing, he was shivering. He fought to restrain it. His eyes burned—as he rubbed at them he heard noises coming from down below in the field. The Hufflepuff team had just gathered onto the middle of it, clad in their playing robes and brooms in hand. He watched as they mounted and rose into the air, and somehow above the rush of the wind, heard the whir of the Golden Snitch's wings. Snippets of their shouts flew out at him.

"Catch-"

"keep your elbows-!"

"Blimey, this wind-"

"Will they know if you do?" Pansy asked doubtfully.

"I can't say. But it's forbidden all the same."

Pansy went grave. She stared down at her hands. "Was it that bad?"

"No."

"I can tell when you're lying. Draco, what happened? Is this why you look so ill all the time now?"

"I wasn't lying," he snapped, but then sighed. "Look, I can't tell you, Pansy. I just can't. Even if I wanted to."

Obviously displeased, she fell silent. The Hufflepuff team had begun to practice with the Bludgers, and the Beaters roved through the air, the occasional crack of the Beater's bats against leather was heard clearly over anything else, even over the howling wind. Pansy winced at the sound. Their Seeker was a blur of motion, chasing after the Snitch again and again, sometimes flying past them so quickly the wind threatened to steal their hats. Pansy pulled hers tighter over her head. They watched him go farther out and up until they lost interest.

"Do you miss it?" she asked, nudging him with her arm.

"No-. I'm not sure."

"You haven't played in so long," she remarked. "The team hasn't had a decent Seeker since you left- I'm sure they would take you back instantly. It might do you good."

"I haven't got the time for Quidditch," he said. "Besides, the season is practically over."

*And if I wanted to place myself back into a situation where my life was constantly in danger, I'd simply go home.*
"I thought you loved Quidditch."

Draco let out a brittle laugh. "I did. I do. But I can't find much reason to play now."

Nor the energy. If he got himself into a game of Quidditch in the state he was currently in, he'd be falling off his broom faster than Longbottom had in First Year.

"So you didn't like it."

"Don't be silly, of course I did. Flying's easy, and it was fun at times. But doesn't mean as much to me as it does him. And I hate to admit, but anyone with eyes and sense enough can see that I'm not as good as Potter."

"I always thought the two of you were evenly matched."

"Don't try to make me feel better."

"Friends are allowed to be biased," she said, knocking her shoulder into his. "And I think you're just as good as him."

There was a long silence. Pansy fiddled with the fringed ends of her scarf, braiding the pieces together. Draco searched the field for the Snitch.

"What do you think they'll have me do, when it's my turn?" She was looking at his left arm. Hidden under layers of clothing, the snake crawled through the skull on his arm.

Draco's stomach sank. "I'm not sure."

She looked as if she wanted to say something but didn't quite dare.

"What?"

"Does it hurt? The Mark, I mean. Did it hurt when they gave it to you?"

Draco winced, and wished he hadn't, that he somehow could have retained that impulse. Pansy reached for him but he drew back quickly.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, embarrassed. She didn't believe him, but withdrew her hand without saying more.

"It doesn't hurt now," he said softly, for fear that the wind would carry his voice to someone else. Draco cast a furtive look around the field, but even when he found no sign of lurkers, he remained cautious. Potter had been watching him a great deal lately and he didn't like it at all, especially since every time their eyes met Potter had the look in them that he was waiting for something. He kept his voice low, so Pansy had to lean in to hear him over the wind.

"But you can feel when he's angry, because it burns you like someone's poured boiling tea on you. It feels like it's always watching you though it isn't," he suddenly realized how on edge he sounded. "It didn't hurt at all when he gave it to me. There was enough pain in the trials, he said, and so the act of getting the mark wasn't painful because it was supposed to feel like a triumph. He told me of the only exception, was when my Aunt was receiving hers and begged him to curse her so she could show how she would withstand anything for him. And he did it thrice."

"Merlin," she whispered, looking utterly aghast.
There were more words coiled in his throat, waiting their turn to be unwound, he didn't mention how at times it felt like the snake was actually crawling under his skin, gliding alongside his veins, just biding its time before slipping in. He didn't mention how sometimes he woke so late in the night he thought he was still dreaming, and found his arm streaked with scratches and blood where in his sleep he'd tried to scratch the Mark from his arm, but whereas his skin had been bloodied and ruined the Mark was as fresh and new as if he'd only gotten it hours ago.

Pansy had her hand over her mouth. The russet of her coat added a luminosity to her dark skin that his eyes kept going back to. He knew how sickly he looked in comparison and was glad there was no immediate chance of seeing his own reflection.

Draco looked off to the field again. "Everyone kept saying how proud my Father would have been if he'd been there to see it."

"Did you want him there?" she asked softly.

"What Father would feel proud of a son who looked like he was about to vomit during the most important moment of his life? What feeling, if not disgust, would a Father feel at seeing his son realize at the worst moment that his plan for him was not what he wanted?"

"No."

Her hands worked the fringe of her scarf quickly, braiding and undoing and re-braiding. "Whatever they made you do, did you want to do it?"

His hands were starting to shake and he looked down at them, trying not to give himself away, and willed them to stop.

"It didn't matter. I had to."

"I'm afraid of that," she said. "I never thought about taking the Mark. I don't know why. We spoke of it once or twice when we were little, do you remember? What were our answers then? All summer Father looked at me as if expecting me to announce I was to join, but I couldn't do it. The more I thought about it, the more I realized I didn't intended to take it." She gave a hollow laugh. "Did you?"

"When I was a boy," he admitted, "I wanted to be like my Father. I was always sure I would follow him. I wouldn't have had much say in the matter anyhow. The Dark Lord called on me to take it and when he calls you can't refuse. Everyone said it was an honor. At the time I thought it was what I wanted." He thought he saw the Snitch in his peripheral vision and turned, but saw nothing.

"And was it?"

Draco couldn't bring himself to answer. The temperature had lowered, and he stood.

"It's almost time for dinner," he said, extending his hand to Pansy. She took it and they began their walk to the castle. Her grip on his hand was sure and warm, and he was intensely grateful for it.

"Will you come in too?" she asked when they'd reached the Great Hall.

"I've got a headache," he said. "I don't feel like sitting in all that noise."

"Alright." She started to open the door and then turned. "Get some sleep, won't you?"

He smiled without humor. "I'll try to."
The next morning Hermione found herself in the Great Hall for breakfast, sitting in between Ginny and Ron, who now that the Quidditch season was over, were speculating over who might try out for the team next season.

"That McLaggen's sure to get in," Ron mumbled, stabbing his eggs rather petulantly. "He's always hanging around the field with his sodding broom as if just waiting for us to beg him to join."

"You fly better than he does," Ginny argued between sips of pumpkin juice. "And you're not half as conceited."

"He doesn't fumble the Quaffle like I do," Ron said. "Last practice of the season he butted in and made saves when I wasn't looking, trying to show off in front of Harry. I wanted to knock him off his broom."

"I'm sick of this moping," Ginny snapped, setting her goblet down impatiently. "We've been going over this all morning. If you want to keep feeling sorry for yourself then by all means keep moaning about it, but if you want to get any better you'll come with me to the pitch and we'll practice if you think you play so badly."

Ron went as red as his hair. Hermione said nothing. Ginny stood.

"Are you coming?"

"It's snowing outside!"

"You want to get better don't you?"

Ron stuffed the last of his pie into his mouth. "Yeah."

"Get your equipment and meet me in the pitch. Hermione, you'll come watch?"

Hermione swallowed her buttered toast hastily and replied, wincing. "Yes, in a moment. I've got some books to pick up from the library."

The two siblings went ahead, and Hermione finished her breakfast quickly. At the same moment she put down her goblet of water, Malfoy walked in and sat down, and not knowing why, instead of leaving as she'd intended to do, she remained seated and began to watch him.

Something looked wrong with him. Whether it was merely the dark circles around his eyes or the unkempt state of his hair (which had only served to make him more appealing to his admirers, according to their whispers), or maybe it was something deeper. Hermione knew full well what some of those problems were but this must have been something else, as she couldn't quite put her finger on it. He looked hellish, simply put. A jarring difference from the Malfoy of yesteryear, whom had never looked anything but immaculate and polished. And though she knew it was none of her business, she couldn't help but wonder why.

Harry'd had his own theories since the year began. He was convinced Malfoy had taken the Dark Mark sometime over the summer, and suspected that he was up to something, but couldn't determine what. He argued that Malfoy's strange behavior was the evidence, that he didn't want to draw attention to himself before doing something big, but Hermione wasn't quite sure she believed it—the second part, at least.

Malfoy taking the Dark Mark? She supposed it wasn't too shocking a theory. His father was a prominent Death Eater after all, as well as his Aunt, who was the closest to the Dark Lord,
something hardly anyone could boast, besides Wormtail probably, judging from what Harry had told her and Ron about him. Still, she wasn't sure what to think. That Malfoy was more subdued than how she'd known him was evident, but she was more likely to believe it was simply because his powerful Father had been caught at last and shoved behind bars. Much of his swagger came from his Father's status, she knew, mainly in their first years at Hogwarts, and though he'd relied on that less and less as he'd grown she supposed it still had to sting when other classmates threw that in your face regularly. Not that they did exactly that-anyone who provoked Malfoy always landed in the Hospital Wing with no memory as to how or why, if the rumors proved true. So they spoke in whispers, passed rumors gleefully, hoped that one day they might see him snap. For all their malicious work it did nothing. Malfoy carried on without breaking his temper more or less (something that had surprised her very much), and so the cruel remarks died down quickly and he was left alone.

Still, it wasn't lost on Hermione how he'd somewhat faded from public view. Aside from the rare class they shared, Malfoy was hardly present anywhere else. And thinking on it now, she realized she hadn't seen him at meals in quite some time, now being the exception.

It showed, too. His clothes looked looser than before. Even if he was tall and his clothes hung differently on him, it was obvious that he'd grown thinner. She frowned, watching him pour himself some pumpkin juice. Was he ill?

*It's nothing to me,* she thought suddenly. *After what he did to me he doesn't deserve my concern.*

But she still couldn't look away. She frowned.

*What's wrong with you?*

He'd finished eating an orange, wiped his hands on his napkin before standing. Hermione blinked. He'd hardly eaten anything and now he was leaving? His eyes flickered around the room so quickly she only just had enough time to look away. A guilty flush burned at her face so she looked down, but still caught his slight frown before he'd left.

She decided to wait a minute before leaving too. She walked carefully, waiting for any sign that he might try and corner her. Would he be angry? Technically, she'd looked at him first. She didn't even know why. Or if he'd noticed at all. But if he did...

*Oh, this is wretched,* she thought, her palms growing damp. *He'll want to argue that I made him look at me by staring at him.*

Some students passed by her and called out a brief greeting. Hermione nodded at them, too distracted to reply. The hall was filling up, it seemed everyone wanted to get to the snow-they rushed out onto the lawn, a magnificently sharp breeze sweeping past the doors into the corridor, sprinkled with puffs of snow. The light from outside illuminated the inner space beautifully for a moment or two until the doors shut, and Hermione realized at last that Malfoy had gone, and she'd been very foolish indeed. Quickly, before anyone could come and discover her, she bowed her head and abruptly went the opposite way.
Since Slughorn had become the new Potions Master, the atmosphere in the dungeons had changed drastically to the point that every one actually looked forward to the lessons. Snape's lodgings had moved, and with it had gone his cold and oppressive aura, whose absences were immediately filled by Slughorn's joviality and flattery, which if not annoying at times, no one dared complain about for the fear of jinxing what they felt was a dream come true.

Not everyone shared these sentiments, however. While Slughorn's improvement of the Potions lessons were indeed welcome, there was a number of students who intensely hated their new Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor and wished the change had not been made at all. These students kept mostly silent about their opinions, but in the end had no need to put voice to them since Snape knew their thoughts quite clearly, and cared nothing for them.

It was no surprise that the DA made up the majority of this opposition group, and most of them were Gryffindors. They had no opinion on Slughorn other than the fact that he was more insidious than others realized and felt they couldn't always trust him. They liked him as an instructor but resented that Snape had taken over and spoiled their favorite class.

A few of them had tried to persuade Harry to resume the DA's meetings as before, Neville being chief among them, but Harry had dissented and said there was no point, for as cruel as he was, Snape was a capable teacher and even if he wanted to, Dumbledore had asked him not to keep on with the DA, for reasons he didn't give, but Harry could only guess.

It was now, after their most recent DADA lesson that the former DA was gathered in a cozy corner of the Gryffindor common room, disheartened by their most recently assigned load of assignments.

"I don't know how he expects us to write so much on a creature there's only one page on in that book," Parvati Patil said, angrily tossing the said book back into her school bag. "And a three foot paper no less! He's gone mad!"

"It's actually not that difficult," Hermione said, but Ron shot her a look, and realizing how she sounded, Hermione blushed and went quiet. Luckily no one had heard her.

"I can't stand that class now," Lavender Brown was saying, nodding. "I wish we could have Lupin back. I'd rather sit through a week-long lesson with Binns than sit through another with Snape."

Neville, who'd promptly sat down in an armchair next to Hermione and Ron, nodded emphatically.

"The way he is, it's like Umbridge had a cousin and left him here to teach," said Ginny. Everyone went quiet. Hermione caught several people reflexively looking down at the scars on their hands. Her left hand instinctively reached for her right, but she forced it back down.

"It feels sometimes like it never happened," Dean Thomas was the first to speak after a heavy pause. He looked around anxiously. "Like I made it all up."

"Like a dream," Parvati added in softly, holding her scarred hand in the other. Her long, dark hair gleamed beautifully in the firelight.

"And the professors don't like talking about it, either," Seamus Finnegan said. "Professor Flitwick told me it was best to forget about it, like it's that easy. Makes me feel like I'm making a big deal over nothing." His face clouded over. "But it wasn't nothing. It was real. And it was awful."
"I thought I was the only one," Neville said, looking immensely relieved. "If it weren't for the letters Dumbledore sent home I don't think my gran ever would have believed me."

There were many nods of agreement around the room.

"I had to hide my scars," Colin Creevey said, looking as if fighting back tears. "My mum was already afraid of sending me back after what happened in at the tournament," he glanced quickly at Harry. "If she'd seen them too she'd have sent me and my brother somewhere new." The girl sitting next to him extended one arm to wrap around him, and let him rest his head on her shoulder.

"It was the same with us," Parvati said. "My parents were furious at Umbridge, and they asked me and Padma why we hadn't told anyone when we still could." Her hands played with the ends of her braid nervously. "As if it was so easy when we lived under that kind of surveillance."

"I tried," Seamus said. "Even asked me mum why she never wrote back. Said she never got the letter."

Hermione shuddered. Harry's face was grave. Ron was looking down at his lap. The fire crackled loudly but for once, strangely, it gave them no comfort.

"I never thought anything like that could ever happen here," Neville said. "Even with Dumbledore gone."

"The school's been breached before," Hermione said. "But we still see it as a safe place. Why do we always forget?" Harry reached over and rubbed her shoulder.

"The fact that the Ministry hasn't apologized for it either," Parvati said, "makes me sick."

There murmurs of agreement became louder. And then there was a lull. No one knew what to say next.

"Well it's over now," Hermione said, with a gentle conviction tailored not to ruffle feathers. "Umbridge is gone, and that's in our favor."

"Hear, hear," Seamus Finnegan said, slapping his hands on his thighs. There was a rumble of approval.

"What happened to her, anyhow?" Lavender was saying. "I don't think we ever found out how she was sacked."

Hermione went still. Harry and Ron started to answer but she gave a small shake of her head, and they stopped at once.

"She ran her mouth at some centaurs," Hermione said, keeping her tone casual. "And they didn't like it. That's what I heard."

"Huh."

"That doesn't surprise me at all," Parvati said, shaking her head. "Well, at least they scared her out of the school." She stood, and the spell was broken—everyone else began to stand and stretch, conversations popped up among them.

"Who's hungry?" Ginny asked, approaching Harry, Ron and Hermione. They all raised their hands.

"Well let's be off to dinner. I heard we're having lasagna tonight and I want all of it."
"Hagrid'll be setting up the Christmas trees," Ron said merrily. "Maybe we can get him to hang up Mrs. Norris."

Harry choked back a laugh just as Hermione glared at him.

"Sorry, it was just a joke."

As they arrived at the Great Hall Hermione looked around at the decorations. The corridor glowed with light; boughs of pine were strung up above and around every door and archway, each sprinkled with small, lit up ornaments and the occasional fairy. There were two great trees on either side of the entrance doors, and Hagrid was busy at one, draping a heavy golden garland around it. They approached him quickly.

"Hullo, Hagrid!"

He turned, beaming. There was a fairy stuck in his beard, and they all laughed. Hagrid swatted it away, and nodded back at them.

"A'right, you lot?"

"The Great Hall looks splendid," Ginny said.

"S'mostly the lights," Hagrid said, wrestling with a tiny knot in the garland. "Them fairies sprinkle their dust over everything and makes it look nice and warm, steal all the credit." His huge thumbs picked helplessly at the knot. Ron took it from him and undid it carefully. He handed it back to a grateful Hagrid.

"Thanks. How are yer classes treatin' yeh?"

"They're alright," Ron said cheerfully, which surprised Hermione. "Got a lot to study, what's new?"

"We've missed you in Care for Magical Creatures," Harry said. "It's not the same without you."

Hagrid beamed again. The same fairy was flying around his face, chattering endlessly, and he waved it off.

"Fang's been itchin' to see yer," he said. "I wouldn't mind a visit before the holiday. I'll make rock cakes!" He tossed the last bit of the garland behind the tree.

"Sure!" Ron said through a forced grin.

"We'll send an owl before we head down," Hermione said, and after saying goodbye they entered the Great Hall and sat down at their table.

The inside had already been decorated. The trees were in their merry corners and laden with bright baubles and garlands and inhabited by the annoying fairies and the occasional bowtruckle. Professor Flitwick, who was in charge of the ornaments was going around to each tree to make sure everything was in place and not in danger of falling or being broken. A small group of first years were sitting nearby, and couldn't contain their giggles at the sight of his tiny body tottering at the top of the tall ladder he stood on. Flitwick said nothing, but after several minutes of it an ornament escaped his attention and fell to the ground, shattering loudly behind the first years, who shrieked in surprise. The Professor apologized profusely and cleaned up the mess, but Hermione caught his quick smile as the first years left.

At once Ginny reached for the platter of lasagna and served herself a huge portion, one that rivaled
even Ron's, who'd already made a grab for the potatoes. Hermione ate, listening to their back and forth and Harry's smitten silence as she looked around the room. Luna, who had a small cloud of fairies hovering around her golden hair, waved and Hermione smiled back. Lavender, who had recently dyed her hair lilac, was decidedly more annoyed by her new admirers than Luna; every now and then Hermione would hear her exasperated cursing at the fairies, who kept trying to pull her hair out of her head to make a nest in the Christmas trees.

"You've got one in your hair," Harry said, and Hermione shook her head. For a brief moment she heard a tiny shriek as it flew away, and laughed.

"We're going to have an infestation before long," she said. "I hope Hagrid knows how to deal with it."

They fell silent for a moment. Ginny had gotten up and taken her plate to the far end of the table to sit with Luna, who had joined Neville and Dean Thomas.

"When's the next trip to Hogsmeade?" Ron asked.

"Next Friday."

"Oh. I need new socks."

"You can have some of mine," Harry said. "I've got extra from Dobby."

"Cheers."

"I'm running low on ink," Hermione said. "And better to stock up on parchment, too, if Snape keeps us writing this much."

They all looked at the staff table. Snape was not there.

Hermione looked surreptitiously at the Slytherin table, and failed to find Malfoy.

"Pass the rolls, Hermione?"

"Oh-here."

"Ta."

She resumed eating, one hand wrapped lightly around her neck.

"Are you getting ill?" Ron asked. "I've got some lozenges. They're not Fred and George's this time, I promise."

"No, I'm fine," Hermione said. She didn't feel like explaining she sometimes felt the ghostly pressure of fingers around her neck, ever since the first time Malfoy had almost strangled her. She rarely dreamt, but when she did, it was only of this.

When she looked up she had a clear view of the Slytherin table, and directly across from her seat sat Malfoy facing her. He was looking down at his plate, filled with food but the way he was eating let her know his mind was far off elsewhere. Something about him looked wrong, like an impostor had taken his place or he was simply a body without a spirit. She frowned. Harry had noticed too—they shared a look between them. Ron, who sat with his back to Malfoy, hadn't seen what they'd had, but noticed their exchange.

'Malfoy?' he mouthed. Hermione nodded.
Harry gave the appearance of turning back to his food but Hermione knew he was still watching Malfoy. She in turn pushed her plate away and took a drink.

Pansy had sat beside Malfoy and they were speaking together. She strained to hear but was unsuccessful. Pansy had an urgent, worried look on her face but Malfoy's expression gave nothing away. She wished she knew what he was saying.

Her hand was on her neck again and she hadn't even realized it. She could feel her own pulse, steady and normal but when she looked up and caught his eye it grew quicker.

He'd looked away the second their eyes had met. There was the initial flash of alarm when it had happened but was immediately silenced by what she'd seen.

He'd turned and said something to Pansy, and by the time she had the thought to look away he'd already left the room, taking a bundle of food with him wrapped in a napkin, perhaps at Pansy's insistence. But Hermione didn't pay attention to that. Her mind was still frozen on the look he'd given her just as she'd looked up. She took a sip of her drink to calm down, but she couldn't shake the fact that what she'd seen in his eyes was undeniably a look of remorse.
"You're being too obvious," Hermione whispered to Harry, who was staring at Malfoy.

Harry blinked and looked down at his plate, frowning. "There's something wrong with him."

"Yeah, when hasn't there been?" Ron asked around a mouthful of cake.

"Something different," Harry muttered. He looked disinterestedly down at his plate, and picked up his goblet instead.

Hermione tried to keep from looking at Malfoy, but her eyes ignored her thoughts and traveled to the Slytherin table. Not finding him there, she looked to the doors, and caught just a glimpse of him as he strode out, the door slamming behind him.

"He's gone," she murmured, and both Ron and Harry turned quite blatantly to look. She sighed and rolled her eyes. "You really can't watch him like that and expect he's got no clue what's going on."

"Well then he's aware we know something's up," Ron protested, crossing his arms.

"Yes, meaning he's going to be more careful from now on."

Ron scowled.

"You see what I mean? Subtlety is key. Remember how they followed us around last year and we didn't realize what was happening until it was too late?"

Harry nodded. "Right." He rubbed at his scar.

"I'm off to the library," she said, and pushed up from her seat. "Do you want to come too?"

Ron snorted. Harry shook his head.

"I'll see you later, then. Tell Ginny where I'll be, if she comes along, please."

"Aren't you going to Hogsmeade with us?" Ron asked.

"Of course," she said. "I'll meet you at the gates at four."

He'd just come back up from the Great Hall, where he'd hurriedly eaten a small meal. The room had been half empty, seeing as most everyone except the lower years was off in Hogsmeade, so he'd taken the opportunity to have some food in peace without prying eyes. It was the first proper meal he'd eaten in days but afterwards he felt so sick, he wished he hadn't eaten anything at all. Draco looked down at the velvet box, and felt his insides twist so tight, to the point he felt he couldn't draw breath. The indistinct bag from Borgin and Burkes lay crumpled on the floor, his features still tingled from the disguise spells he'd put upon himself to mask his identity having worn off. The leather gloves on his hand kept them from shaking, at least, despite the cold that hung like ice in the dormitory.

It was still early, and everyone else would remain in Hogsmeade for hours, until dark, even. Pansy was on a date. The last he'd seen of Granger, she'd been in the library with Longbottom. Potter and Weasley were off probably spending all their pocket money in Zonko's, as if they were still in First Year. And the only company he had was a cursed necklace and a poisoned bottle of wine.
Draco shed himself of his coat, and then his robes. After walking through the snow and wind for what had felt like ages, it was good to feel the air against his skin no matter how cold it was. His skin was damp from the trek back to the school; he peeled off his shirt and put on a fresh, warmer one that he'd had lying by the little stove in the center of the dorm.

The packages he hid in the secret compartment of his trunk, and warded it off with the most powerful guarding spells he knew. He settled onto his bed, warm and strangely peaceful, but within minutes he was up again and tore the items from his trunk, convinced that it was the stupidest place to hide anything important. It didn't matter that no one ever looked through his things. It happened to everyone else, even Blaise, but never to him, but that was no comfort.

He pictured Potter with his accusing eyes, remembered that damned cloak. He had a penchant for nosing around, and Draco would be damned if he was the one who brought light to his intentions. The lid of his trunk hung wide open, like the unhinged jaw of a serpent preparing to consume its prey.

This would be the first place anyone would look.

The items looked innocent enough. Perhaps not the wine, but it wasn't exactly a secret that students smuggled alcohol into the school. What was another bottle of wine? He was tempted to take some to let it all be over with, but knew he couldn't. The necklace, if found, he could claim was a birthday present for Pansy. Though it was really grand looking and people might think he was in love with her, it would keep them from seeing anything suspicious about it.

They can think what they want, as long as they don't touch it.

It was a risk, hiding them here. So out in the open, and what if someone didn't believe him? What if further investigation were called down? No, he couldn't leave them like that, and though he had his lies ready he preferred not to drag Pansy into it.

His head pounded with the force of a church bell. His head was the bell tower, empty and full of the aftershocks of the heavy swings.

Draco looked out the window. The sun hadn't even begun to set yet, but he'd begun to perspire as if he could already hear the others climbing up the steps that led to their dorm. He looked around, and his eyes landed on a letter he'd received that morning. Since he so rarely went to breakfast lately his owl had begun bringing his post to his dorm. It was another letter from his mother. She'd written to say first and foremostly that she loved him, and missed him. He'd sent her a note of his intention to stay on campus during the holiday, and she wished he would come home, but understood his wanting to focus on his schoolwork. It was not the reason he'd given her. He actually hadn't given any reason, but understood her message: stay where you are.

The wide open mouth of the trunk stared at him. Inside were books and clothing, miscellaneous items. His Quidditch gear. When was the last time he'd worn it?

It happened too quickly-he'd reached in to take the bottle and the necklace out, and reeled back, gasping, as the lid swung down viciously.

He stared at it in shock, his hand still in the air.

It had teeth!

Not now, not anymore-he blinked hard. Once. Twice.

It's only a trunk.
But when he'd reached for it he'd seen the teeth, blurring into streaks as the fangs had made a lunge for his arm.

They were gone now—they'd never existed—but what he saw had looked so real.

*It wasn't real.*

Draco reached back into the trunk, holding his breath, and this time nothing happened. He suppressed a shiver. Forcing himself to move slowly, so as not to admit fear, he took the wine and the necklace back out.

*I'm losing my mind.*

It didn't mean anything. Everyone saw things from time to time, and frankly it was to be expected when living on such a fucked up sleep schedule.

The soft, familiar voice reared up again, like a mother's whisper in his ear.

*Throw them out the window. Destroy them. Tell someone. Anyone.*

The bottle of wine was cold against his skin.

*I can't. He'll kill me.*

*What if someone could help you?*

Draco's eyes burned.

*No one can help me.*

His left arm began to burn. Draco grit his teeth and pretended it was just the heat of the sun coming in from the window.

*Someone could help.*

*Who?* Numerous faces flashed in his mind's eye. *Who would ever want to help me?*

An idea struck him, and he rushed to his bed and dropped the items onto it. Consumed in his task, and forgetting he was capable of magic, grabbed his bed by the end and dragged it away from the wall. The task was harder than it normally would have been; he'd lost weight and his muscles were weak; it had been too long since he'd last trained, and his lack of sleep and malnutrition only contributed to his poor state of being.

*No one. Can't let anyone know.*

He picked up his wand and knelt on the floor, feeling around for a loose floorboard. The one he found was only slightly loose, but he used his wand to separate it from the rest. He picked up the items again, more carefully this time, and deposited them into the dark space.

The voice returned.

*Not even Pansy?*

When he was done he pushed his bed back into place and sat down, massaging his temples in a vain attempt to relieve his headache. The bell tower stood cold, empty. A draft blew through. The bell had gone quiet.
Not even her.

It felt like he was outside of himself. It was so strange, and he was aware of his being irrational, but could do nothing to fix it.

Of course he could tell Pansy. He knew he should. But it felt impossible, and he wasn't quite sure why.

Oh, yes you do.

Draco looked down at his hands.

Red hands. Red hands. I can't take it back.

There it was—he gripped his head in both hands—the images were flooding back and he'd only just managed to calm down again. He forced himself to think of nothing, even when they pressed on, insistent, on the inside of his eyelids.

No.

Blank eyes. A limp, bloodied hand lying in shallow water.

He opened his eyes, breathing heavily.

You need help, the voice repeated.

I can't do this.

But you've done it before, said another voice in the back of his mind, tinged with malice. And you'll do it again.

Draco flinched. Red hands. Dead eyes.

I'm going to die.

Suddenly he couldn't stand to be there any longer. He grabbed his coat and left the room, walking as fast as his legs could carry him. It wasn't until he reached the Owlery that he realized there was someone up there.

A year ago he'd have gone up anyhow without a care and gone about his business. Now, he lingered around the top steps, where there was a curve in the wall of the tower so whoever was up there couldn’t see him, but he could see them.

It's her. It's always her.

He was glad he hadn't gone all the way up, then. She stood with her back to him, facing the sunless, cloudy sky. An owl had just flown off, a thick envelope held between its talons. She had her arms around herself and for the strangest reason he had the absurd urge to stay there and watch her a little longer but apprehensive of her threats and of being seen, he went silently back down the steps and hid in a nearby alcove. He shrank into the shadows there, mind carefully blank of any thought until the sound of her footsteps cut through, growing louder and louder and when they passed, he allowed one more minute to pass, and then went up the cold tower, trying not to think about to whom her letter might have gone.

The cold bit into his skin and stung his face but he hardly felt it. It was beginning to snow. The dark grounds below were instantly obscured by the lacy sheets of white, as if they were nothing but miles
long streams of wisteria hanging down from the heavens. The view was stunningly beautiful from that height; how it fell heavily from above was such a peaceful sight he felt himself relax almost immediately. The owls hooted softly above him but he didn't hear it—there was only the soft rush of snow falling.

Even through the peace he was aware that it might not last—that it could flee at any instant. He found himself almost suspicious of it. Wet, icy flakes of snow stuck to him and melted in place, leaving damp spots all along his coat and face, but he didn't want to move. Not when everything was still.

He was used to the quiet. There were so many different kinds, but of late the only kind he knew was the maddening type, the type that followed him to bed and kept him from sleeping because all he could hear was the whispers in his head. The doubt. The fear.

But here, now, his mind had gone quiet. It felt like floating on water. It was such a great relief that his eyes smarted at it, the calm. He let his eyes close, let the snow fall on him, and tried to sleep.
"Will you be going home for the holiday?"

Pansy looked up from her notes and shrugged. "I haven't decided."

She had, in fact. Pansy had no intention of going to her home where her parent's anxious, expectant stares would follow her from day to night. They would needle her with questions about Draco, how he was doing, if she would join too-all questions she had no idea how to answer.

If she went that was what waited for her at home. If she stayed, it would be her first time away from home during Christmas and she wasn't entirely sure that she would like it. Neither option seemed overly appealing, especially since she missed her family most at this time, but not even the guilt of not seeing her parents could make her change her mind.

Hermione flipped a page of her textbook and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear.

"Well if you don't you're welcome to spend the holiday with us, since we're staying too," she said, smiling. "It'll be nice."

"Oh-" Pansy felt a pleased smile overtake her face. "I'd love to."

**Problem solved.**

Then her smile wavered. What would she do about Draco? He'd never said it aloud but she knew he wasn't going home either. What was he going to do?

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked.

Pansy would have liked to have someone to talk to about Draco, and how much she worried about him. It was something that constantly ate at her mind, but she knew it would be inappropriate to bring up to Hermione. She wasn't sure how her friend would take it, and she didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable.

After all, Hermione had never really told her what exactly had happened between herself and Draco the year before, and Pansy knew better than to pry. Whatever it was, it was between the two of them to resolve, if they ever chose to, so Pansy kept her mouth shut. Hermione probably didn't want to hear anything about him, and Draco would deem it unforgivable if she went telling everyone what was happening.

"Nothing," she said. "Fancy going to get dinner?"

"Sure, just let me finish this," Hermione said, gesturing to the History of Magic paper she was writing. The length of parchment threatened to spill off the table from both ends. Pansy eyed it.

"Binns could skip rope with that monster."

Hermione sputtered into laughter.

Nearby, behind some bookcases, someone shushed her loudly. Hermione blushed.

"Oh, shove off," Pansy called out to the stranger.

"I've changed my mind," Hermione said, rolling up her parchment neatly. "I'm starving. Let's go."
"Excellent." Pansy gathered her things and they exited the library and made their way down to the Great Hall.

As they came into view of the huge double doors Pansy caught glimpse of Draco across the corridor, and turned to Hermione before she could see him.

"You go on in, I'll see you at the table."

Hermione nodded and entered the room. Pansy wondered if she'd seen him anyway, but there was nothing to be done-she approached Draco and tried not to look too critical when she looked at him.

The circles around his eyes just kept getting darker and darker. There was the ghost of stubble around his jawline; hardly detectable but in the closest proximity. He'd given up in keeping his hair tidy-it fell across his eyes in a handsome wavy pattern and curled past his ears-odd contrast to the sculpted smoothness he'd once preferred. The way he held his mouth looked like his jaw was wired shut-she shivered to see it, and placed her hand on his arm. He gave her a tired smile-the barest lifting of the corners of his lips, although that too appeared strained.

"Will you go in for dinner?"

"I just came from the kitchens."

"Good. Do you want to meet later? I'll bet you twenty Galleons you haven't started your Charms paper yet."

He looked miffed. "I've been busy."

"Of course. I'll help, if you like."

A minute flash of alarm passed through his eyes.

"With the paper, I mean," she clarified, wondering at once what had prompted the reaction.

"No," he said, suddenly curt. His voice had gone cold. "I'll come up with something."

"Oh-okay," Pansy said, trying not to look hurt. What just happened? "Well I just wanted to tell you I've decided I'm staying home for the break. I imagine you are too."

He nodded, his eyes had wandered off, looking behind her.

"Well I just wanted to make sure so we could maybe do something together."

He faced her again. "Of course." He squeezed her shoulder. "I ought to go."

"Send me an owl if you need anything," she said.

"I will," he said. "It'll be a notice saying you owe me twenty Galleons."

She cracked a smile, and he left.

It was four in the morning and Draco couldn't remember how long he'd been awake or if he'd gotten any sleep at all and it was killing him.

He rolled onto his side, eyes burning with exhaustion. His eyelids felt so stiff and heavy it almost hurt, but every time he closed them red was the only thing he could see, and that was the last thing he
wanted. The incomprehensible mess of his Charms paper was stuffed inside his bag, ready for grading. Defeated, he stared at the ceiling of his canopy.

*Just once,* he thought, drawing his arm over his eyes. *I want to sleep a whole night through just to remember what it feels like.*

His bed was warm, pillow invitingly soft and the curtains were drawn and the room was silent but why couldn't he rest?

He wanted to shout out his anger to wake everyone else up but his mouth made no effort to open and his tongue was thick from all the Butterbeers he'd drunk before bed. Consumed with boredom and an incurable thirst, he'd rummaged through his things until he'd found a half empty whiskey bottle from the year before that he'd shared with Blaise and Pansy on the train ride home, and forgotten existed. He'd downed it quickly enough and disposed of the bottles and jumped into bed, already feeling sleep's embrace, and had slept gladly, almost suspiciously, until he'd woken for no good reason.

His head hurt. His fingers were shaking, and he knew he wouldn't get any more sleep.

Draco ground the heels of his palms into his eyes, groaning. The silence in the room was too great to bear; it filled his ears with static and muddled his mind. He felt his heart beat and strained to hear his own breath but heard nothing but the emptiness around him.

*Fuck it.*

Furious, Draco flung off his sheets and stood, and without knowing why, decided to go for a walk around the castle, curfew be damned. He dressed himself without care and treading silently, left the dorm.

He walked without destination in mind. His socks were the only protection against the cold stone floor, and even if it felt dreadful he supposed it was better that way, as the sound of shoes would be a dead giveaway. Filch would dance with joy if he found him out in the open like this, as Draco had pulled several pranks on him over the years when he'd still been best friends with Crabbe and Goyle, and though they'd never been caught Filch had always suspected him except for the few occasions he'd managed to pin the blame on someone else. Draco stumbled, and frowning, kept close to the walls. Perhaps Filch could have his revenge another day. He wasn't in the mood for rules and punishments now, and the thought of those ancient, rancid teeth being bared at him made him feel sicker, so he determined to be as quiet as possible.

Which would have been easier if he wasn't quite so drunk.

It was pathetic. *He* was pathetic. Drunk on Butterbeer and what else and stumbling around in the dark. He turned around and peered behind him, but there was no one, which he couldn't believe.

*If Potter's following me, he's getting a hell of a show.*

But there was no sound or movement around him other than the mothlike flickering of the torches on the wall, so he turned back and kept on. It never occurred to him to use his wand to produce a little light.

*Where am I?*

Funny how the school became unrecognizable in the dark. The same halls he'd walked since he was eleven in the dark turned to nothing but a long stretch of black that yielded little familiarity. Even the torches, stationed like red little soldiers along the wall, propped up on their sconces, did a poor job of illuminating the great space that threatened to overtake their army. Everything looked the same. He
began to walk slower, suddenly afraid that he might find a set of stairs and fall down them and split his head open.

If they did, would he become a ghost? Would he wake and find himself, pearly white and translucent, floating along the school corridor? Or face oblivion and non-existence?

*Who's to say I'm not one now?* He looked around him. It was like he was the only one alive in the entire castle.

He felt the cold of the stone floor deep within his bones, felt the for once steady beat of his heart, but there was no one to be seen and nothing to be heard; he crept the length of the corridor, feeling more comfortable in his solitude than he'd felt for weeks.

When was the last time he'd spoken to anyone besides Pansy? He couldn't say—the days came and went and he took no notice of them, though they passed by unbearably slowly. Blaise was the one he had most frequent contact with—rarely verbal, their communication hinged on passing looks with their eyes and shifts of the eyebrow.

'Are you alright?'

'Yes.'

'Do you want to talk?'

'No'

'Do you want me to go?'

'Yes.'

And so on.

There was no one else he talked to. A year or two ago he'd spend half his time in the common room, entertaining himself with a girl that had taken his fancy, or off somewhere wasting time around the castle with Blaise, Goyle, whoever he could drag along.

*And now you spend all your time alone. No one cares about you anymore.*

Merlin, these thoughts. If there were a way to drown them completely...

He turned suddenly. The corridor yawned before him in all directions; a void crawling in on him. He remembered how afraid he'd felt the first time he'd entered the castle—where had that fear gone? It had fled the instant they'd stepped foot into the Great Hall, chubby cheeked and wide eyed, and he'd never felt it again, not even now, when he was so at risk of being caught, exposed as he was in the dark.

"I like you better when you're empty," he said to the corridor. There was no reply but the howling of the wind outside, the faint echoes of his own voice.

His feet were stiff from the cold—he found himself wrapped in a memory of when he was six—he'd run outside into the wood that surrounded his home, chasing after an errant toy broomstick, his bare feet (shoes knocked off while flying around his nursery) sinking into the snow powdered ground. He'd quickly lost sight of the broom. It had flown off into the woods and he was more irritated than upset; he'd tricked Dobby and had run away, and his parents had been entertaining guests so no one had noticed him slip out. Without coat or cloak he'd been chilled quite thoroughly and had gotten lost
—it was only minutes later that Greyback had found him and took him back home, depositing him into his mother's arms while his father struck down the mischievous broom with magic. Even then, as a child, Draco had sensed his mother's dislike of Greyback, and wondered why she hated him if he had done something good.

Suddenly uncomfortable, Draco shook himself away from the memory. There was a row of doors on his left, and on his right the wide, tall windows that let in streams of silver moonlight. He could see the light of it catching in his lashes at the oddest moments; as he walked he would lose focus and move his eyes from one place to another to try and catch it again. And then he tripped over something indistinguishable and fell. The corridor rang with the sound of his fall and hurtled down its length.

Shit!

Merlin, he was fucked. That had sounded really, unforgivably loud. What had he even tripped on? There was a pain in his elbow and shin—he rose quickly but it was too late. He was already counting the seconds until Mrs. Norris appeared with her damned yellow eyes like oil lamps acting as a beacon for Filch to find him more easily. Out of nowhere there was light in the space around him, almost blinding in its suddenness and it startled him so badly he couldn't move despite his whole body shaking, as if screaming RUN!

He felt like a rat caught between a trap and an oncoming predator—he didn't know which way to go so he froze.

But there was movement behind the door—in the thin slat of light at its bottom there was a shadow and it was coming closer and Draco immediately turned to flee but before he'd gone two steps it was flung open and an alert, velvet voice called into the dark.

"Who's there?"

Draco froze.

Fuck. Fuck.

He didn't dare move. If he made no sound then she would close the door and fall back into sleep with no trouble. Someone like her was likely to always dream pleasant dreams. She would dream and forget about the strange noise outside her door.

She called out again, and he took what he thought was a silent step, but apparently made enough noise to convince her to step outside the door and into the dark corridor. And, he thought exasperatedly, if he thought he'd been so quiet before then who knew how much noise he'd actually been making?

In all his distracted thinking he didn't catch the sound of her coming closer, or her whispered Lumos, but he sensed her closing in and he started walking without hesitation, without looking back.

"Stop."

He froze.

Her voice was low, heavy with warning, and he knew without looking that her wand was aimed at his back. The light source behind him cast his shadow, tall and narrow, stretching down the length of the floor. With the Lumos illuminating him from behind, there was no way she couldn't know who he was. Were he anyone else, with not so distinguishable hair, he could have made off and she would have a hard time of it trying to pick out the culprit from the hundred other boys who had dark
"Turn around."

He closed his eyes in defeat, and turned.

The full brunt of her Lumos caught him square in the face, and he frowned, but didn't move. It was strange, that every time they found each other she was always bathed in light. And he? Cast in the shadow of it. Only now it had been reversed. How must he look? Bedraggled, dirty hair and crumpled clothing; face probably looking as tired as he felt.

What would she think? That he'd been waiting outside her door? That he'd been following her again, looking for revenge?

Bad to worse—he wished he'd never gotten out of bed.

*If she curses me at least I'll get some rest before waking up in the Infirmary.*

He could hear her coming closer, and edged away slowly.

"What are you doing here?"

He spread his palms in the air, eyes still closed. *Search me.*

"You know I don't believe that."

"It's the only answer I have." His own voice sounded unfamiliar to him. His throat burned. He cleared it.

"I'm going to ask you again and this time I want a proper answer. Why are you here?"

"I couldn't sleep so I went for a stroll. Does that answer please you?"

How strange it was, to be talking to her again despite the circumstances. It felt… *good*, and he didn't want it to. When was the last time he'd heard her voice so clearly? It was like coming out of a fog. Even like tuning a radio—the abrupt switch from static fuzz to clarity. He felt wider awake than ever, and wished again that he'd never left his dorm.

"That sounds more like the truth, but I'm sure there's more to it."

She still hadn't lowered her wand, and Draco dared at last to open his eyes. First there was the white glare—nothing but light. It was like the inside of his head had imploded into a mass of soft, shapeless matter. It made him dizzy. It took multiple blinks and some straining of his eyesight to be able to see her past it. A kaleidoscope of color lit the edges of his vision.

"You're blinding me, Granger."

"So sorry." She sounded anything but, and the wand stayed where it was. Draco impatiently waited for when her arm tired out.

As his sight adjusted, he could make her out better. He'd initially been keen not to look her in the eye, doggedly keeping to the blackmail, but by now he'd broken most of her conditions so he supposed he was already cooking over the fire. How much damage could one more match wield?

Her hair was tied back, her features bleary from being woken suddenly in the night. Her cheeks were mussed and red, perhaps from tossing and turning her head on her pillow. She clutched her robe shut.
with her free hand. Her eyes looked up at him coldly.

"Are you going to sic Filch on me?" he asked, tired of her continuing silence. "Curse me?" She didn't answer. He supposed she was figuring out her next move. "I wouldn't begrudge you for it." He raised his hands higher. "Go on, get it over with."

The light in his face was gone. He blinked slowly, surprised. She'd lowered her wand somewhat, and the Lumos had dimmed, but she still looked at him, eyes wide but faintly narrowed, as if trying to discern whether he was joking or not. Draco braced himself, but at length her expression shifted.

"Don't think I don't want to. I'm still trying to figure out why you're drunk and outside my door."

"I'm not drunk," he said quickly.

She snorted. "And I'm the Queen. Really, you reek."

"Believe me or don't, but I didn't roll out of bed at this godforsaken hour just to haunt your doorstep." His voice came out sharper than he'd intended. "I only wanted to walk. What are you doing here?"

She crossed her arms and raised one eyebrow. "I live here."

Draco squinted at her door. There, just beside the frame, was a small golden plaque labeled *Gryffindor Prefect*.

"Well, naturally. I see that now." He frowned at the plaque. "Why all the way out here?"

"You mean you didn't know?" She didn't believe him.

"I missed the last dozen school newsletters. Care to fill me in? Also-didn't this used to be the old History of Magic classroom?"

"No, it was a regular storeroom." She was becoming more annoyed by the second.

"Well, excuse me. Not everyone memorizes the floor plans of this castle on their first train ride here, you know."

She seemed taken aback by this, as if surprised that he'd still have the memory of their first meeting.

"They weren't exact floor plans. I made them myself based on what the older years told me."

"I'll bet it didn't turn out very accurate."

She glared at him. He fought the sudden, shocking urge to smile.

"How come you've got your own room? Only the Head Boy and Girl get separate quarters, not Prefects."

"Professor McGonagall trusts me," she said curtly. "As well as Dumbledore. I asked for separate rooming so I could study in peace."

His eyebrows raised. "And they said yes."

"Clearly. Good behavior can get you certain privileges."

Through the tone of her voice her message was clear.
"You didn't deserve any of yours last year."

His head was feeling light. Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was the early hour. This could be a
dream, an extremely convincing dream and for all he knew, he could be passed out on his bed.

"Imagine that," he said.

"Nevermind all that. You're out past curfew, and drunk. I could hear you shuffling down the
corridor. It's like you wanted to get caught," she said accusingly.

"So report me." He couldn't find it in himself to care anymore. He deserved what he'd get, anyway.
If he'd been more careful and not so incredibly stupid he wouldn't have got into this mess.

"I will."

She kept looking at him strangely and he had the feeling she was trying to piece him together, and it
annoyed him.

"Are you going to give me a detention or what?" he finally asked. "Or will you hold me here until
you've had a long enough look?"

She glared back at him, but the contempt in her expression had bled into something else. She tilted
her head.

"You realize you've broken the terms of our arrangement."

"It was blackmail, if I recall correctly. And yes. Painfully aware." His eyes still burned from her
Lumos. He shot her wand an irritated glance, and knew she'd caught it, but she did nothing.

"Then you know what comes next."

Draco raised one shoulder and let it fall.

"Do what you will."

Her mouth opened in shock. Then she remembered herself and closed it, frowning, and he knew
she'd expected an argument from him. He might have argued, but couldn't be bothered to start.

"I'll inform Professor McGonagall that you're to have a detention. She'll assign you something."

"Fine."

An awkward silence ensued and dragged on. She was thinking of something to say next, he could
tell. Whatever it was, he didn't want to hear it. He'd already been defeated so he wouldn't let her rub
it in, but before he could even take one step she spoke up and startled him.

"Is there anything you need?"

He blinked. His head was spinning. "What?"

She seemed unsure, hesitant, and if there'd been more light he might have noticed her uncomfortable
blush.

"I asked if you needed anything."

Draco gave her a look, as if she'd sprouted another pair of arms from the top of her head.
"No. What do you care?"

"No reason at all," she said distantly, and finally, after a moment of deliberation, put her wand back into her pocket.

"Do you think that's wise?" he asked, nodding towards it.

"Are you threatening me?" she asked softly, narrowing her eyes. She reached back for it quickly.

"Merlin, no." He stumbled backwards. His face was hotter than fire. When had it gotten so hot? Why was he still there? Why had he said that? Of course she would take it as a threat.

Had his brain shut off from lack of rest? Gods above, he was an idiot.

She stood there, absolutely still, scrutinizing him. Draco didn't know what to expect.

"Go to bed, Malfoy," she said, and turned to walk away.

Draco stood there for a moment, incredulous. She reached her door and stood within the frame watching him. Her figure was shrouded in darkness, illuminated from behind. Her shadow stretched onto the wall opposite them.

"Are you going to stand there all night?"

Draco's ears burned.

"No."

"Then get going before someone finds you. I don't care to have you lingering out here."

This wasn't what he'd expected her to say. She knew it, too, but made no move to say anything else.

"Fine." He turned.

"What do we have here?" came a familiar voice from behind him, and he heard her sharp intake of breath.

"Professor-I was just-I heard a noise-"

Snape ignored her and looked straight at Draco as he stepped forward, his lank hair shining dully in the dim light. His black eyes glittered eerily.

"Why are you here, Draco?"

Draco said nothing.

"You know it is unwise to walk these halls alone at night," he said, and through his dead toned voice Draco heard a warning.

"I couldn't sleep," was all Draco could say. Once the words had left his mouth he wished he'd phrased it differently, or that he'd not said anything at all. It made him feel like a child again.

There, at least that they could both believe. He couldn't see the expression on either of their faces. She put her hand on the frame of her door. Snape studied him carefully, while Granger hovered at her door, unsure of what to do.
Suddenly it seemed as if Snape remembered that someone else was present.

"Why are you awake, Miss Granger?" Snape asked suddenly, as if he hadn't heard Hermione's words only seconds ago.

"There was a noise outside my door, Professor."

Snape gave her a long stare, as if trying to determine whether she'd lied or not. She stared back, undeterred.

"It's long past curfew," he said softly. "This will call for a detention for the both of you."

"Professor, I don't think that's fair," she said, sounding more energized in her annoyance. "I haven't done anything wrong. It's him that's broken the rules, not me."

Snape didn't even look at her.

"Those are her quarters, I assume?" he asked Draco.

Draco saw her tense up from behind Snape.

"Yes, this is my room." Her voice had turned brittle.

"And you heard a strange noise."

"Yes."

"You're no stranger to the dangers of this school. It could have been something more unsavory. You did not think to call for assistance?"

Her voice was scornful. "It's just Malfoy, Professor. I already gave him a detention."

Draco bristled, but kept his mouth shut.

"Need I remind you, Miss Granger, that your shiny little badge does not give you right to speak to me in that manner."

Her anger was palpable. "Yes, sir."

Snape turned to Draco again.

"You were alone."

"Yes."

"She is telling the truth?"

Draco heard her outraged scoff.

"Yes." He forced himself not to look at her to see her reaction.

"You're sure of this."

"Yes."

Snape was silent for a moment. The girl at the door wasn't looking at either of them but the window across the corridor, as if distancing herself from the situation to remain calm. Draco could sense her
temper's breaking point.

"Miss Granger," Snape said, and her attention snapped back to them. "I think it's time you get back to sleep."

"Gladly," she said, and without bidding them goodnight, shut the door behind her. It rattled in its frame, and one second later her light went out.

Somehow, during all this, the sky had grown lighter. Draco was stunned that he could actually see down the hall, but mostly if he squinted. His head still hurt, but it was a dull kind of hurt, and if he focused on something else he didn't feel it much.

"Get back to your dormitory," Snape told him.

"I'm not tired anymore," Draco said. He had gone cold again.

"I don't care if you sleep or not. You should not be outside your dorm."

"I had to move."

"Move to your Common Room."

Draco let out a harsh sigh.

"Your mother has reached out to me to ask why you are not answering her letters."

"There's nothing to say."

Snape was losing his patience.

"You realize she entrusted me with your safety."

"I didn't ask her to."

"You're beginning to draw attention to yourself," Snape said, crossing his arms. "You know if you are in need of assistance I am here for that reason."

"I don't need your help."

Snape let out an impatient sigh. "Then get back to bed before you're truly caught. I won't help you then." He turned and left, bleeding into the dark. As Draco watched, he flicked his wand at Hermione's door, and it took his sleep deprived mind a moment to realize that Snape must have cast a sound muffling spell around them to keep anyone from overhearing. He cast one last look at the door and left.

Hermione stepped away from her door silently, drawing her robe tighter around herself.

Snape had known she'd been listening. There was no way that door could have blocked out all of his and Malfoy's conversation without a silencer spell of some sort.

_That means they have something to hide._ She couldn't help but wonder what it was.

She pictured Malfoy's face, sallow and exhausted, even in the cover of night. She'd seen his bare feet and had been too surprised by them to say anything. When he'd spoken he'd sounded more like himself than he looked, and she realized with a start that she had not heard him speak since the
beginning of term. Owing mostly to her blackmail, of course, but even in years past when they rarely or never spoke to each other, she could still usually hear him during class or meals, talking in the background.

Hermione glanced at her door again, as if expecting to still hear him just outside it. Her hand came up to her neck and pulled the collar of her shirt away from her throat.

Why had she even woken up in the first place? She couldn't remember if she'd been dreaming or not —lately she'd been on a dreamless streak, which was a welcome change from the usual. It was true that she'd heard him coming down the corridor but she'd been awake a long time before that.

Full of questions, Hermione settled back into her bed, rubbing her cold feet together under her comforter. The fire in her hearth had died down a little but that was alright since the room was softly lit just enough to lull her to sleep. Hermione closed her eyes, relaxed, and fell asleep.

Hours later, back in his bed with the curtains drawn tight, the young man with silver eyes was still regrettablly, unbearably awake, and feeling himself to be at his wit's end with tears in his eyes, screamed aloud in frustration.

No one heard.
Three Firsts

Two days later, when the papers were delivered at breakfast panic sparked amongst the students. Someone shouted out the headline in alarm, and before the last Daily Prophet had reached its recipient the news had reached everyone: there had been a mass breakout at Azkaban.

"It's obvious who did it," Hermione said. She, Harry, Ron, Ginny, Pansy and Neville were hunched over the table, talking quietly over the bedlam. Ron had the paper spread open over their breakfast. The far right section was stained with grease from hash browns but it was not the section they were reading so they paid it no mind.

Bellatrix Lestrange's face peered at them from a window, her wild hair covering more than half her face so that only one dark, narrowed eye and a sliver of her nose were visible before she lunged at the camera, screaming. The frame shook, the image flashed, capturing the camera person's frightened reaction. Neville looked like he might be sick. Harry patted his arm without saying a word.

"Who else escaped?" Pansy asked.

Ron read out the names: "Dolohov, Crabbe, Lestrange, Greyback, Rudolfus, and Malfoy."

Ginny whistled.

"Has there ever been a breakout at Azkaban before?" Harry asked, thinking of Sirius. "At least, to this scale?"

"No," Ron and Hermione said at the same time.

"I'm surprised the Prophet actually reported this at all, considering how deep they are into Voldemort's pocket at this point. Same with the Ministry," Ginny said bitterly.

"What are we going to do?" Neville asked.

"What can we do?" Ron replied. "We're not Aurors. It's not like we can just waltz out of the school and hunt them down."

"But there ought to have been a reason why he bailed them out," Pansy said. "Could it be they've planned something?"

Everyone looked uncertain.

Professor McGonagall had taken to the pulpit, in light of Dumbledore's temporary absence.

"Will you all calm yourselves at once!"

The noise died down in seconds. Most of the Great Hall sat back down. Hermione looked at Harry—he had a note in his hands and was reading it, frowning. Their eyes met. She raised her eyebrows and he shook his head.

"There is no need to shout and panic! Certainly, this is worrisome news, but it does not affect any of you currently."

_Think again_, Pansy said. Had Draco heard yet? He was not in the room. Neville, who sat beside her, was shaking. She had caught the look Harry, Ron and Hermione had shared after they had seen the picture of Draco's aunt, and then the way they had looked at Neville after. She wondered why but
was afraid to ask.

"I urge you all to comport yourselves with civility. There are better things to fix your minds on than this."

As she finished the bell rang, and everyone moved at once to exit the room, her words already fading from their minds.

The Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom had all the curtains drawn on the windows, but streams of sunlight filtered through the edges, appearing silver instead of gold. Most of the class had arrived already and were waiting in their seats; a low hum of conversation filled his ears.

That morning he'd spent an hour in bed debating whether he should bother coming at all. His eyes were raw and dry, his mind so tired it jumped from one thing to another so he had trouble concentrating on most things. He'd become lethargic and sensitive to bright lights; often making his way through the corridors scowling and wincing from the floods of sunlight that poured in from the high windows. Because of this he had frequent headaches, which made it even harder for him to pay attention in class.

He'd intended to go to breakfast that morning but had slept in instead, waking only when his owl came with the post. The contents included a detention notice from McGonagall, the day's issue of the Daily Prophet, and a letter from his mother.

Currently Draco had his book open on his desk, flipping through it slowly and forcing himself to look at the content therein instead of the young woman on the other side of the room, whom his eyes darted to now and then despite his forced focus.

The other night was still on his mind. How had she slept after? Like a baby, probably. He envied her. She looked bright, happy, well rested as she talked to Pansy at the Gryffindor table, unaware of the hostile and uneasy glances she was getting for it from her own classmates. Now she sat near the middle of the room on the left side facing front, so every time he looked at her he only caught her profile—from her forehead to the delicate sharpness of her nose, the curve of her lips.

The kiss, the kiss. He shivered at the recall of her lips against his. Wrong and right. He would have liked another, and hated himself for it.

She wouldn't kiss you if Potter's life depended on it. She didn't even want to kiss you the first time, and you did it anyway.

Draco felt a shameful blush spread across his face. It burned hot as the sun.

I never should have done it.

You assaulted her, the voice crowed. And now you want more. You're really something, aren't you?

Draco's stomach twisted.

I was a monster.

That he should still feel this...attraction, or whatever it was, toward her was utterly sickening. Wrong on so many levels. Her hatred for him had only grown since and he could not fault her for it when he'd been the one to cause it. Unwillingly, he was transported back to the memory of her struggling body against his, the fear in the stolen kiss; how upset she'd been after. Worst of all was that he'd enjoyed it.
Currently, she was saying something to Weasley, who sat beside her. From where he sat Draco had no hope of making it out but her voice resonated in the room, slightly more distinguishable than the rest, perhaps only due to the fact that he was so tuned for it. It struck him how desperate he was being, and highly annoyed with himself he abruptly turned to face the other side of the room and tried to block out her voice.

The last group of students rushed into room, and upon seeing that Snape was not there yet, calmed considerably. Pansy was among them—she caught his eye and scowled.

"What's wrong?" Pansy asked the moment she sat down beside Draco. "Have you been ill?"

Draco shifted in his seat, trying to will away the irritation he felt at her presence. There was no reason for it, other than the fact that he just wanted to be left alone.

"No."

"Then why didn't you answer any of my messages? I've been trying to get hold of you for days. It's terribly rude not to answer back. You should know, I've been guilty of it who knows how many times and you've always been eager to remind me."

Draco put down his quill. "I simply forgot, Pansy. Forgive me."

Which certainly wasn't the truth—he'd received her notes and hadn't had the energy to reply to a single one. It had been days since they'd last spoken—all he could think about was the wine and the necklace—the message in his mother's latest letter.

_We are anxious to hear how well you are doing in your studies_, she'd written. _Your Aunt sends all her love. She is jealous of your still being in school and often wishes aloud that she could be there to help you._

_Our close friend has come to stay with us_, she wrote near the end of her letter. _He says he cannot wait to see you again, that it has been too long. He wonders what you'll have to tell him. Your Father and I are delighted to have him with us; now and then he jokes to your Father and I that he'll have to take us along with him when he leaves, he hasn't had much company for long, and he'll leave you to arrive to an empty home._

He'd burned it, wishing he'd never opened it at all.

So now it was clear that the Dark Lord doubted him. Not that he'd questioned the thought before, but it was terrifying to have confirmation from another source that wasn't his own paranoia.

_And not only that_, Draco thought, _he'll kill my parents if I fail._

His hands had gone clammy with sweat—he wiped them on his robe. More pressure was just what he'd needed.

He'd thought it strange that his mother had mentioned his father in the letter, as if he were back home instead of in prison where he really was. Then he had read the paper and it all made sense.

He supposed Pansy wanted to tell him the news.

Pansy gave him a look. _Of course I will, you fool._ At the same moment Snape walked in and all conversation died at once.

"Open your books to chapter twenty," he said, and the room was filled with the sound of flipping
The lesson began, and Draco couldn’t hope to pay attention—his thoughts were already filled to the brink with everything but the history and origin of the first concealment spells. One of those things sat far off to his left.

Pansy slid a note over to him.

*Will I see you at dinner?*

He shook his head.

*I've got detention with McGonagall,* he wrote, and pushed it back to her. She read it, frowning.

*What for?*

Draco paused, unsure if he should lie or not. But because he could find no other excuse, he wrote the truth.

*I got caught out past curfew.*

Pansy didn’t ask for particulars, luckily.

*Want me to bring you food after?*

He shook his head. He had an appetite, but not for food. She took the note back and scribbled something onto it, without taking her eyes away from the front of the room. Snape's flat, toneless voice rolled on and on as he gave the lecture.

She slid it back to him.

*You've heard the news?*

*Yes.***

*Any thoughts?*

*None whatsoever.*

She took it back just as Snape was looking around the room. His eyes passed over them. It was obvious he knew they hadn’t paid attention, but he never brought attention to it.

The next Hogsmeade trip was in a week. He barely had a plan but it was a prime opportunity, and he could not let it go to waste. He would have to be extremely careful.

He felt sick just thinking about it. He didn't want to do this. Not anymore. He felt like an idiot for ever having wanted part of this. The previous night he’d woken again with his left arm scratched through and bloodied, though the Dark Mark persisted. He couldn't stand to look at it, but even now was aware of it, of the snake's slow, almost drugged movement around the skull. He had healed his arm but the skin still felt tender.

Whom could he tell, if there was anyone who was willing to listen? Pansy, perhaps, but he didn't want her to get tangled in a web that was not of her creation. Snape already knew, and as he'd said before, could be trusted to help, but Draco didn’t want to trust someone who was so close to the Dark Lord. What else could he do? The fresh threat in the letter gave him no other choice. If he did not kill Dumbledore, his family would be killed instead, himself likely along with them.

A sudden uneasiness, not his own, caught his attention, and he looked around the classroom to see if
he had missed something. Everyone on the Gryffindor side looked tense or annoyed.

Snape had asked a question. Granger, of course, had her hand high in the air but it was the unfortunate Weasley whom he'd called on, who jerked awake at the vicious jab in his ribs, bestowed by his furious deskmate.

"Shall I repeat myself?" Snape asked, his voice slower than normal. That was never a good sign.

"Er-

Draco thought he could hear Granger hissing, 'It's in the book! It's-right-in-front-of-you!'

Somebody snickered.

"I don't know," Weasley said. His face was as red as his hair.

"Switch seats with Malfoy," the Professor said, looking down at Weasley with disgust. "Let us hope your new partner will be good enough to keep you awake and spare you from ridicule."

There were titters from Draco's side of the room. Granger blushed.

Draco cleared his throat. "I would rather not, Professor."

Snape, who had turned his back, rotated to face Draco, his face showing the barest hint of surprise.

"And why would that be?"

Draco faltered. Hermione's words floated back to him.

'Play the Mudblood card if you must. That hasn't stopped you before."

He'd certainly done it before, and Snape had humored him each time. How many times had he done it in the past, to be exact?

Too many. But he'll understand. He always has.

Old habit. She was right. But he couldn't bring himself to say it, and didn't know why. He felt wrong just thinking it. He remembered how she'd broken down before him in Umbridge's office, doubting her own self-worth because of the way he had treated her. And then twenty minutes later he'd taken advantage of her and snogged her while she'd been restrained.

She hadn't deserved it then, and she sure as hell didn't deserve it now, agreement or not.

"I have no reason."

Snape looked down at him from his hooked nose.

"Then kindly do as I say."

He looked at her, and she sat with her spine straight and her gaze fixed on the front of the room. He couldn't determine her expression. Everyone else was twisted around in their seat, staring at him. Draco grit his teeth.

"May I insist on someone else, Sir?"

Snape gave him a piercing look.
"You may not."

Draco began to argue, but the Professor slammed shut the book he'd been holding and the whole class jumped.

"I have made my decision. If you do not obey me at once I will take fifty points."

Unwillingly, Draco's eyes went to Hermione. She still wasn't looking at him. Snape's voice cut through the silence.

"Fifty points from Slytherin."

Somebody gasped loudly.

"Now both of you. Move."

The whole room was still as death. Snape had never taken points from his own House before. Draco felt Weasley's hateful stare on him, as well as the stunned stares of his Housemates. Pansy grabbed his arm but he stood swiftly and she had to let go.

"May I be excused, Professor."

"Take. Your. Seat."

Longbottom flinched so hard he almost fell backwards out of his seat.

Weasley stood up and headed for him, scowling. He moved swiftly, angling his shoulder to knock it hard against Draco's but he dodged it entirely, and the red headed Gryffindor stumbled hard into his new seat. Draco moved stiffly between the rows and sat down beside the brunette witch without a word. At once she was out of her seat with her hand in the air.

"I'm not feeling well, Professor. May I go to the Infirmary?"

Snape hadn't even looked at her, but gave the laziest twitch of his hand, as if he couldn't be bothered to shoo her away properly. She gathered her things quickly and left the classroom, leaving Draco alone. She hadn't looked at him once.

When the bell rang everyone waited until Snape had gone to his desk to get up and pack their things. It was always a strange feeling to go from such a fearful (on the Gryffindor's part, anyhow) silence back to the normal flow and bustle of conversation, as if a predator had passed through their mist. Draco collected his blank parchment and quill, tucked them inside his textbook and shoved them into his bag, rising from his seat. Pansy was waiting for him at the door.

"That was pleasant."

Draco said nothing.

"Sure you're not hungry?"

"I've got food in my dorm." It wasn't true, but a visit to the kitchens would remedy that.

"May I ask what all that was about?"

"No."

"Alright then," Pansy said. "We've got Charms after dinner. I'll see you there?"
"Yes. If you see Weasley falling asleep, hex him for me."

She gave him a reproachful look, but smothered her laugh as she walked away. Draco waited several minutes, and then went in the same direction. The corridors were getting busy—everyone was in a rush for food. The calamity of sound in the corridor was getting too great to bear and he didn't have the energy nor patience to maneuver through the throng so he took a different route to the kitchens.

A little ways from the staircase there was a dead ended corridor. Two portraits led up to it: one of three very short horses grazing in a meadow, and a dreary still life of an arrangement of potions ingredients. At the dead end was an enormous moth-eaten tapestry that hung from the border of the ceiling to the floor, which when pulled back revealed a wide passageway. Draco stepped past it and climbed down the spiral steps.

Halfway down was a couple, necking in the dark. Draco stepped past them without a single glance, and they too ignored him, caught in their own bliss, giggling softly.

The stairs took him down back to the first floor, where he resumed the way to the kitchens. A last gaggle of students were just exiting the corridor—no one noticed him as he turned into another passageway and another and went down another set of stairs, walking until he reached the large portrait of a fruit bowl. Before he could reach up and tickle the pear, the doorway opened suddenly, and he met a familiar pair of brown eyes.

Surprised, as she'd been stepping through the painting, she lost her step and tripped. Draco moved back but it was too late—her hand caught his robes by reflex and she only just managed to keep herself from falling—Draco was pulled downwards along with her, his shock had gotten the better of him and automatically his arms moved to catch her.

Before he could even register what had happened, she regained her balance and let him go, throwing her hand down as if disgusted by him.

"Sorry," he heard himself say. She'd already begun to leave, but froze and she turned halfway, looking like a bird staring at an intruder with one alarmed, scrutinous eye from the side of its head.

Draco felt her look of confusion, but ignored it and entered the room without looking back, his head buzzing loudly at the wake of her proximity for the second time that day. He didn't know if he should have acknowledged her or not. He'd already broken the blackmail and was still waiting for news on it, either from her or his parents, but so far nothing had happened. Besides, her behavior just ten minutes ago made it evident she did not want to be near him currently.

In the kitchens something strange happened. As he waited for the House Elves to wrap him up a bit of food, Draco found himself looking around as the cheerful creatures prepared the contents of their dinner.

"Will Draco Malfoy be wanting some Butterbeer?" Bitsy asked. She was the one he was most familiar with, as she always greeted him upon entering the kitchens. She had a long, crooked nose and short ears, but her eyes were the brightest blue he'd ever seen on anyone, and she had a toothy smile that stretched to the sides of her face.

"No, thank you, Bitsy." He didn't want another incidence like the one days before.

"Then pumpkin juice?"

"Please."
He'd become more comfortable in the kitchens than he'd been at the start of the year. He'd always known the kitchens were accessible, but had never bothered approaching them himself since Crabbe and Goyle were usually only too happy to make the trek and bring back all sorts of things. He'd been apprehensive of asking any favors of the House Elves, considering he hadn't always been very kind to his own growing up, but if there was a time to make up for it it was now, he supposed, so he took pains to be nice.

He was watching a pair of House Elves magically mince an enormous mound of carrots when there was the familiar CRACK of Apparition, then a surprised squeak and sudden movement at the other side of the room. Draco looked over curiously, but there were too many Elves to see who had arrived. When the crowd dispersed the newcomer was gone but some of the still gathered Elves were turning and looking at him, whispering among each other, appearing confused. Draco frowned and turned away.

Bitsy handed him his wares and sent him off, and Draco set off for an alcove closest to his next class.

"I'm fine, Ron," Hermione snapped at Ron, shrugging his arm off her shoulders. They were situated in the library, seated in a table farthest from the general population and from Madame Pince's glaring eye.

"Well, you look a bit angry," Ron said. "I assumed you were still upset over what happened in Snape's class."

"What did happen?" she asked. "You fell asleep. We both got chewed out for it though I did nothing wrong."

"Well, he did have a point..."

"In what?"

"You could have woken me up sooner."

"Ronald Bilius Weasley," Hermione said, turning red. "I am not your babysitter."

"Well I never said you were!"

"Then don't ask me to watch over you when you should already have a handle on basic human functions! Keeping yourself awake during class should be easy enough, you and Harry make a game of it all the time!"

"Well you deserve what you got. I wouldn't have been surprised if he gave us both a detention."

"I already apologized for that," he said. "I meant about Malfoy."

"Yes, well, he didn't do anything." And that was what she couldn't stop thinking about, aside from their encounter outside the kitchen.

He said sorry. Had he even realized that was the first time in their acquaintance he'd ever apologized to her? Her head was still spinning.

"What do you mean? He threw a fit to not sit next to you."

Hermione fixed him with a critical look. "We've known him for nearly six years. If that was a fit I'll eat my wand."
Ron shrugged. "Point is, he was still a prick."

Here Hermione wanted to point out that Malfoy had only been trying to follow the rules of her blackmail, but kept quiet. Harry and Ron still had no idea about this, and she was going to keep it that way. She also didn't want to give off the impression that she was defending Malfoy, of all people.

"I think I can guess who you're referring to." Pansy sat down at their table and set her bag on the floor.

"Sorry."

Pansy shrugged. "You shouldn't be."

"Well, he's your best mate and all," Ron said, scratching his chin.

"That doesn't mean I'll excuse every bad thing he does." Pansy looked at Hermione. "You okay?"

"Why is everyone acting like he hexed me? I'm fine, nothing happened. I can't believe I'm saying this, but he didn't actually do anything bad this time. There are more egregious acts than this."

"Refusing to sit with you isn't bad?" Ron asked.

"Ron, if you think I can't handle a little snobbery I'm worried for your memory."

Ron glared at her.

"Alright," Pansy said. "Just checking."

"I didn't mean to snap at you," Hermione said. "Sorry."

"All's well."

"Why does Malfoy look so sick lately?" Ron asked suddenly.

"Ronald!"

Pansy faltered. "Um-"

"Don't answer that," Hermione said, elbowing Ron in the ribs.

"Ouch! Sorry! But you and Harry've been asking the same thing for months! Ouch!"

Pansy looked at a loss for what to do.

"I'm really sorry," Hermione told her. "I know we've got no right to pry." She cast her red-headed companion a warning look.

"I don't feel comfortable talking about it," Pansy said. "He's just worried about his Father."

Hermione, sensing Ron about to utter another blunder, pinched his arm. He winced and leaned away from her, but thankfully said no more.

"That's understandable," Hermione said. "I'm sure he's got a lot on his mind."

"Yes, well..."
"Fancy a sweet?" Ron held out a bar of chocolate. Pansy hesitated, then took a piece. Hermione followed suit. They chewed in silence.

"Wait," Pansy said suddenly. "Where's Harry? I can't believe I didn't realize I haven't seen him all day. Was he even in class?"

Her companions froze. She looked at them curiously.

"He's studying," Ron blurted out.

Pansy raised her eyebrows. "Really?"

"No," Hermione said. "He's with Dumbledore."

"Oh." Pansy looked out the window. "Is he in trouble?"

Hermione smiled. "I hope not."
His Father's eyes stared at him coldly wherever he went, pressing on him even through the veils of snow and wind. Draco did his best to ignore them, buttoning his coat up to his ears and bowing against the wind, keeping his eyes to the ground, to the sky, anywhere but the eyes.

**WANTED FUGITIVE**, the posters read. There were others, of Greyback, of Bellatrix, of Crabbe and the rest. Their images growled and screamed in their frames, or like Greyback, licked his lips and flashed his sharp, yellowed teeth. They were bloodied. Crabbe glowered sullenly at the camera, holding his placard with huge, meaty hands that threatened to snap the piece of wood.

It was only Lucius who stood calmly in the face of the shaming camera. He stood erect, rigid, hands restrained behind his back like Bella's, his placard hanging down his front by a chain. He stared down his nose at the onlooker, lips in a thin straight line, the faintest curl of a sneer visible, but it was his eyes that disturbed Draco the most.

He was no stranger to the practices at Azkaban. The Dementors by far were not the end of it. But whatever they were, they had reached his father, and they had cracked him. It turned Draco's resentment to fear.

He had looked at the others to see if they had it too, but it was hard to tell. Aunt Bella had been unstable for as long as he could remember. She looked just as wild as before, but as he stared at the image again, watching it replay itself continuously, he was unable to tell any difference. Would it matter, in her?

Greyback's intimidation did not affect him. He had known the werewolf for too long to consider him a threat. Countless times in his childhood he had come to visit or have dinner (despite his mother's protests) or simply to visit his father, for the two had been friends for years. Draco searched his familiar yellow eyes and found nothing, but took no comfort in that. Greyback, family friend or not, was as dangerous as Bella. More so, perhaps, in his own way.

Crabbe looked on the verge of tears despite his scowl. Draco looked away from the posters at last, and resumed walking. His Father's eyes followed him.

He wondered what was happening currently at his home. That look in his Father's eyes…how was he now? He had received no more letters but the warning was ever present in his thoughts.

The posters covered almost everything, creating a sort of tunnel-like appearance in Hogsmeade. No one was outside. The other students on the trip were nowhere to be seen—they had either gone inside for warmth or fled back to the castle. Occasionally he could hear the jingle of a shop door or pub door opening, a brief flash of sound from a crowd, and then silence. Once or twice he'd see a shrouded figure, bent against the wind, hurrying to their next destination.

He didn't know why he was here. He didn't know where to go.

The thought of entering the shops or the restaurants repulsed him. What would he do, sit alone while everyone else talked of their plans for the holiday? No, he would much rather stay out here.

The wind gained force, and he stumbled into a wall sideways. Raising his arm to cover his face, Draco placed his other hand against the wall for support.

He had to act soon, but didn't know how to start. The necklace lay in wait in his pocket, packaged
carefully so that he ran no risk of its danger, and disguised as a bottle of perfume so as to evade Filch's hated Secrecy Sensors. He wasn't sure if the spells would have worked, but caught a stroke of luck when Filch had found Romilda Vane with some love potions in her canteen, and had spent the better part of the morning crowing his victory, targeting the rest of the Gryffindors over everyone else, and Draco had slipped through without trouble.

Draco blinked snow away from his eyes. Perhaps it was time to get back after all. Why had he come in the first place?

The wind faltered and died down. Relieved, Draco began to turn and head out of the village when a pair of voices caught his attention.

"What're you writing to him for? It's been ages!"

"Friendship requires frequent communication, didn't you know?" The scornful voice was immediately recognizable. Draco lunged into a narrow space between two buildings beside him and crouched behind a mound of snow almost as large as him.

They were coming toward him. He didn't know why he'd hidden himself, but figured it was best it no one saw him.

"You only knew him for a few months!" Could Weasley try any harder to sound jealous? Draco rolled his eyes. "You'll probably never see him again!"

"What of it, Ronald? I'll make friends as I damn well please."

"What, were you going to invite him to your Slug Club party?" He said mockingly.

"I'd have invited you if you'd just asked," she hissed. "You've gotten yourself worked up over a letter."

"A series of letters, apparently," Weasley said angrily. Draco rolled his eyes. A third voice cut in and said something. Draco couldn't hear it, but assumed it was Potter.

"I'm not saying she's not allowed to write to him," Weasley said. Without looking, Draco could easily picture his red, speckled face standing out in all the snow. "I'm just saying—"

Their steps came to a dead halt, mere feet away from Draco.

"Yes, Ron, tell us, we're dying to hear what business it is of yours," she said.

Weasley said nothing.

"That's what I thought," she said coldly, and then the vicious stomp of her boots through the snow led her past them and Draco, to the end of the lane.

"You could have handled that better," Potter said.

"I didn't mean it like that," Weasley replied half-heartedly.

"Then are you going to apologize?"

"Do you think she kissed him?"

There was an uncomfortable silence. Draco found himself wishing he'd left when he had the chance.
He'd been surprised at the question, thinking at once that Weasley was referring to him. But it couldn't be. If they were truly talking about him, then they would have come with their wands out and then asked questions later, as if she weren't capable of defending herself (and that she had).

"Yeah, probably," Potter said at last.

"*Him*?"

"She can kiss whoever she likes." Potter sounded annoyed now. "She liked him, you know."

"I'm still not convinced he liked her-"

"If you're jealous-"

"I'm *not*," Weasley said impatiently.

"Then tell her how you feel."

"I'm not jealous. I just don't trust him."

Who? Draco thought. Who were they talking about? All this time he'd thought it was Potter and Granger who had eyes for each other. But *Weasley*? This was more information than he cared to have. Did she like him back? What he'd just witnessed gave him a very strong negative answer, but one couldn't be too sure. If she had stayed around that jealous idiot for so long then it would be ridiculous to claim she didn't care for him.

*Even when he acts like a fool.*

But here he was, starting to feel better about himself and eavesdropping, too. It wouldn't do. One evil didn't wipe out another, and he certainly was in no position to think himself higher than Weasley considering all he'd already done. It was a sickening, humbling thought, and Draco hated it, but it was the truth.

They kept talking, and finally began walking away, but Draco had already ceased to listen. Draco rose from his hiding place and dusted snow off his cloak. Before he too could leave the scene a door in the alley way opened, and he froze.

Bright light illuminated the alley for a split second, flashing on the posters around him, and then there was the slam of the door closing, and the curious sound of someone walking through snow in heels. At least, he supposed they had to be heels, since it didn't sound at all like boots. He paused, waited to see who it was.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" said a somewhat familiar female voice. Draco waited another second, and then saw a large black trash bag floating towards the other end of the alley. There was a figure there, protecting herself with a thick shawl, whom he could only guess was Madame Rosmerta.

The bag landed heavily on the frozen ground, and she turned to enter back into the pub but caught sight of him.

"What are you looking at?" she asked, not too sternly. "Isn't it a bit too cold to be lingering about, dear? You ought to be going back to school."

She'd recognized his cloak. Draco was about to reply when an idea struck him suddenly. Rosmerta was coming closer. It must have gotten darker in the alley, or maybe the snow was still falling too quickly because while he could see her somewhat clearly she didn't seem to be able to tell who he
was, and that was lucky. He wouldn't have faulted her for shooing him away from her property based on the posters splashed around them in the narrow space.

"You look half-frozen," she was saying. "Come on in-I'll fetch you something warm to drink."

Draco pulled his wand from his pocket as a sudden gust of air brought a spray of snow off the gutter and between them, obscuring both their vision.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She had come even closer. Draco backed away.

"Sorry about what?"

"Imperio."

She froze, and as his Father's eyes watched, Draco gave his orders and commenced the first stage of his plan.
Why did I come here?

More guests were arriving just as she approached the door. Slughorn's booming laugh emanated from the room. Merry, festive music filled the space around her. Oh, and she'd chosen a sleeveless dress—she'd forgotten how cold the dungeons could get. Even now, her breath was visible. Nerves began to form—she made a face, anticipating an unpleasant evening. She shouldn't have come, but how could she get out of it now? It would be extremely rude, too, considering she had a date…

Cormac had noticed her shivering. "Do you want my cloak?"

Hermione uncrossed her arms. "No, thank you."

They entered the room together and were met with instant warmth. Slughorn had preceded the temperature problem; the once gloomy dungeon was suffused with golden light, cozily warm as if the very sun had devoted some of its might to ensuring a successful party. Hermione looked around, searching for familiar faces.

"Do you want anything to drink?"

"Yes, please." She smiled at him. Ron had not talked to her much after the outburst over Viktor's letters, and she'd been so fed up with it she'd dropped the intention of asking him to the party with her, and at a loss for who else to approach, surprised herself by asking Cormac McLaggen on a whim. Harry knew, but she had avoided letting Ron know, expecting another fallout. She still felt slightly guilty for not inviting Ron anyway, but only remembering how needlessly angry he'd been over the whole matter chased the feeling away.

What does it matter to him, who I write to? She remembered how he'd viciously he'd acted in Fourth year, during the ball when she'd attended with Krum.

Could he have been jealous?

Of what?

"Hey, Hermione!" Padma passed by, looking over her shoulder to stare excitedly between her and Cormac. Hermione turned away. Brilliant.

Cormac's hand went around her waist. Taken by surprise, she looked up at him.

"Would you rather I didn't?" he asked, grinning crookedly.

"I don't know." And she didn't. "I suppose I don't mind."

"There's Potter," he said, looking over her shoulder. "I'll get your drink." He turned and disappeared in the throng of people all around them.

Harry approached Hermione, looking pointedly in Cormac's direction and then back at Hermione curiously. She laughed and shrugged.

"Where's Luna? I thought I saw her just now."

Harry ran a hand through his hair in an attempt to flatten it. "She's talking to Trelawney."
"That must be quite the conversation."

"She gave me this." He pointed to a silver-petaled flower on his lapel.

"It's lovely," she said, reaching out to touch the petals gently. "I've never seen this before. Did she give you the name?"

"I've forgotten," he said, and laughed.

The music shifted to a familiar song by Celestina Warbeck. They both winced.

"She's really got a beautiful voice," Hermione said. Harry shrugged one shoulder.

Cormac materialized beside her and handed her a glass. Hermione thanked him.

"Slughorn's got a lot of friends," Harry said, looking around the room.

"I hear there's a vampire here somewhere," Cormac said. "From Romania."

"Really?" Hermione craned her neck to look around. "I'd love to ask him some questions."

"If you can spot him first," Harry said. The room was more crowded than it had ever been, and more people kept arriving. The music began to pick up again.

"Shame there's no room for dancing," Cormac said. Hermione blushed.

"Will you be signing up for the Apparition lessons?" she asked him.

"Who isn't? Nothing beats flying a broom, but you couldn't convince me to travel extensively through one."

"Awful, isn't it."

"It's a wonder the lessons only take up so little time. With all the risk involved you'd think it would take more time to learn than a few weeks," Hermione said. "Perhaps if there was some precursor, or extra reading material..."

"Don't start," Harry said. "You spend enough time in the library."

"What's wrong with that?" She put her hands on her hips. "You could stand to spend a few hours a day in the library, you know."

"Oh! What will you say to that, Potter?" Cormac asked, laughing.

Harry smiled. "I'd say she's right."

Shortly after Cormac excused himself and Harry and Hermione both stood for a moment without saying much.

"He doesn't seem as annoying as he usually does," Harry said, frowning.

"I'd forgotten." She turned to him. "Perhaps it only rears up around Quidditch."

"Maybe he fancies you."

Hermione frowned. "You think?"
"Harry, m'boy!" a huge, fat hand clapped onto Harry's back. Hermione jumped. Harry staggered.

Slughorn and his belly stepped into view. He wore sparkling green robes and a matching hat. His grey walrus mustache had been oiled, his round, sagging cheeks flushed red. In his other hand he held a goblet which must have contained wine, considering the smell of his breath.

"At last you answer my invitation! You've been hiding from me too long, boy. You ought to let yourself have some fun!" He wagged a meaty finger. Harry's face was blank.

"I've been busy with schoolwork, Professor."

"Always so modest, isn't he?" Slughorn winked at Hermione. "I hear Albus has you doing extra assignments, too!"

"Mostly it's just me finding things," Harry said. Hermione bit back a laugh.

"Well I made sure Dumbledore had no claim over you tonight, Harry, m'boy. Education is important, of course it is, but one must take advantage of their youth while they still have it. I'm sure some stories of your father's doings in his schooldays have reared themselves, and it isn't quite fair to thrust so much responsibility on one at such a young age no matter what they may have gone through. Although, I have heard stories of your adventures in your first years here, and I am sure you don't need an old drunken man telling you what you already know."

"I didn't exactly go looking to have adventures, sir," Harry said.

"Of course not! Forgive me, Harry, I fear I've annoyed you now when I didn't mean to."

"It's alright, sir."

For fear of the awkwardness continuing, Hermione spoke up from the other side of Slughorn's belly.

"Thank you for inviting us, sir," Hermione said. Slughorn turned, shocked to find her there, as if she had been hiding intentionally.

"Miss Granger! Oho!" He gave another booming laugh. "The pleasure is mine, my dear. The room is made brighter with your presence! You know, I had a hunch you two would be coming together, and I'm never wrong!" His stomach heaved visibly and wobbled as he laughed.

Harry and Hermione traded amused glances.

"Er…"

"We didn't come together, Professor," Hermione said, smiling in embarrassment.

Slughorn's face fell.

"Goodness, is that so? Forgive me, you two! My mind is muddled with merriment and this delicious wine. Let us pretend I said nothing at all and enjoy the party. Miss Granger, there are several author friends of mine in attendance who I am sure you will have fascinating conversations with."

"I'll be pleased to meet them, Professor."

"As you command, my dear!" He took her arm and began to walk off, but turned to Harry again. "I've been told you're very fond of treacle tart, Harry. There's a man by the table who's been wanting to speak to you, as well. Enjoy yourself, won't you?"
As he led Hermione away Slughorn kept up an endless stream of conversation and greetings to other people, so Hermione had little other to do than walk along and try not to bump into anyone.

"I'll introduce you to Marlene Tanspel first," he was saying, "she wrote the most scrumptious book on the sometimes questionable inner workings of the Ministry. Banned almost immediately after publication, of course—Fudge didn't approve—but there are copies out there, and one of the few that exists resides in my library." He patted Hermione on the arm. "You'll keep my secret?"

"Of course, Professor."

"I'm pleased to hear it! Now, what's this?"

A commotion had started up amongst the guests. In between bodies, Hermione caught a glimpse of Snape speaking very sharply to someone, but she couldn't see whom.

"Severus, what is the matter?" Slughorn asked, gently releasing Hermione's arm. Grateful, Hermione looked around for Harry, but couldn't find him. Had something happened to him?

"Nothing more than an intruder," Snape said in his usual detached voice. "I shall reprimand him at once."

Slughorn looked surprised, then thoughtful. "Now, now, Severus! Bring him here, if you please."

Visibly annoyed, Snape led what appeared to be a very reluctant Malfoy up to them. Hermione's stomach jumped to see him so suddenly. Her cheeks went red, and she didn't know why.

A slight pink tinge overtook his face but his jaw was clenched. Their eyes met and he too seemed surprised to see her there but looked away quickly. Hermione studied him carefully—he looked as ill as before, as if he'd never gotten a night's sleep in his life. As gaunt as he looked she was surprised to notice it made him appear handsomer. His cheekbones appeared more prominent, and even in this startling ragged state he looked like a prince among commoners, and it was aggravating. Ghost pressure constricted her throat; her hand came up to it instinctively—his eyes flashed towards her at the motion and he turned his whole head away, as if he couldn't bear the sight of her.

She remembered him outside her door, squinting in the glare of her Lumos, looking like a creature come from the forest to creep the abandoned halls.

'Do what you will.'

She started. The letters. Oh Gods, the letters. Why hadn't she sent them yet?

"Why, Draco!" Slughorn said pleasantly. "If you wanted to attend, you might have asked."

Hermione found herself extremely doubtful that Malfoy cared enough about some silly party to go out of his way to crash it. If he had, he certainly wouldn't be acting as calm as he was now. He looked embarrassed, to be sure, but not as angry as he could have been. He had to have been doing something else—she simply couldn't believe that he was resentful enough to pull something like this. But what did she know? He'd surprised her in the past.

"I'm sorry, sir."

There was something he was hiding. She could see it in his eyes.

"Never mind that. Let him alone, Severus. Let him join the festivity! Times like this, there's no need for punishment over something so small."
Snape's scowl deepened until it looked his face was carved of rock. He placed his hand on Malfoy's shoulder, as if wanting to get a word in but Malfoy shrugged it off viciously.

Malfoy spoke stiffly. "Thank you, sir." He turned and left. Snape had already gone, too. She wondered what Malfoy would do now. Why was he here in the first place? She hoped Harry was already on the move.

After she had finally extracted herself from Slughorn and all his friends, she went in search of Harry, and finally found him with Luna in a corner of the room.

"Hullo, Hermione," Luna said. "Did you see the feathered wormdingle on the Christmas tree?"

"I don't think I did," Hermione said, taking some punch from the table.

"They like the smell of pine," Harry informed her.

"And bacon." Luna took a chocolate from the small paper plate she was holding and ate it.

"Me too," Hermione said, taking a bacon-wrapped sausage from the table.

"I can tell you two want to talk. That's okay. I'm going to find Ginny." Luna patted Hermione's arm, smiled, and left. Hermione stared after her, perplexed.

Harry looked around, suspicion and unease scrawled across his face.

"Did you follow him?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah, out into the corridor." He paused. "He and Snape had an argument."

"What did they say?"

"I'll wait until we get back to the tower," he said, leaning away suddenly to nod at Cormac, who had found and approached them. Hermione, who hadn't noticed him, jumped.

"Sorry," he said. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder and grinned crookedly. "The party's gotten weird."

"Oh-" she looked around. He was right. Slughorn was well into his cups, bellowing loudly along to the song the band was playing, clutching one of his visiting guests by the shoulder. A gaggle of students stood nearby, looking thrilled and some even cheering him on.

"Well."

Luna stood beside the pine tree in the front of the room, arm outstretched to the top, talking to something invisible, as if coaxing it to come down. Someone had smuggled in a Fizzing Whizbee—it snarled as it flew past them—Cormac had to duck. It made another trip around the room, and the excited students grabbed for it, wanting to throw it too.

Hermione brought out her wand. "Accio!"

The toy flew into her waiting hand and she tapped it with her wand to deactivate it before stuffing it into her pocket.

"Right," she said, "shall we go?"
"Let me walk you to your common room," Cormac said.

Hermione paused. "I'd like that, thanks."

"I've got to escort Luna back, too," Harry said. He squeezed Hermione's arm. "See you in a bit."

"Sure."

"Why'd you ask me to go with you?" Cormac asked. They were the only ones in the corridor. Torchlight flickered all along the floor. Hermione wished she had worn a warmer dress.

"I couldn't think of anyone else to ask, honestly," Hermione said, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Everyone else had plans, and then I ran into you…"

Cormac nodded. "I wondered…"

"What?"

"I'd thought you and Potter would go together."

Hermione missed a step and nearly stumbled, but caught herself in time.

"That's the second time I've been told that today," she said, trying not to sound too annoyed. "Why does everyone think that?"

Cormac looked like he wished he hadn't said anything. "It's just-you two are so close. You spent most of tonight with him, though he wasn't your date."

The accusation stung though he spoke plainly, and without bitterness. Hermione felt a sharp retort at the tip of her tongue but bit it back. He wasn't accusing her. He'd just said a fact, and the truth was, he was right and within his right to do so.

Guilt turned her face red. She really had spent more time with Harry. How many minutes in total had she spent with Cormac? Ten, at the very optimistic most. She cringed, wondering how she could have behaved so rudely.

"I didn't realize…" she grabbed his arm and he stopped. "I'm so sorry. That was abominable of me."

"I was happy when you asked me to go to the party with you," he said. "When we got there, I began to think you were using me to make him jealous."

Her jaw went slack. "I would never!"

He smiled. "See, I thought so."

Hermione took a moment to collect her thoughts.

"Look. I love Harry, but not in that way. I really don't have an excuse for what I did other than the fact that I can be a fool sometimes and unfortunately it came at your expense. I really am sorry."

"Perhaps we can try again some other time?"

"Perhaps."

Gods, he was too nice. Arrogant, most of the time, to be sure, but she'd never known this side of
him. What Harry had said earlier ran through her mind again and she looked at Cormac dubiously. Perhaps the behavior change was simply because she never talked to him at all and only ever saw him at the Quidditch pitch.

Whatever the reason, he'd still been enjoyable company. If Ron had been in his place he would have sulked and played the silent treatment and who knew what else.

*You shouldn't be surprised,* she told herself. *Everyone's different. You just forget that a lot.*

Cormac had come closer. His hand was still on hers. She could see a small scar across the bridge of his nose.

"Do we kiss now?" she asked jokingly.

"If you want."

She took a moment to think it over. Was it a good idea? Here, now? In the corridor? All alone? Where anyone could find them like this?

*Go on, do it! It's only a kiss. When was the last time a boy paid you attention?*

*That's not a good reason to kiss someone,* she thought.

*But he is handsome. You've always thought so, haven't you? Have a little fun. It doesn't have to go any further than this.*

She leaned in, still unsure. He removed his hand from on top of hers and brought it around her waist, leaning in even closer until their lips met. His curly blond hair fell into her eyes and he pressed firmly against her mouth. His lips were soft, warm, tasting faintly of cinnamon. His chest pressed against her and it felt nice, like the first time she'd kissed Viktor, though that had been so different. And then the last time she'd ever been kissed… His tongue sampled her bottom lip—her breath caught and she pulled away nervously.

"Sorry," she said, trying to catch breath though the kiss had only lasted for a matter of seconds. Memories had come up, ones she did not want to think about currently.

Cormac looked at her carefully. "Are you alright?"

She tried to smile. "I thought I heard something."

He took a look around. "We should get going. Regardless of where we came from, Filch isn't fond of Slughorn."

They reached her room some moments later, and lingered outside her door.

"I enjoyed tonight," he said.

"I wish I hadn't made such a blunder of it," Hermione said, grimacing.

"Perhaps we can try again, if you'd like to be my date on the first trip to Hogsmeade after break?"

Hermione bit her lip. "I don't want to give you any ideas, Cormac. I like you, but I have more important things to focus on than dating currently."

He looked a little taken aback at her choice of words, but after a moment, nodded. "I get it. School first."
"I didn't mean it as a slight," she insisted. "I don't have room for much else."

"Surely we can still talk?" he asked teasingly. "I'd hate to see you held hostage by schoolwork."

She swatted at his arm and said, "Of course," even while thinking it was unlikely to happen.

There was a distant sound at the farthest end of the corridor. They both jumped.

"Well, goodnight," he said softly.

"Goodnight. Enjoy the holiday."

He leaned in again, and sensing he wanted another kiss, Hermione turned away. He paused, and stepped back.

"Same to you."

Hermione entered her room and stood there for a moment, not knowing what to do. The letters were on her mind. She had to send them. It had been almost two weeks since her discovering Malfoy outside her door. She didn't know why she was so reluctant to do it. It was confusing and irritating. What would he think if she didn't come through on her threat?

She began to pace, composing the letter in her head.

Including the usual formal introduction, this was all she had:

You'll be interested to hear that your son has behaved most inappropriately. During Dolores Umbridge's time as Headmistress last year he, along with others, was assigned to follow certain students to gather intelligence. Your son was assigned to me, and over the course of the year he increased his efforts, which ultimately led to physical violence in which I was left with injuries and bruises more than once.

Now, the kiss. How on Earth could she write about that? To his parents no less!

Your son snogged me against my will and I wish you, or someone would punish him for it but I'm too embarrassed to tell.

Perhaps if she just sent them the memories instead, and a short, succinct note...

Hermione rubbed at her eyes. It would be best to work on it tomorrow with a clear head.

He was walking again in the dead of night, walking back to his dorm from the Room of Requirement. He'd been so angry after getting caught outside the party that he'd gone upstairs to work on the cabinet and take his mind off it.

Raw, numbing exhaustion burned at his head.

Just a little longer.

The thing about Disillusion charms was that they didn't conceal shadows. As useful as magic could be, it did have its limits. To compensate he stuck himself to the wall like a spider and crept on, treading silently.

There was a little light up ahead. He knew its source. He slowed down further to eliminate any chance of her hearing him, walking almost as if he'd been hit with a slow-motion jinx. He could hear
her pacing inside her quarters, that was how quiet it was. What could she be doing at this hour?

*Better not to dwell.* He crawled on.

He was going to have to walk past her door.

*Fuck that.*

He went around to give it a wide berth, wondering if he dared pick up speed a little.

He took a step, and kicked something—a small stone, probably. It clattered down into the darkness, and his heart stopped at the same moment her pacing stopped.

Every instinct screamed to keep going, but he felt that if he listened to it, somehow she would be persuaded to exit her room and investigate. His heart rate would suffer for it, but he remained frozen, hoping he was right. If she came out anyway, at least his concealment charm would buy him seconds enough to get a head start.

Seconds dragged by, each slower than the last. No sound came from either him or behind the door.

There could be no way she didn't know it was him.

His legs burned. All he wanted was to fall on his bed and sleep. How funny, that he was practically hiding from her now. She would laugh herself into hysterics if she ever knew.

The pacing resumed. The light clicked off, and minutes later, when he was absolutely sure that she was not listening behind the door, he crept away, heart still racing.
Reconnaissance

Christmas morning dawned frosty and swirling with fresh snow; the students who’d stayed for the holiday woke up in their beds and before rubbing the sleep from their eyes, reached for the pile of gifts at the feet of their beds. The first years, as always, were the most savage, tearing off wrapping paper and leaving it in piles on the floor and stuffing sweets into their mouths and bidding their dormmates a chocolatey "Happy Christmas!" Shouts and laughter filled the dormitories of every House; in one, a young woman with very pale yellow hair sat pleased and holding in her lap the mimbulus mibletonia someone had sent her. In another, a young man with decidedly red hair looked confused as he looked down on a box of sweets that someone had sent him, signed 'your secret admirer'. Outside the castle, a pale, lone figure walked through the grounds, just on the fringes of the Forbidden Forest. The pile of presents at his bed lay intact and utterly shunned. A strange package had arrived in the early hours of the morning. It contained a new cloak made of a thick, heavy material. He’d discovered a letter sewn inside of it. It lay still unopened and trapped between the jaws of his trunk. It was from his Father.

Safely away from the chaos, the staff were the chief occupants of the Great Hall, taking advantage of the gift opening to enjoy a calm breakfast. The Headmaster, sporting a gaudy mitten on his withered hand, was in the brightest of moods, and insisted that each of them use up their Christmas crackers, and because more than one cup at the staff table held a reasonable amount of Firewhiskey (all thanks to Professor Flitwick's flask), they did it with great gusto, and had a single student been in the room they would have been treated to the stunning sight of the Professors roaring in laughter at the ridiculous gifts bestowed on them from the party favors. Even Snape, though pointedly looking away from the merriment with a roll of his eyes, sported the smallest quirk in his lip that might have been a smile.

After the gift opening was done with, students gathered in their common rooms to thank friends and show off gifts; a few Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes packages were opened to reveal firecrackers that zoomed around the room, others exploded in the recipient's face and when the cloud of smoke cleared, left them wearing ridiculous or spectacular Christmas apparel. Seamus Finnigan wore a footie pajama set that made him look like Father Christmas, and invited everyone to sit on his knee. Lavender Brown had been bestowed with a teapot-shaped witch's hat that rattled and whistled every couple of minutes. She'd tried to get rid of it but was pressured to keep it on, since everyone loved the novelty, but she passed it off and the hat went from head to head, leaving a trail of steam around the common room.

Hermione was last to exit from the girl's dormitory. Harry and Ron had been waiting at the bottom of the stairs, and when she reached them she flung herself into their arms.

"Happy Christmas!"

They all wore their newest Weasley sweater. Hermione clutched a large book under her arm, and she immediately kissed Harry on the cheek.

"You shouldn't have, Harry, I said I was going to save up for it!" She held her new first edition copy of *Hogwarts, a History*, as proudly as he'd held the golden egg from the Triwizard Tournament after winning the first challenge.

"You almost cried when you saw it at the shop," he said, grinning. "I thought you might vomit out of excitement."

"I might now!" she said, laughing. She turned to Ron. "And Ron – I don't even know what to say."
Her hand reached for her neck and caught the delicate gold necklace. The pendant was a small heart with her initials engraved onto it. "It's beautiful, thank you."

Ron was evidently relieved. "It was a bit of a gamble, really. I thought you'd like it but I couldn't be sure since you don't often wear jewelry." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry I've been a prat."

"You don't need to give me a necklace to apologize," she said. "But I appreciate it." She pulled it over the collar of her jumper so it was more visible. "You're one of my best friends, Ron. It means a lot to me. I love it, I do."

Ron's face had gone red. He coughed and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Thanks for the cloak. You didn't have to, you know."

"I know," she said. "And I know we were only trying stuff on in the shop for laughs, but I thought you looked handsome in it."

His blush intensified. "Thanks, Hermione."

Harry, who'd gone to speak to Neville for a moment, had returned. Ginny approached them at the same moment, laden with a spectacular witch's hat that left a trail of sparks whenever she moved her head.

"Food?" she asked.

"Gods, yes."

Before they had even sat down everyone had already begun to serve themselves, chattering happily all the while. Hermione had just put down the pudding when they were approached by Pansy, whom they hadn't seen in the midst of the large crowds clustered around in the Great Hall. Hermione was already seated, but Pansy approached her from behind and hugged her anyway.

"Happy Christmas!"

Hermione, who'd let out a shriek at the surprise greeting, began to laugh. "Happy Christmas, Pansy. Did you like it?"

"Like it? Try love it! I do! I'm wearing it now!" She showed them all her new shawl. It was a rich shade of marigold, and detailed with a lace pattern at the end of the sleeves. From the bottom trailing on up were lines of delicate pansies. "You made it, didn't you? Of course you did. You ought to teach me one day." She thrust a large parcel into Hermione's hands. "Now here: I hope you like it."

The package was wrapped neatly with a wide white ribbon holding it shut. Hermione opened it quickly as everyone watched.

"You didn't have to get me anything," she said nervously.

"Yes I did. I saw it and I thought of you," Pansy said, grinning.

In Hermione's hands was a messenger bag made of a thick leather. *Dragon hide*, Hermione realized as she felt the material. The front flap had a thick buckle to hold it all shut, made of brass. It was durable, and looked like it should have weighed more than it actually did. She had the sense that no matter how many books she put in it, it would get no heavier than how it felt now. It even had a handy pocket on the strap to hold her wand.
"Perfect for holding lots of books," Pansy said, sounding very pleased with herself. "I've seen how heavy that bag of yours is. You never complain but I thought this might help. If you use it to hold something small you can shrink it down a little with your wand like this-" she demonstrated how, and they watched as it shrank to the size of a small purse. "Of course it's the same thing if you want it big again, and there's no damage whatsoever." She did it again and the bag returned to its previous size.

Hermione stared at it in amazement. "I can't accept this, Pansy." It looked quite expensive, and suddenly she felt quite embarrassed about her homemade gift.

"Yes you will," Pansy said. "I see how much you like it already. Besides I've grown quite attached to my new shawl and I won't give it back so easily." She wrapped it around her shoulders once and left the ends to trail down her front; and stared down at herself admiringly. "Truly, I've never been given something so lovely." She looked up at them, grinning self-consciously. "And it's so refreshing to have something that's not green or grey."

"Mine has Quidditch hoops on it," Ginny said, rising up to show hers proudly. Hers, in contrast to Pansy's marigold, was navy blue.

"Very fitting," Pansy said, nodding. "I love it."

Ginny took a bite of a cupcake. "Are those pansies on yours?"

"Yes!"

"They're lovely! Won't you stay for breakfast?" She patted the empty space between herself and Ron.

"I meant to stay but there's a few other friends I've got to find."

"Well, you know where we'll be," Ron said, reaching for the pitcher of milk. "We'll try not to eat everything."

"Don't you dare, Weasley."

"Will you be long?" Hermione asked.

"I hope not," Pansy said. "Oh, and before I forget—the bag only opens to you. No one else can get at what's inside. Isn't that neat?"

"It's nothing I've ever seen before," Hermione said. She rose and hugged Pansy. "Thank you. It's incredible."

"I knew you'd love it! Now I've really got to run. I'll see you all later!" And she rushed off.

"Well she's chipper," Ginny said, smiling. "Whatever she drank this morning, I want a full glass. I still feel half asleep."

"Anyone fancy some Quidditch later?" Ron asked, piling more sausages onto his plate.

"Not feeling it today, actually," Harry said. "And it's too cold outside."

"What about a snowball fight?"

Ginny made a face. "Still too much work."
"Merlin, but you're lazy today," Ron said to Ginny. She shrugged.

"We're on break! I'm allowed to want to rest!"

"Why don't we go play a round of wizard's chess?"

Hermione reached for the jam. "Why don't we finish our breakfast first and then decide what to do?"

"Oh, alright then."

"This is for you."

Draco automatically took the package thrust at him. Pansy stood before him, looking quite pleased with herself. There was a glow around her, emphasized by the rare, bright morning sun. The parcel was wrapped in brown paper.

"Go on, open it!"

Draco turned it over in his hands. It was quite heavy. He gave her a look. "What's in here, bricks?"

She huffed. "I'll beat you with one if you keep stalling."

"Nice yarn, by the way."

Her face lit up. "Isn't it lovely? I'm going to wear this through the summer even if I get heatstroke. She's really got a talent."

"Who?"

"Hermione, of course."

"Oh." He looked back at the package. "Don't you want me to wait?"

"No. You need it now." She prodded him with her finger through her mittens. "Plus I know how much you like getting gifts."

"No, I don't." He'd said that a little too quickly.

"Of course you do. Everyone does," she said, smiling. "Blaise told me you haven't opened any of your gifts."

"I didn't feel like it."

"On Christmas?"

He gave her a look.

"I know you've got lots of things on your mind," she said. "But surely you can enjoy today?"

He didn't answer. Pansy shivered and looked around.

"Merlin, it's cold. How long have you been outside?"

"All morning."

"And you look half frozen to prove it. Are you trying to freeze yourself to death?"
"I needed to clear my head, Pansy, that's all. I didn't even realize the time."

"Hm." She narrowed her eyes at him. "You haven't opened your present."

"Can't this wait until we get inside?"

"Goodness, just open it, Draco."

Draco sighed, and tore it open. It was a bunch of small bottles, all unlabeled.

"What am I looking at, Pansy?"

Pansy was grinning now, hands on her hips. "Take a whiff of them."

He did. "Sleeping potions?" A slow, incredulous grin worked itself onto his face.

"I know how you feel about going to get them yourself, you see," she said. "And I know Madame Pomfrey controls how much goes out of the Infirmary, but I've got connections, and I gathered a small supply to last you over break. A little longer, perhaps, if you use them wisely."

He didn't plan to. He would have taken an entire bottle right then and would have slept happily outside in the snow until spring if he'd been alone. But suddenly he was embarrassed that his problem was so apparent that she'd taken it upon herself to help.

"Pans, I don't need these—I told you I'm well."

"Tell that to someone who hasn't known you all their life and they might believe you," she said. "I don't know what's haunting you lately but I can guess, and I want you to know I can help."

"You already have," he said. "But there's nothing haunting me."

Red hands. Black eyes. He pushed the images away and squinted up at the sun. What brief amount of sunlight they'd gotten had just been eradicated by the clouds obscuring nearly all of the sky. He found himself feeling impatient with them, and wished that the sun could have stayed out longer.

Pansy came to a stop. The castle was just coming into view ahead of them through the falling snow. They had gone in a loop—it was too cold to venture out much farther.

"I've seen the way you look at her."

His stomach plummeted. "Don't, Pansy."

"And I know that's not the only thing that follows you around."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You don't have to," she said softly. "But you can at least apologize to her. It's been too long."

"It's too late," he said. "And she'd never believe me."

"How do you know that?" Pansy asked skeptically.

"I just do. I'm tired of talking about it."

"Fine," she conceded. "But whatever's going on with you, you can't let it drag on like this, Draco. Is it your Mother? Is she ill? Or is this about your Father?"

"I don't understand. Which one is it?"

"You saw the news about Azkaban. I got a letter. The Dark Lord has decided to stay with my parents for the time being."

Pansy frowned. "What for?"

_To make sure I do what I'm meant to do._

"I don't know."

"I'm sure they can take care of themselves," she said. "They have before."

"I know. But I still worry."

Pansy didn't know what to say. She was positive there was loads more that Draco wasn't telling her. Whatever it was, it had to be what was making him waste away like this. It hurt to see but she knew that like every time before, if she asked him now he would grow defensive and angry.

_Why hide the secret that's killing you?_ she thought.

"I forgot to get you anything this year," he said suddenly "I'm sorry."

"I don't care. I just want you to get better."

"I will," he said. "I just need to get my thoughts straight."

_On what?_ Pansy wanted to ask.

"Come on," he said, taking her hand. "I'm hungry."

At Draco's suggestion they'd gone to the kitchens instead of the Great Hall, and as the House Elves rushed to prepare them something Pansy had written off a note for Hermione and one of the House Elves had volunteered to deliver it.

The enormous kitchen was full of happy Elf chatter and the merry banging of pots and pans, a softly sung song or two. The smell of hot chocolate and freshly made meat pies was heavy in the air, making his mouth water. There was a Christmas tree in one corner, gaily decorated. Draco was perplexed to see a series of brightly knit socks strung all over it. An enormous line of gateaux were lined up, ready to be sent up to the tables. A group of Elves worked incredibly quickly, moving down the line, each one wielding a piping tube, and by groups of four, the cakes were decorated. Pansy and Draco stood awkwardly in the midst of it all before the great fireplace. He watched the Elves work, feeling their cheer slowly creep its way into him. Pansy hadn't said much since they'd come back into the castle. He wondered what she was thinking about.

Just as he'd finished that thought he thought he saw something familiar. A jolt of shock ran through him and he blinked, but when he looked again it was gone.

_It couldn't have been_, he thought. _There's no way_. He looked at Pansy to see if she'd noticed it too, but she was staring at the fire, her dark eyes downcast and full of thought.

A trio of Elves walked up to them, proud of the large basket they'd wrapped up for their guests. Draco felt himself flush.
"Is this foods be being enough?" one of them, the smallest, asked in a high pitched voice.

Draco eyed the basket. It was as big as the three elves put together. They struggled under its weight and he reached to pick it up. They handed it to him gratefully,

"This is more than enough," he said. "Thanks."

"Can we have some drinks, too?" Pansy asked suddenly.

"Yes! Certainly!" And the three of them scurried off.

"Where will we eat?" Pansy asked. She hadn't looked away from the fire.

"I don't know."

"Not the Common Room?"

"No."

The three Elves returned, presented them a bag full of bottles of Butterbeer and two flasks of pumpkin juice.

"Great, thanks," Pansy said, and the Elves bowed as they left. Draco was too busy maneuvering to hold the large parcel of food in his arms too notice that as he left, one of the Elves, with great green eyes and a shapeless knitted cap perched over one enormous ear, emerged from behind a large barrel, staring at his former Master in utter astonishment.

Pansy set her sights on the Room of Requirement. Draco had protested the idea, claiming that the large study room was 'boring' and he didn't want to go back there. When Pansy asked why he'd refused to answer, but they both knew what had happened last time he had been in there, and how close he'd come to expulsion.

But Pansy had persuaded him to go anyway, promising that he wouldn't regret it. Draco didn't know what the fuss about this old room was about, but his curiosity had been piqued and so he agreed, sensing that she had a plan.

And now he was regretting it.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Pansy, who was pacing at the dead end in the corridor, cast him an irritated look.

"Hold on, will you?"

"This isn't even where the Room of Requirement is—there's no bloody door! I think I've got a right to ask what the fuck is going on."

Though the place did look familiar, this simply couldn't be where the room itself was situated simply because there was no door. It wasn't a rare occurrence at all to find twin places within the school—places where everything looked similar down to the paintings on the wall or the stones on the floor but only one was real, and the other was just a strange, unnecessary substitute that served only to intimidate and annoy the first years, or anyone with a terrible memory. Or sense of direction. He looked around skeptically, wondering if this was one of them, and his eyes landed on the same (or twin) alcove where he had cornered Granger once, mere months ago.
The way she had looked in the fire's light, her fear like an aphrodisiac as he threatened to uncover her secret… He remembered the way he'd tried to intimidate her by getting as close to her as he could, and it had worked. She'd been visibly rattled by his proximity and he'd been strangely pleased by it and how it felt to have her so near. He wanted to laugh at himself but kept quiet—how had he not known in that very instant that he was attracted to her? The comment he'd made then—he cringed, remembering it. No wonder she had been able to evade him for so long. He was a fool.

And you thought you were better than her. Ha! She's flown circles around you from the second she stepped foot into this castle, and you've been too proud to notice.

The sound of Pansy's pacing helped pull him out of his thoughts.

"Pansy, let's just go."

"It would have happened by now if you'd just shut up. It's hard to concentrate with you whining every ten seconds."

Draco crossed his arms. What was she talking about? "You get one more try at...whatever you're doing. Then we're going to the dorms."

Pansy gave him a venomous look. She pointed her finger at him, then at the floor. Draco scowled and sat, his arms around the basket. She resumed her pacing. Draco picked out a grape from the assortment of food and bit into it.

"There, see!"

Where there had been nothing but a blank wall before there was now a wide door. Draco stood, frowning.

"That wasn't there before."

Pansy, trying not to look too smug, picked up the bag of bottles and opened the door.

"It wasn't. It only appears when you need it."

"And this is the place Potter used to hide that group of his."

"The very one."

Well, now it was all making sense. Draco scowled.

They stepped inside and Draco was further surprised to see it was a completely different room from the one he'd been in last time. This one was much smaller, with a large, thick carpet before a fire. A small diamond-paned window looked out onto the distant mountainscape. It was still snowing outside. It looked nothing like the large library he had found Granger in. He frowned.

"It's different."

"That's the secret of this room. Isn't it great? Harry told me how to use it."

Draco tried to ignore the fact that Pansy and Potter were now on a first name basis. When the fuck did that happen?

They sat down on the carpet and promptly began to unload the basket of its contents.

"We forgot to ask for plates. And utensils."
Pansy laughed. "Does it matter? We're already eating on the floor." She grabbed a chicken leg and bit into it. Her eyes rolled back. "Gods, that's good."

"Is there pie?"

Tearing off another mouthful, Pansy peered into the basket. "Apple."

"Excellent. Hand it over." He hadn't felt hungry all day but now his appetite was making an appearance. His stomach growled loudly. Pansy grinned. He ignored it.

When they had finished eating they both sat closer together by the fire, neither saying a word for a long while. Pansy rested her head on his shoulder. Draco hadn't eaten such a heavy meal in a long time, and was feeling the effects of it. His stomach was content, at least, but he felt weighed down and heavy from everything he'd eaten.

"Why didn't you go home?" he asked her after a while.

"My parents are afraid. They have been since you joined. My Father wants me to join, and my mother doesn't. All they do is fight over it."

"So you decided to stay here with the insomniac."

"That isn't funny, Draco."

He shrugged. "Might as well get a laugh out of it."

"I wish you would let me help you."

"Pardon—you already did." He pointed to the package where inside lied the pile of bottles. "That's going to help me more than you know."

"That's what I mean." She sighed and brushed her hair from her face. "You can trust me, Draco. We've kept each other's secrets before."

"This is different."

"I don't think it is, but tell me how."

Draco ran a hand over his face. He said nothing for a moment. Pansy waited patiently.

"I got myself into this," he said quietly so that she had to lean in to hear him over the fire. "It's my fault, and I don't want you getting trapped in it."

"That's for me to say, don't you think?"

He grabbed her hand. "I know you want to help. I do. But not for this. You could get in trouble too and I don't want that."

"If you could just tell me what's going on—"

"I can't."

"It's that bad, is it?"

He let go of her hand and looked away from her. He nodded.
"And it's only going to get worse."

"Yes."

"I won't think any less of you, Draco. I've seen some of your ugliest moments and I'm still here."

Though sometimes I still ask myself why.

It was a thought she hated to acknowledge, but it was true. She'd long been acquainted with his unsavory side, though she'd never seen it as bad as it'd been the year before. And if she was being honest, she'd come back to Hogwarts prepared to burn the bridge that had connected them since their early youth, had it not been for his acknowledgment and apology for the things he'd done the year before.

If only he'd said them to the person who actually needed to hear them…

He had changed. He was still changing, too. But was it enough? She was almost certain of his sincerity, but wished she knew more behind it. What role had Hermione played in it? Would he stay as his new self, hopefully something better, or would he revert back to his former self? It all made her very, very anxious.

Despite the reassurance, part of her feared that he would rear some hideous act that would turn her away, even as she spoke. Still, there was a glimmer of hope.

"I know you're better than the things you've done," she said. At least, I hope you really are.

Even if I killed someone? He thought. He looked into the fire and said nothing for a while.

"Do you still want to be a Death Eater?" she asked.

The snake flickered on his arm. "No."

"What are you going to do?"

He closed his eyes. "I don't know." And he didn't want to think about it.

Pansy was unsatisfied by his answer but figured that she wouldn't know either if she was in his situation.

"What time is it?"

He looked at his watch as he stood. "It's five."

"I should go." She brushed crumbs from her lap. "They're waiting."

"You all have plans?"

"They went to visit Hagrid, and as for later, I'm not sure."

Draco scoffed. Pansy frowned at him.

"They're good people, Draco. You would probably get along with them if it weren't for your pride."

"I highly doubt that." He narrowed his eyes. "Don't you think it a little strange they took you in so easily? No suspicion whatsoever?"
"Easily? We still tiptoe around each other. I don't tell them about you and they don't tell me about Harry, not that I push it," she said, drawing her new shawl around herself. "But I like them."

"And do they like you?"

"I hope so," she said, thinking of their interaction that morning during breakfast. She fingered the trim of her shawl uneasily. Draco looked at it, and his features softened.

"I'm sorry. I just—"

"I know you still don't like them," she said. "And I'm sure that's not going to change for a while, but I'm sure they could help you if you reached out to them. I think you could get along with them if you tried."

Draco doubted it. There was too many years of history and animosity between himself and the three Gryffindors. What would it take to get past it? Nothing, he was sure.

Draco cleared away the basket and the remnants of their meal. Pansy's gift lay between them.

"Take them," Pansy said. "You look like a dead man."

Draco didn't want to take them. Just looking at them made him feel weak.

You'll keep getting weaker if you don't take them, a stern voice spoke up.

"I will."

She rose and went to the door. "Message me if you need anything."

"Happy Christmas, Pansy."

"Happy Christmas, Draco." The door closed behind her.

Draco stayed in the room for a while longer, feeling rather relaxed and daring to hope that he might fall asleep naturally if he stayed still long enough. In and out, he drifted, slipping a little further each time, the heat of the fire glowing against his skin.

Drowsily, he wondered what they were doing now. Playing outside, perhaps. The window was closed but he could hear the distant shouts of students currently outside hurling snow at each other. Or they might be gathered somewhere within the castle doing fuck all.

It was clear that Hermione and Pansy really enjoyed each other's company and had quickly become friends, but he still wondered about Potter and Weasley's feelings towards her. They'd been a little stiff and awkward when she had first begun making appearances with their friend, while the rest of their House had been openly hostile and unwelcoming. Now, it seemed the suspicions had chilled, and everyone had come to accept that she was not quite as bad as they had thought.

He remembered the look of displeasure he'd caught on Snape's face the first time he had noticed Pansy and Hermione sitting together without his involvement, and wondered if he'd had a cautionary talk with her after, but doubted it.

Would they try to turn Pansy against him? His stomach twisted. He was beginning to sweat because of the fire. They had every reason to do it. He might even deserve it. As accepting as Pansy claimed they might be, they probably had some issue with the fact that she was still friends with him.

Shit. All drowsiness had fled. He shouldn't have kept thinking. There was no more surefire way to
keep oneself from sleep than to think and think and think. He stood, angry and with the sense that he had wasted his own time.

No matter. He clutched the bag of potions and shrank them with his wand to fit inside his pocket. It wouldn't do to be carrying a suspicious looking package around the castle. Filch would be only too happy to take them from him. He cast one last look at the mysterious room and left.

As he made his way back to the Slytherin common room he came upon Marcus Flint, who looked quite incensed.

"Something wrong?" Draco asked half-heartedly.

"My left ear stopped working properly after the Weasley twins trapped me in that damn cabinet last year," he said. "Been getting me into nothing but trouble. Old Sprout just gave me a detention because I didn't hear her directions clearly and killed my damn plant, as if I'd done it on purpose."

Draco put his hands in his pockets, not knowing how to reply.

"Didn't you ever report them?"

An expression of utmost displeasure crossed Flint's face. "The night they ran away was the one Umbridge was meant to expel them. Cowards."

"Ah." Draco remembered that day too well. He'd never liked fireworks since then. "That's unlucky."

Flint shook his head. "I'd make them pay for it but it seems they've beaten me to it with that hideous shop of theirs. Fools." He left before Draco could say anything, and perhaps it was best to leave it at that, since Draco had been on the verge of pointing out that the new joke shop had done enormously well since its opening.

He'd forgotten about the Vanishing Cabinet ordeal. Most everyone had been too preoccupied with the war on Umbridge to realize he'd gone missing, and it was only by a stroke of luck that he'd been found, but it still took a great deal of effort to extract him from the tricky piece of furniture. Draco recalled suddenly how strange it'd been to see him in hospital, furious and ranting one moment and then disoriented and babbling nonsense the next, but he'd told both him and Blaise about how he'd been stuck in a sort of limbo that connected Borgin and Burke's to the Room of Requirement.

Draco slowed his walk. He'd barely known anything about the Room at that point, and hadn't paid it much attention. His thoughts froze.

A limbo...he could hear and see what happened in the shop...if he hadn't gotten stuck, could he have used it as a portal? Perhaps it already was and simply needed fixing. If the cabinet's twin was located in Knockturn alley it wouldn't take much effort to use it to transport whoever the Dark Lord sent as backup for when he declared he was ready. He'd walked past that cabinet every time he'd gone into the shop for years—he only had to find the one here, at the school.

Draco hated this idea. It would work, he could feel it. But he didn't want it to.

If you don't do it, He'll kill you and your family, a quiet voice told him.

He rushed into the dormitory, took some paper and a quill and a bit of ink, and then went right back out. He got some strange looks as he passed but consumed in his task, Draco ignored them.

When he reached the Owlery he sat on a bench and began to write one of two notes. His hands shook from the cold.
I have a favor to ask of you. Meet me in the Forbidden Forest tomorrow at midnight.

He didn't sign it. He knew Fenrir Greyback would be able to tell whom had written it by scent alone. He sealed and warded it for paranoia's sake, though the tampering with mail had ceased once Umbridge had been sacked.

He called his eagle owl Hermes from the rafters, and offered him a treat. Hermes ignored him at first, since Draco hadn't visited him since the start of term but Draco stroked his feathers and kept patient.

"You're the only one I can trust to deliver this," he told him. "You already know where he is."

Hermes' sharp stare pierced him, but he hooted softly and stuck out his leg. Draco tied the small roll of parchment to it and set him off.

Now for the second.

Pansy, he wrote,

Apologies if this interrupts whatever fun you're having. How exactly does the Room of Requirement work? How do you get the door to appear? If I need something specific will it provide it for me or does it give something random? I know, I know, I should have asked you earlier. I saved you the chastisement. Speedy reply appreciated.

He called down another owl.

"To Pansy Parkinson," he said to it. The owl flew off quickly, and Draco was left to wait.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Draco awoke his mind felt clearer than it had felt in days. A glance at the clock proved it was almost noon, but he didn't mind. He was the only one in his dorm to not go home for the holiday, and therefore had the room to himself. He stretched widely, arching off his bed and pushing his feet off until they dangled off the mattress, craning his head this way and that to work out the kinks in his spine and neck. Small cracks filled the empty room. Relief and soreness coursed through his body, and he groaned, savoring the feeling.

What if he just stayed in bed for the rest of the day? Tempting, tempting. As he deliberated he relaxed back onto the bed, the warmth of the sheets stark contrast to the biting cold of the dormitory. For the second day in a row he'd gotten a full night's sleep, thanks to Pansy, and he decided he would not waste the rest of the day by lying in bed when there were pressing matters to face—he sat up, blinked the heaviness from his eyes, pushed his hair from his face and went to his trunk to pull a thick jumper from it and put it on.

It was always cold in the Slytherin House no matter how long those stoves and fires burned away. Naturally, too, since they were located in the dungeons, and so close to the lake. The windows in the common room were nearly level with the waters of the lake; it wasn't an uncommon sight to see the Giant Squid passing by on a daily basis. When it was winter much of the windows were covered in ice and only a sliver of the sky was visible.

The same couldn't be said for the dorms, thankfully. He'd grown used to it by now but was sometimes struck by how dark the Slytherin quarters were compared to the rest of the castle, and, inevitably, the other three Houses though he'd never seen the inside of any but his own. Based on what he'd heard from other students, he was confident in his suspicion. Green lamps lined the long tunnel-like passageways that led to the dorms, and tall, narrow windows gave a glimpse of the lake's end and the ground curving slightly upwards at the lake's end, the dense foliage that obscured much of the sky. The dorms were as richly and coldly furnished as the rest of the House; all silver brocade drapes and mahogany furniture and dark walls lined with bookcases that held grinning skulls and other morbid knick-knacks.

Now and then the residents grew frustrated with the lack of light and took to their own methods to make their lives easier. Some took old lamps from unused classrooms and set them to work in the common room. Others pilfered candles from all around the castle and put them in every corner, and since the torches lining the corridors were unmovable the older years, having a better grasp of Transfiguration and Charms than the younger ones, used their knowledge to gather some crystal balls from a very forgetful Divination Professor, illuminate them, and charm them to hang around in the air similar to the candles in the Great Hall. It helped, but it was a regular prank among the students to inscribe dirty messages or pictures on them so they would show on the walls. On the opposite side, everyone loved to change the color of the lights so that the common room was bathed in a rainbow of soft light, enhancing the look of the common room being underwater.

But because there was no one else around currently the room seemed colder than before and the light even weaker. Draco pushed away the heavy drapery and looked out the window—it was snowing again. The bottle of sleeping potion he'd used the night before was on his bedside table, gleaming in the cold, greyish morning light. He'd taken only a small portion before going to sleep, hoping it would be enough, and it was. He'd slept without trouble, and without any dreams, thankfully. The
The first reply was written on the back of his original note—each letter almost carved into the thin parchment from the strength of the writer's hand in a sharp, undisciplined scrawl.

*See you there*, it read.

Simple enough. The second was written on a fresh piece of parchment.

*Draco-

*I hope you're not planning anything naughty but I'll oblige. All you've got to do is pace in front of the wall for a bit and think of what you need. For example, if I needed a bedroom (wink, wink) I would think, 'I need an UNDETECTABLE bedroom that I can hide in for a while.' If you need something specific, like a desk or some books on let's say, safe sex, then it should grant it for you. Neat, isn't it? The only thing it can't do is get you food.*

*That should cover it. Make sure to ask that no one else can get in or you're toast. I'll see you later.*

*Pansy*

So that was what she thought he needed the Room for? He scoffed, and was prepared to write back an equally chirpy reply but decided against it. The less she knew the better. It was better for her to think he was there to shag someone rather than what he really was going to be doing.

Draco was left feeling energized, but in a sickening way. He was going to have to start now or risk wasting precious time. Quickly, paranoid of the energy vanishing, he dressed and set off for the Room of Requirement, making sure that he was not being followed along the way. The corridors, however, were mostly empty, and so he had little trouble reaching his destination.

The blank wall stared at him from the end of the corridor. Draco looked around to make sure he was alone, and approached it carefully, avoiding looking at the alcove that still haunted his thoughts.

He stared back at the wall, suddenly wary.

What if someone was already in there? The idea hadn't occurred to him until now. Would he still be allowed in? Would he have to share space with someone else? He hoped not. Perhaps the Room could harbor more than one person at a time, but in separate rooms. Perhaps Pansy knew. He wasn't quite sure how that worked, and by now was more than a little curious to learn the origins of this particular space, but had more pressing matters to attend to.

Listening keenly for any sign of an intruder, Draco put one foot in front of the other and began to pace, not sure it would work after all, even with Pansy's advice.

*I need a place where no one can find me and I can fix the Vanishing Cabinet.*

He paced a little more and opened his eyes.

*Oh. First try.* He remembered Pansy's multiple attempts, and smirked.

The door had already appeared—just an ordinary door like any other in the castle, except if what Pansy had told him was true, it would give him exactly what he needed. Hoping that he really hadn't bungled it after all, he twisted the doorknob and entered the Room.

*Fucking hell.*
There was junk everywhere. He shivered with revulsion to see it. It sprouted everywhere like an unchecked growth.

*Gods, what a mess.* He'd never seen anything so bad. How was it humanely possible?

Chairs and desks piled high as Quidditch hoops, stacks and piles of books, old and new: books on trees and trolls and trains and transfiguration—he felt if he needed a book on any specific subject he would find it here, and have a number of options to pick from, too. There was a large number of Wizard's magazines, scattered like leaves in the wind, some dated as far back as to way before he'd been born. The moving images of the scantily dressed witches winked and posed provocatively as he walked past, following the *manmade*? path that snaked around the enormous room like the strangest maze he'd ever seen in his life. Broken, dirty furniture, warped cauldrons beyond repair, chests of costumes and old uniforms and robes, even a chest full of sickles and knuts lay upturned on the floor, its wares lay like a mosaic on the floor. Spare change lost around the castle that someone or something had collected here over years.

*I ought to give it to Weasley,* he thought.

The path was so narrow he kept bumping into things—statues of great ladies and lords, of lions, tanks and birdcages, chess pieces tall as a human and barrels holding extremely outdated racing brooms and cracked old mirrors that were too dusty and tarnished to show his reflection. He was grateful for that, at least—he'd never been so averse to his own reflection. He imagined he looked just as awful as he constantly felt, if not worse than.

At some points the path grew too thin and he had to walk sideways for fear of his broad shoulders knocking down a pillar of items and bringing it all down on himself. When he could, he used his wand to widen the pathway and shove the endless items deeper into the mess. There was natural light streaming in from a line of clere story windows, like the inside of a cathedral. It gave the Room such a strange, almost un-earthlike appearance that he found himself wondering if he wasn't really in a dream.

Who had started this mess? How long had things been collecting here? How many people over the ages had contributed to it? It was both fascinating and disgusting all at once. Why had no one ever bothered to clean? Did people really just come here to dump unwanted things?

And the dust. *Gods,* the *dust.* He coughed and spat the fuzzy motes off his tongue and into a handkerchief he'd found somewhere and cleaned before using to cover his nose and mouth. It lay in a thick layer over almost everything, floated in the air around him and stuck to his clothing. If he brushed any of it off he would find more on his robes minutes later.

He wondered if Filch knew about this place. Probably not, considering the amount of contraband items he could see anywhere he turned. The old man would have heart failure if he ever set one foot inside.

There was an ancient phonograph to his left, and a Muggle stereo to his right. He wondered how whomever had owned it once had got it through the anti-technology wards. There were old toys and photographs on the floor, diaries and shoes and even jewelry strewn about everywhere. There was a necklace with the initials MM+TP on it laying on a burnt night table. He put it down and resumed his exploration. More pornography. More books. More furniture, but no sign of what he needed. Draco looked around weakly. He couldn't even see the other ends of the room, not even the walls. There was still so much left to cover. How was he ever going to find it in this mess?

"Point me to the Vanishing Cabinet," he whispered to his wand. It spun in his palm and pointed north. Draco followed it for some time, climbing over finely dressed tables and rotted bookcases and
tuneless pianos, avoiding wobbling towers of textbooks and one massive mountain compiled of hundreds if not thousands of old pieces of old and new bits parchment that just screamed fire hazard.

Curiosity got the better of him, and he read a handful that he plucked out as he passed by.

A series of sketches littered over a piece of parchment. A study of the Great Hall took up one corner but the rest was mostly faces and blots of ink. Some looked familiar. He squinted at them, trying to recognize them but none gave up their identity.

He tossed it away.

*Will you watch the match today?*

*No, I don't like Quidditch.*

*What?*

Draco snorted and moved onto the next.

*-never notices and everyone's always so mean,* read another. Draco guessed it had been part of a diary once. The paper was warped, as if it had gotten completely wet, but the ink was intact. *I miss home. I want to go back. I don't like it here, everything's too hard and I'm not good at anything. No one wants to be my friend or even talk to me. All they do is make fun of my glasses and my freckles and my voice and I have to hide in the bathroom to cry but they won't stop. The only person who's ever been nice to me is Tom. He comforted me once when he found me in the bathroom before curfew. I told him he shouldn't have come in but he said he'd given that awful Lillian a detention for throwing a frog in my cauldron during Potions. I was still crying when he told me he liked my glasses and that stopped me quick. He made me leave after and I felt so happy I tried to say hi to him the following week but he walked on by as if he didn't know me.*

There was an extremely unflattering drawing of Snape. Draco swallowed his laugh and tossed it aside.

*Dear Mum, could you send me some pairs of socks? I didn't pack any.*

He was half-tempted to go back and get another handful, and see if he could find anything interesting but he had no wish to wade back through the mess so soon when he hadn't even found his objective yet.

There were so many trunks. Lying wide open, or broken, or fire or water damaged, in stacks, in splinters. He wondered whose they were, and what could ever make a person leave them behind. He opened a few as he walked by them, and found hairbrushes, diaries, lotions, robes, even a wand. A set of scales, a cricket bat, some smelly, weathered Quidditch gear that made a creaking sound when he touched it. The smell of the old leather was comforting.

The path ended abruptly a few feet ahead, where a pile of chairs blocked the way. Draco looked around, more impatiently this time. There was no sign of it anywhere.

*I'm never going to find it in this mess.*

He'd probably have had better luck if he'd just asked Flint where exactly the damn thing was.

The pile was too unstable to climb over. He dropped down from it angrily, coughing from the rise of the dust caused by his landing.
Fine.

He took out his wand, threw his body into the motion of the spell.

"Confringo!"

He only just remembered to duck. The pile of wood exploded. Too late to cast a Protego. He raised his arms to protect his head. The blast from the spell threw his hair into further disorder. Chunks of wood flew everywhere. Something tore at his robe.

Draco stood, panting, inspecting his left arm. A piece of the debris had ripped his sleeve and sliced into his shoulder. The ruined edges of the tear were already soaked in blood. It wasn't too deep, luckily. He healed it with the only healing spell he knew, leaving a vivid red mark that he knew would remain as a scar, but not wanting to go to the Hospital Wing, he decided it needed no more attention than what he'd already given it.

The site of the explosion still smoldered. He walked through it carefully, feeling much calmer than before.

I ought to destroy things more often.

He'd just been about to cast the locating charm again when a tall black structure caught his eye, and feeling a jump in his stomach, Draco approached it quickly.

It was a cabinet with silver gilding on the doors, similar to the one he'd seen now and then when visiting Borgin and Burk's. This had to be it.

He should have felt relieved, but didn't. He reached up and hesitated.

Go on, open it.

Draco's hand latched onto the silver doorknob and froze there.

Your parents will be killed if you don't, and it will be your fault.

The hand twisted, the cabinet opened, and Draco peered inside the empty space.

There was nothing better than the creaky silence of the night. The naked branches and the occasional gust of wind provided the only sound to be heard. He'd cast a Silencio on his own feet to keep detection and predators away. No winds blew.

Snowfall would have been ideal to further conceal him, but he forgave its absence. Draco shrugged off his Disillusionment charm and waited in the cold behind the thickest tree he could find, staying as still as possible. The groundskeeper's hut wasn't too far off. If the half-giant chose now as the right time to take a stroll or walk his hound then Draco would have to find a way to escape. He suddenly wished he'd brought his broom.

The Room of Requirement was long behind him but he was still finding dust on himself. Draco shook it out of his hair, watching the heavy clumps float briefly in the silver moonlight before falling to the frozen earth.

"There you are, pup."

He turned, heart beating fast. "Fenrir."
He could see tendrils of heat emanating from the visitor's body, as if he'd run all the way here. Draco was inclined to think he'd done just that. His scarred, hairy chest was covered only by an unbuttoned shirt that was so dirty and worn it could have been the only shirt he'd ever worn. His trousers were in the same state. He wore no shoes. He had let his hair grow long—it went down past his chin. His yellow eyes were the only spot of color in the night—a dull yellow brought to life amidst the nighttime world of greyscale. The rest of his face was haggard, lined, looking as coarse as his hands, as if crudely carved in rock without proper tools and left unfinished. He had a crooked, broad nose and a cruel, savage mouth of whose victims Draco had heard much about over the years.

He came closer, and Draco was reminded how tall the werewolf was when he stood before him and clapped a hand on his shoulder. Draco's knees threatened to buckle underneath him. His head barely reached Greyback's shoulder.

"Since when did you start calling me that?" Fenrir asked. "You've called me Uncle from the day you started barking."

"Forgive me, Uncle," Draco said. He was fighting not to shiver in all his layers and cloak. Greyback, on the other hand, looked to be perfectly comfortable despite the fact that he wore no protective clothing, as if it were summer rather than winter. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up; there were blood stains all along his arms and front, as if he'd just hunted before coming over. Only his face was clean. Draco took some comfort in that.

"No matter." Fenrir scratched at his neck. "Been a long time since I've seen you. You're taller now." He grinned. His teeth were red and yellow. "But not as tall as me yet. Prettier, though, I'll give you that one."

"Father said you've been busy."

"Aye. Running errands for his master." He spat on the ground. "But when my nephew calls I've got time for a visit. Your Father was surprised you called me rather than him." He sniffed the air. "So much prey in these lands. You never see it, your lot, but it's delicious."

"How are my parents?"

"Fine. The Dark Lord's taken up house in your home, but you already knew that. They're doing everything they can to keep him happy, but that all depends on you, pup."

Draco felt his insides twist. "I know."

"I wouldn't take it, if I were them," Fenrir said, frowning. "Master or not, I wouldn't allow someone come into my property and order me about. I'd rip their throat out and hang them up 'til they run dry. Even if he'd kill me, I'd fight the bastard. I won't be reduced to nothing in my own house."

Draco smirked. "You don't have a house."

Fenrir laughed. It was a coarse sound, it made one shudder to hear it. "Right you are. Don't need one, either." He looked at Draco properly, and frowned. "You look ill, boy."

There was little point in lying. Fenrir Greyback could detect lies very easily, and often at a painful price.

"Trouble sleeping."

"Best you get on that. Going to need all your energy when the day comes, won't you. Which brings us round to why you asked me here."
Here it was. Draco forced all his nervousness aside.

"I think I've found a way to breach the castle. There's a cabinet that connects to another one in Borgin and Burk's."

Fenrir raised his brows. "Is that so?"

"I need your help. Someone's got to go in the shop and tell Borgin not to sell the piece or do anything with it. I'll give you the money to buy it if you have to. Take it somewhere, hide it so I can work on the one in the castle and test it out."

"You sound just like your Father when he was young," Fenrir said. "Why choose me?"

"My parents are under surveillance by Aurors, waiting to have a reason to search our house," Draco said bitterly. "No one bothers you. You know how to go around undetected. Outside of killing him, make sure Borgin keeps quiet."

"Never liked that man, Borgin. Which sounds funny, coming from me." He scratched his jaw, grinning. "It'll be a pleasure. And what do I get in return?"

"I can pay you."

"Look at me, boy. You know I don't want gold." Greyback gestured to his pitiful attire proudly. "What's more, your Father never paid me for the work we did together. It would feel wrong, taking money from family." He barked with laughter again.

"Well, what do you want?"

Fenrir wiped off some of the blood off his arm, licking his lips. "I want to join whoever goes into the castle when it's time."

Draco didn't like this. *He's looking for a meal.* He would rather have emptied his Gringotts account than to say yes. He wanted to say no, but how? If he wasn't careful, he would regret it.

"I'd need the Dark Lord's permission for that."

"Don't worry about it, pup, I'll ask him myself when I get back. I'm sure he won't mind."

The day had been too full of ups and downs. Exhaustion crept into his limbs but he stood firm. "You won't kill anyone."

"No, not that day. I'll leave the showstopper to you."

*How generous.*

"Thank you."

Fenrir grunted. "Your Father worries about you."

Draco's lip lifted. "So he's told me."

He'd opened his Father's letter only the day before, and still remembered it's content:

*I fail to see why my own son would take so long to achieve any sort of progress with such a simple task. You have had training and time to prepare you. One would think you would have accomplished something by this point. Report to me at once and explain yourself. Do not make me*
"Then you'd best be good, pup." Greyback shifted on his legs and sniffed at the air. The snow creaked underneath his bare, hairy feet. "I want to see the inside of that bloody castle. I'll paint it red."

"You said you wouldn't kill anybody," Draco said, and abruptly wished he'd kept his mouth shut. To his relief, Greyback didn't take offense, and only smiled, still sniffing the air.

"I'll keep the promise," he said, "but a little scratch here or there never killed anyone."

A light came on in the far away hut suddenly; a wash of warm yellow light spilled like sand over the sea of white, and Draco turned to it, heart in his throat, immediately casting the Disillusionment spell over himself. There was the sound of disturbed snow beside him, and he turned. Greyback had already gone. His tracks led several feet away, and then disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone's curious, the diary excerpt Draco found is from Moaning Myrtle's diary, written months before her death.
"Alright. I've had enough." Harry pushed away the chess set and stood, trying to hide his displeasure.

"If you practiced more you'd get a win every now and then," Ron said, chuckling, tossing his queen in the air lightly and catching it neatly with a snap of his wrist. The chess piece's furious insults were muffled out by his fist.

"Let me have a go, then," Pansy said eagerly, standing from her seat and scooting closer to the fire where Ron sat. "I love chess."

Ron's face had taken an expression of mild panic. "Er, actually-" He began to stand. "I think I've had enough too-"

"No, no, no," Pansy said, pointing back at his seat. "You're going to play me and we're going to see who's the best of the two of us."

"I think Ron just gave us the answer," Harry said, grinning.

It suddenly occurred to the three of them that the fourth member of their little group hadn't said a word for some time. They all turned simultaneously to look for Hermione.

Pansy was the first to find her.

"She looks asleep," she said softly. Harry nodded, and went over to check. Hermione had sat down some hours ago by the corner, on top of a thin pallet she'd transfigured from her robe to write some letters and read her new book, and had fallen asleep somewhere in the midst of writing a very long letter to whom Harry could only guess was meant for Viktor Krum. Her book lay open beside her, she herself was on her side; one arm under her head and the other with her hand cupping her throat. She was frowning. Harry took off his robe and draped it over her. The heavy fabric accidentally knocked into something that had been lying between the open pages of the book and they scattered around the floor—hurriedly, so he wouldn't wake her, he picked them up.

His eyes caught flashes of words from Krum's letter—he wished they hadn't—but the words processed and it was too late.

Do you remember—I miss—come visit me—I have never stopped thinking of you.

Blushing, he folded them together and tucked them back inside her book. Hermione gave a light snore and slept on, oblivious.

Pansy and Ron were still playing in the background—he could hear them laughing, the sound of their chess pieces complaining as they moved across the board.

Before he could help himself, he wondered what Hermione's reply to Viktor's letter was. Did she feel the same way? His eyes went to Ron, and he remembered his jealous outburst. What would his reaction be if whatever was between Hermione and Krum was deeper than he thought?

"Daydreaming, Potter?" Pansy's voice called him back to the present.
Guiltily, he wracked his brain for a response.

"I'm thinking who I should bet on."

Ron pretended to look hurt. "You've known me longest, you prat. I can count on three fingers the number of times you've beaten me."

"Yes, well, newcomers always have the advantage," Pansy said smugly. "You've never played against me, but I know all your moves."

They continued to banter, and since they were now distracted Harry began to pace around the room. None of them had wanted to make the trek up to the Room of Requirement so they'd simply chosen to lounge about in an abandoned classroom on the first floor by the Great Hall. Normally Filch would have found them quite speedily and banished them from the room for no reason whatsoever, but thanks to Ron and a clever gift from his brothers, the caretaker was far up on the sixth floor dealing with another swamp that had suddenly taken up residence by the Divination classroom, and so they were free to do as they pleased.

When he had got far enough away so that he was half hidden by a curtain he pretended he was looking out the window and pulled out the Maurader's Map, whispering the words to make it reveal itself.

Ink surfaced on the worn parchment like a spider's web, thinner in some places and thicker in others, little pairs of feet either idled or moved along the plotted out corridors.

First he checked the Slytherin common room. Though the common rooms and the dorms never revealed who was within he harbored a fleeting hope that Malfoy would just be exiting or entering, but that was not the case. He checked the Great Hall next. No. The Astronomy Tower. No. The Great Hall. No. The Owlery. No. All the men's bathrooms, the Prefect's bath, Snape's classroom.

No, no, and no.

Where had Malfoy gone?

He'd only just seen him that morning. Harry wondered if he was still asleep. Malfoy had been doing that a lot lately, just stay in bed all day. It explained why he was absent from most of his classes and why he was not visible anywhere else on the map at times. It made sense, too, as there wasn't much to do during the break when the castle was mostly empty, but it still raised suspicion as far as Harry was concerned. It just wasn't like him. Where else could he be?

Perhaps he'd gone to visit his family. Doubtful, but possible. He adjusted his glasses and searched the map again. Filch was still on the sixth floor, and the Bloody Baron was creeping up on him from one corridor, and Peeves from the opposite. What a nasty shock it would be when all three met. Harry turned his attention to the rest of the castle.

Professor McGonagall was in Dumbledore's office. Hagrid was by the lake. Fang's paw prints bounded around his marker. He briefly looked for Ginny before remembering she was at the Burrow. He wondered if she and Dean Thomas were still seeing each other over the break, and ignored the rush of jealousy that made his face grow hot.

It was no use. Malfoy was in bed and he would have to be content with that answer. He would just have to check the map later, or take a walk in the Cloak again after dinner, when he was bound to show himself.

"What are you doing?"
He turned quickly. Hermione had woken up, and now stood beside him, a little bleary-eyed but alert as ever. He folded the map back up.

"Just taking a look."

"Still nothing?"

"Maybe he's gotten sick," Harry said wistfully.

"Then he would go to the Infirmary," Hermione said. "But you said he's been avoiding that place for months."

"Maybe he's not sick."

She tapped her fingers on her chin thoughtfully. "He could be using some complex sort of concealing spell to hide himself."

"But he would still show up," Harry put the map back in his pocket carefully.

"Not necessarily. You don't register when you're wearing the Cloak," she pointed out.

"I forgot."

Hermione pulled her hair back and secured it. Loose strands of her hair poked out all over. Harry tugged on one curl gently, and she smiled and swatted his hand away. They both leaned against the wall. Hermione leaned onto him and sighed. Harry waited a moment before he spoke.

"You're still dreaming about it."

She froze. "Did I say something in my sleep?"

"No." She relaxed. Harry put his arm around her. "But I could tell."

"They're not as bad as they were before," she said quietly. "But I wish they would go away."

"I wish I could help you," he said. Touched, Hermione pressed his hand. They both were well aware of the constant plague of ill dreams he'd had since coming to Hogwarts. It was only recently that he'd stopped having nightmares of Sirius's death, after all.

"You really think he's planning something?" she asked quietly.

"He has to be." Harry looked at her from the corner of his eye. "I know you and Ron don't believe me-"

"I'm prepared to believe it," Hermione said, "It's just that we need evidence to support that suspicion."

Harry sighed. "He knows what he's doing. He knows I've been watching him."

"Then you'll have to be one step ahead. He put a tracking spell on my quill last year. You could do something like that."

"Isn't that illegal?"

Her face remained neutral. "Fair's fair."
They were interrupted by a shout of victory.

"Aha!" Pansy cried, springing up from her seat. She raised her wand and gold confetti streamed from it. Stunned, Ron stared at the chessboard.

Harry and Hermione returned to them and congratulated the exultant Pansy.

"Thanks," Harry said, laughing, and shook her hand. "I've never seen him like this."

Ron looked up. "You got lucky," he said, looking stunned.

"Don't be sour, Weasley," she said jovially, taking his hand and giving it a firm shake. "Good game."

"Yes, good..."

"What shall we do now?" Pansy said, stretching. "I feel I could take on a troll."

"I'd rather not," Hermione said.

Ron had shaken himself out of his stupor, and though still a little visibly shaken, he stood up.

"Well dinner's hours away."

"Why don't we go outside?" Hermione suggested. "The sky's the clearest it's been in a week."

Harry glanced at the window. She was right.

"Quidditch?"

Ron stood up at once. "Excellent."

"By all means, go get your bits frozen off," Pansy said, smirking. She waved her wand and all the gold confetti vanished from the floor.

"You're not coming?" Ron looked at her and then Hermione. "Who's going to ref?"

They looked at each other. Pansy made a face and shrugged. Hermione laughed.

"Fine. You'll all have to wait for me to run and get my things," Pansy said, stretching.

"You could just summon them, couldn't you?" Harry asked.

"And have Peeves snatch them again? No thank you."

"You could get the Baron to get him to give them back, you know," Ron added.

"That requires too much effort for something that could be easily avoided."

"You could just borrow some of my things," Hermione offered. "I've got spares."

"Of course you do," Ron said, rolling his eyes, smiling.

"It's practical!" Hermione insisted.

"Yes, it is," Pansy agreed, looping her arm through Hermione's. "And I am very grateful. Shall we get going?"
The Fat Lady did not take kindly to the presence of a Slytherin directly outside the Gryffindor common room entrance.

"The location of one's one House is meant to be a secret!" she squallled at them, frowning in all her finery. "What do you not understand about 'secret entrance'? And revealing it to an enemy House, no less! Godric would be outraged!"

"Everyone knows where each of the common rooms are," Ron pointed out. "More or less."

"Never, in all my years!"

"Could you please just let us in?" Hermione asked. "We've got the password after all."

"DON'T SAY IT!" the Fat Lady shouted, flapping her arms wildly. "IN MERLIN'S NAME, DO NOT SAY IT IN FRONT OF HER!" she pointed at Pansy, her bloodshot eyes narrowed.

"Lovely to meet you," Pansy quipped. Ron burst into laughter.

The Fat Lady took a moment to calm herself. She took several large gulps from her cup. There were wine stains all over her gown.

"You must pardon me, my dear," she said to Pansy. I simply cannot permit a student of a different House to enter. It is simply not allowed."

"I've never heard of that rule," Hermione said, placing her hands on her hips.

The Fat Lady gave her a severe look. "It is unspoken, but a rule nonetheless."

"That can't be true," Ron said.

The Fat Lady ignored him. She smoothed her hair and skirt.

"I will only allow you inside, if you," she pointed to Pansy, "please stand separate, dear."

"That's a bit excessive," Harry said, frowning. "What does it matter if she hears the password?"

The Fat Lady's eyes bulged. "'What does it matter'?"

"She's off her rocker," Pansy muttered to Hermione. "I'm glad we haven't got one like her."

"You don't have a portrait entrance?" Hermione asked.

"No, and I'm grateful," Pansy said, eyeing the pink clad woman with distaste as she squawked on in argument with Harry. She put her hand on his shoulder, cutting him off mid-sentence. "Look, if it's this sacred, this secret, I'll walk around a bit."

"You don't have to," Harry told her. "She's just drunk. She won't remember later."

Pansy eyed the painting. The Fat Lady was pouring herself another cup. "I don't want to bring any curses down on you lot."

The three of them looked at each other and laughed. Pansy blinked.

"I think we'll be fine," Ron said, grinning. When her confused expression lingered, he shrugged his shoulder, as if to say, 'We'll explain later.'"
“By all means, go ahead.”

They waited until the Fat Lady had finished her cup. She wobbled in her chair but still eyed them suspiciously as they approached her once more. For good measure, Pansy hid behind Hermione and Ron, trying to hold back her laughter.

“Hippogriff wings,” Harry said, and the Fat Lady hiccupped and swung open.

They all climbed inside. Pansy hovered at the entrance and because she couldn’t help herself, she looked in and scowled.

“Well, I’m jealous.”

They all turned to look at her. And then, having realized what had happened, the Fat Lady began to wail.

“TRICKED! TRICKED BY MY OWN WARDS! FOOLED BY STUDENTS! BREACHED ONCE MORE! FIRST THE RAT, THEN THE CRIMINAL, NOW THE SLYTHERIN! I’VE BEEN CURSED BY THE CASTLE! THE SECRET IS GONE, TORN TO RUINS! HOW THE OTHER PAINTINGS WILL LAUGH AT ME. I’M NOT FIT TO GUARD ANYTHING, NOT EVEN A MOUSE.”

On and on she went.

Pansy, wincing from the sound, looked at the three Gryffindors, not knowing what to expect.

“Come in, before she robs us of our hearing.” Hermione took her by the arm and led her in the rest of the way.

“I HAVE BEEN STATIONED HERE FOR CENTURIES. NEVER HAVE I FELT SUCH DISRESPECT FROM STUDENTS.”

“Welcome,” Harry said to Pansy.

Pansy looked around, fascinated. Cozy, shaggy carpeting. Squashy armchairs covered in throw blankets, pillows; floor cushions in every corner. An enormous fire dancing merrily, as if to greet them. Simple, diamond paneled windows looking over the campus. Heavy, scarlet drapes fringed in gold tassels. Quidditch memorabilia on the walls; class pictures of past students waved at her from one bookcase. Potted plants that were still alive! A cat brushed against her legs and she jumped, watching it go as it went to lie down on a corner of the carpet.

Everything was just so…**Gryffindor**. And she loved it.

“I imagine the Slytherin commons are different,” Hermione said, watching her reaction.

“Like fire and water,” Pansy said. “Merlin, it’s like living inside a basket of yarn.”

“Huh.” Ron looked around. “Oddly enough, that fits.”

“I’ll get the brooms,” Harry said, heading to the boys’ dormitories. “Ron, get your Quaffle.”

“Right.” Ron followed him.

“Do you want to come up?” Hermione asked. Pansy followed her up the winding stairs and into the girls’ dorms.
Pansy sat on Hermione's bed and watched her rummage through her trunk.

"I thought you had your own dorm?" Pansy asked.

"Oh, I do," Hermione said, taking out of her trunk a small stack of folded jumpers. "Ginny insists I sleep over at least once a week so I keep spares here."

"Well, thanks for letting me in," Pansy said. "I really wouldn't have minded waiting outside, though. I don't want you getting into trouble."

Hermione smiled. "I've read *Hogwarts, A History* more times than I can remember, and I've read the rulebook backwards and forwards and asked Professor Dumbledore loads of questions and I've never seen a single thing that prohibits students from visiting the other Houses. If you ask me I think the reason it's so rarely done is just to keep the mystery alive and the rivalries between Houses going. Everybody wants to believe it's forbidden."

"That seems silly," Pansy said. "Imagine how different things would be if everyone knew!"

"Most people don't really seem to care," Hermione said. "Everyone thinks their own House is best—why bother with the others? We've all got friends in other Houses, of course, but there is a fear of appearing unloyal to one's own House. Nobody wants to be the "traitor"."

Pansy stared at her lap. "Hm."

Hermione paused. "No one's been bothering you about being friends with me, have they?"

"Oh, hardly anyone," Pansy said. "It's only stupid taunts and threats to tell my parents but I think they wouldn't care. Much." She tucked her hair behind her ear. "They think you've got something on me, or that you put some charm on me to make me like you, things like that. They're not the brightest." She laughed.

"Well if it gets out of hand you know I can and will discipline them," Hermione said, laying out a scarf, hat and gloves onto the bed beside Pansy. "Not understanding something is no reason to condemn it."

"I appreciate the offer."

Hermione paused. "While we're speaking candidly…" she suddenly appeared nervous. Her hand twitched to her neck and pulled her collar away from her throat. "Malfoy doesn't approve us being friends"

"In the beginning he was against it. But I made him see that it's none of his business who I'm friends with."

"In the beginning?"

"Well he thought you lied to me to get me to feel sympathy for you. Bloody prat."

Hermione took a moment to push herself to ask her next question. "I probably shouldn't ask you this, but is he ill?"

Pansy hesitated, then let out a breath. "I don't know."

"You worry about him."

"I feel like I shouldn't," Pansy said, casting Hermione a guilty look. "But I do."
"You've known him longer than I have," Hermione said. "I don't want to force you to choose between him and I. You told me he was like your brother."

"Don't downplay it, Hermione. What he did was wrong and I know it and I've told him just what I think about it. I hate that he did that to you."

"I hate that I let it affect me so much."

"He'll hate me if he finds out I told, but," Pansy took Hermione's hand. "Don't think he doesn't regret it."

"He only probably regrets it because he was almost expelled for it," Hermione said dismissively.

"No—I mean, don't think he's not sorry."

Hermione frowned. "What?"

"People change." Pansy rolled her eyes. "Take me, for example."

Hermione blinked. She shook her head, trying to reassemble her thoughts. "You're telling me he's sorry for what he did. To me."

"I am."

Hermione felt her head spin. Confusion and doubt gripped her.

"I'm sorry, but I have to ask. How do you know?"

"He told me himself. But I think you need to find out the rest through him, not me, or else you'll never believe it."

"I don't believe it now, despite you telling me."

"O I! YOU'RE TAKING FOREVER UP THERE!"

They both jumped at Ron's bellow.

Hermione pressed her spare coat into Pansy's hands. "Put this on."

Pansy did, fumbling the buttons. She had to be careful.

"I mean it, Hermione," she said. "I think you should talk to him. I'll chaperone if I must so he won't try anything again, but I know he won't. He's ashamed. And he'll be angry if he hears, but he needs help and he won't listen to me. Something's wrong with him. Something bad. And I'm afraid it's going to kill him." Her voice had wavered. She cleared her throat.

She wound the borrowed scarf around her neck and pulled the gloves on. Hermione stood by the foot of the bed, still processing her words, one hand on her neck, the other holding her elbow.

"I don't want to talk to him, Pansy."

Pansy's heart sank. "I understand."

"Every time I look at him I feel his hands around my neck," she said quietly. "Silly as it sounds, sometimes when I wake up I think I've just died because in my dreams he didn't let go. I can see how he meant to kill me. I don't care that he's ashamed. He should be."
"I shouldn't have asked you to," Pansy said, turning pale. "I didn't know—I didn't know exactly what he did."

Hermione stood silent for some moments, biting her lip. Pansy waited nervously.

"You really believe he's in danger?" Hermione asked at last. She looked conflicted.

"Yes."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. But he's going to let it eat at him because he thinks he deserves it."

The words fell heavy from Hermione's mouth. "He does."

"He does." Pansy wiped at her eyes with her sleeve before the tears could fall. "But not like this."

"SHOULD WE GO ON WITHOUT YOU?"

"HOP OFF YOUR RACING BROOM, WE'LL BE DOWN IN A SECOND," Hermione shouted. Pansy snorted with laughter through her tears.

They went to the stairs. Hermione pulled her own hat on and took Pansy's hands.

"I'll speak to him," she said. "But only as a matter of inquiry as a Prefect."

Pansy squeezed her hand as thanks. "I'll go with you."

"No," Hermione said. "I want to do it alone."

The parchment was crisp and dry against his skin, its sharp edges pressing into the flesh of his hand. The script was neat, the message curt. The Gryffindor crest was stamped in one corner, the Hogwarts crest on the other. He'd been staring at it for several minutes.

Go to the courtyard tomorrow at four and wait by the statue of Merlin.

It wasn't signed, but it didn't take a genius to know whom it was from. The lion's jaws were open, revealing its fearsome teeth. A memory flashed into view—her bared teeth, her hands trying to pull his from her throat.

She'll burn you again.

But he would go. There was no telling what she would do if he didn't. A year ago he'd thought her predictable, and she'd proved otherwise. If it was the only time she would ever speak to him again, he would go. If the Gods were good, he would have a chance to explain himself and apologize. Something told him she might not want to hear it anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Nobody noticed the Fat Lady stopped screaming because she went and told Dumbledore what happened and Dumbledore told her to allow Pansy into the common room. Because nobody likes a snitch.
The Fat Lady finally found out about Pettigrew the impostor rat a year after Scabber's identity was revealed. She wasn’t pleased, to say the least.
It was ten past four and he was standing in the snow facing the forbidden forest, approaching the time mark of twenty minutes that he had been there waiting. Exactly why he'd come so early he didn't know. Restlessness had prevented him from sleeping the night before, and he'd been unwilling to take more of the sleeping potions, since lately nightmares had begun creeping up and he was too afraid to risk having one again, and would rather endure another sleepless night than to face his dreams. Drunk on sleep deprivation and fatigue, he'd dressed and came out early for a walk in the biting cold, nibbling on figs and other breakfast things he'd got from the kitchens before heading outside, only now he found himself wishing he hadn't eaten. The figs all rolled uneasily in his stomach; he wanted to go and retch it all up somewhere but stayed put for fear of being absent when Granger arrived.

As the set time approached and passed he found himself slightly calmer of mind than he had been when he'd set out, and found the statue of Merlin at the far end of the courtyard. The legendary figure had a formidable stare, his stance proud, but his hands were held with the palms out, one clasping his wand loosely. That gesture alone reminded Draco of the early paintings of Christ he'd seen in museums as a child. He'd never paid it much attention in all his years here, but now that he had more pressing matters on his mind and an abundance of time, he studied it carefully. The artists' name was degraded so badly he could make nothing of it, but the name of the work itself still remained fresh as the day it was carved.

'The First.'

A shiver crawled up his neck. He belatedly noticed that the wizard's feet were bare.

A piercing silence filled the courtyard, wrapping around him slowly and he struggled to ignore it, but now and then he felt it grow louder until it buzzed in his ears and he found himself wondering if he should have ignored the summons and stayed inside instead.

Would she even come? He'd never known her to be late for anything. He wondered if perhaps she'd just sent him out here to look a fool until he realized he had been set up.

You can still leave, he told himself. But he knew he wouldn't.

The sound of footsteps crunching through snow cut through the air, coming from behind him. It made him stand straighter. He turned to face her.

She wore a plain black coat and her Gryffindor scarf wound around her neck. She wore gloves, but was taking them off as she approached him. Her face was determined, looking past him rather than at him, but when she finally came to a stop directly in front of him her eyes shifted and locked onto his.

He didn't know what to say. As if taking this time to brace herself, she put her gloves in her pockets, lingered there, and at last, looked up.

He opened his mouth to speak, not knowing what he wanted to say, but to break the silence, because he'd grown weary of it. She denied him that chance.

"Take out your wand and put it on the ground."

He searched her eyes, hoping to find a sign of anything. What was she going to do?

Her jaw clenched. "Now."
Without breaking eye contact he withdrew his wand from inside his coat, extended his arm, and let it fall to the ground. It slipped into the snow silently.

She fought to control it, but he could hear her struggle to keep her breathing calm. It was loud as a dragon's roar in the snow cushioned silence of the courtyard. He pretended he didn't hear it, and in the pause that came forward he focused on his own heart beat gaining speed, wishing it would be calm again.

The contrast of her black-clad figure against the snow highlighted the fact that she was shivering. He wondered if she could tell he was too. Was it from the cold, or out of fear? Her eyes were blazing, her mouth set grim like a criminal awaiting execution.

When she spoke her voice was thick. "Choke me."

Draco regarded her warily. He turned his ear towards her, as if he'd heard wrong. "What?"

She stepped closer as she unwound her scarf, letting it fall to the ground to bare her throat. Draco caught the briefest flash of a bit of jewelry, a tiny golden heart suspended on a thin chain, slipping deeper behind her neckline. Her loose hair fanned out around her shoulders; unruly, soft dark brown curls that looked soft as clouds; he remembered them glowing like redwood and gold in the light of the sun. Draco's throat went dry.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Put your hands on my neck and choke me."

Draco's jaw went slack for a brief half of a second before he snapped it back shut, clicking his teeth together sharply. His eyes, though, had gone past his control and regarded her with consternation. "You've lost your mind."

A small smile formed on her mouth but fled instantly. "I must have, to be here now. This isn't a trick, Malfoy, if that's what you're worried about."

"It's certainly not the only thing. I'm not going to do... that."

"It hasn't stopped you before, but the difference is I'm asking you now."

Her words stung. Draco shook his head. "I'm not doing that, Granger."

She came closer. "Last year you gave me no choice. Now it's your turn."

She grabbed his hands suddenly and brought them to her neck, enclosed them in a circle. "No-" Draco stumbled backwards, but his hands she kept around her throat. Her grip was strong and her hands were cold. "Granger! What the fuck are you doing?"

"I'm giving you a free pass," she said. "Finish what you couldn't last year."

There were tears in her eyes. Her palms were damp and trembling. Her throat was hot and pulsing wildly in his hands. Her hands kept his from leaving. Her fear
radiated through him, mixed with his own.

*This is what you did to her. Same pulse, same hands*, an old, familiar voice whispered to him. *Kill her now that you have a chance. She's right, this is what you want.*

A year ago, he'd have taken the opportunity. Now, all he wanted was to get away.

*No,* he told the voice.

"This is madness, Granger. You don't want to be doing this."

"*Now* you're concerned about morality?" A tear slipped free. "*Now* you realize this is despicable?"

She let him go abruptly, and he fell backward into the snow.

Panting, she staggered forward and stood over him. Draco waited, ready to move in case she tried anything else but she just stood there, and after a second or two he got back up.

"What the *fuck* are you playing at?" he asked angrily.

She looked shaken, but still fierce as her eyes focused and she calmed her breathing back down. Her eyes were accusing, suspicious.

"Why didn't you do it?"

"Because you've gone mad!" he exploded. "Are you trying to frame me?" He looked around, expecting Potter and Weasley to be behind him with their wands drawn. He turned back to look at her. "Well? Did you not have enough material for your blackmail? Is that it?"

"You wanted to kill me last year," she said, advancing towards him angrily. "Or at the very least seriously injure. Now you can hardly look at me."

"Dammit, Granger, don't you think your threats had something to do with it? That was one of your conditions, after all."

They paused, interrupted by a sudden burst of wind. Draco waited for her answer. She seemed to be gathering the courage to speak—she half opened her mouth, and Draco leaned forward.

"Wearing necklaces never used to bother me," she said, and he couldn't tell if her voice sounded faint because of the wind or if it was hard for her to admit what she was saying. Because of the wind her hair streamed to her side, thick coils of it given life. "Nor scarves, nor the ties of my uniform or the collars of my shirts."

Draco's stomach sank low.

"Now every time I wear one I can feel is your hands instead. When I sleep, I feel it. When I look at you, I feel it."

She looked toward the ground, her hand outstretched. "Accio."

Draco's wand met with her palm, and she held it together with hers, staring down at it as she spoke, turning them round in her hand.

"The look in your eyes, the way you only let go because McGonagall had to make you... Any chance you had to remind me how powerless I was, you took, and now I give you one, and you look like you're about to vomit."
Draco passed a hand over his face. He'd begun to sweat despite the cold. "Maybe I don't feel like committing murder."

"I would have stopped you before you ever came close to that." Here her tone was confident again, and strangely, it relieved him.

"Well I wasn't going to," he snapped, and paused. He spoke as the words came to him, he was sure if he had even a second to think it over, he'd never have said a thing.

"I shouldn't have done that to you in the first place…I-I very much wish I hadn't."

He had to force himself to keep looking at her. His ears were red, he knew it, and he wished he hadn't stammered, but it was out. The rest of his apology lay on the edge of his tongue, pushing, pushing to be released, but his lips would not open, and they remained trapped, fading with every passing second until they were gone completely and he was left with regret and annoyance that he could be so cowardly. It occurred then to him how unused he was to giving apologies. To Pansy, to his parents and friends, it was inconsequential—almost meaningless, but she was neither, and though he felt it was best to continue he couldn't because of the way she froze upon hearing his confession.

Once again he was struck by her animated hair still moving in the wind, like Medusa's enraged, restless serpents. The rest of her was stone; eyes slightly wide, brow furrowed, mouth a little slack, as if he'd hit her with an Impedimenta jinx.

One half-beat later she was alive again, and realizing her expression she masked it instantly after, taking a moment to push her hair away from her face to recollect herself.

"You say that only because you were caught," she replied coolly.

"I'm glad I was. I was carried away by my anger. I was the weak one, not you."

Again, she was taken by surprise but this time transitioned more smoothly. Their wands were separated; she held one in each hand and her stance made him step back, fearing for a moment that she would actually attack him wielding two wands.

She was unconvinced. She glared at him.

"Why are you lying to me?" she demanded.

"I'm not."

As he watched, she stuffed her own wand into her pocket, then held up his wand with both hands, directly in front of his face, fists facing him. Draco reached to grab it and she gave him a warning flex of her wrists—the meaning was clear. He lowered his hands slowly.

"Lie again, and I will break it."

He exhaled angrily. "There is nothing preventing me from buying a new one if you do."

"I won't just break it," she said softly. "I'll take my memories to Dumbledore and you'll be expelled for good. Umbridge isn't here to save your sorry arse anymore."

She looked a little wild, with her dark brown hair writhing and her eyes so vengeful and her mouth curled into a sneer. He found himself wondering just how many times it had been him bearing that expression instead in their encounters.
"Now tell me," she said, "what you are pretending at, that you're sorry."

"I didn't say I was sorry," he said, suddenly defensive and annoyed, both at her and himself. What did he have to be annoyed about? He had apologized, technically... "I..."

When he failed to continue she lowered her arms slightly. "Well?"

"I shouldn't have done that to you." He gestured to her neck. "I acted irrationally and I should have been expelled for it."

When he'd gotten her note, he'd really only expected her to yell and jinx him a bit, maybe. This was much worse.

She studied him so hard, as if he was notes to an exam she was afraid to fail. He stared back evenly.

In past events he was on the other end of the wand, convincing people with lies. Now he had to prove he wasn't. He licked his lips. Perhaps he was, in fact, still asleep. But he was relying on that absurd possibility more and more lately. A troubling thought.

She scoffed suddenly. "Liar."

"Wait, wait!" he said hurriedly, reaching forward to stop her as she started the motion to break his wand. "Stop! Merlin, Granger!"

When she raised her eyes to look at him he realized she'd been faking. She didn't smile, but her eyes were mocking, victorious. Draco winced and looked at the sky.

"I deserved that."

"And more," she said crisply. She tucked his wand into her pocket. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"I think me not wanting to choke you was a clear sign," he said drily. She gave him an irritated look, and he sighed. "What have I got to lose, Granger? If you offered me Veritaserum I'd take it. I'm not going to pretend I'm not sorry when what I did was inexcusable. I think we both wish I'd realized that sooner."

She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes, saying nothing for some time. Draco stood there, not knowing what to do. If it weren't for the fact that she still had possession of his wand he would have just walked away.

"I haven't sent the letters," she said suddenly.

Draco scowled. "I figured. I've been waiting for a Howler every morning for weeks."

She shrugged. "A little suspense never hurt anyone."

Her words brought a shiver over him. Suddenly he didn't feel well.

"Why haven't you? I imagined you would all but have skipped to the Owlery the moment I broke your terms."

"I almost did."

Far too many.
"Then what?" he asked angrily. "Why tell me? Did you want thanks for your generosity?"

She gave him a hateful stare.

"Turns out it's a little bit difficult to compose a letter explaining what happened. It's not exactly enjoyable to revisit, much less write about a time someone almost killed you because they never learned to properly manage their anger."

"Strange," he said feigning innocence, though his temper had flared. "You're loquacious enough—I assume you would have less trouble writing a ten foot paper on troll dung."

This hit a nerve. She instantly drew her—his—wand, and an invisible force bent his knees. Draco fought it, gritting his teeth though it didn't hurt. He'd fucked up, he ought to have kept his mouth shut, he knew it, and deserved this, though it didn't stop the instinct to resist.

When he landed on his knees in the snow it made a sharp, scraping sound. Ice bit into his trousers. His skin crawled in shock from the cold. She looked down at him in the same way she had looked at Umbridge, the same way she had looked at Rita Skeeter, even Snape. He didn't know why it affected him so much now when she had looked at him with hate countless times before.

"You assaulted me on a number of occasions. Stalking, choking, threats, and it all ends in sexual assault."

He opened his mouth to argue but she cut him off.

"You kissed me against my will. While I was restrained. Snark all you like, it wasn't fun for me."

Draco found it hard to keep eye contact suddenly. He focused on her hair instead, because he was suddenly aware how foolish he'd been to come here and expect that she would give him a chance to apologize, or that either of them could have come out of this having found some sort of resolution.

"You're right," he said, all too aware of how strange it felt to be saying this to her. "I'm ashamed I ever did it."

"You ought to be," she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. "Horrible as you are, I never thought you capable of that."

Draco's face burned. His legs were losing feeling. "I didn't, either."

She frowned and uncrossed her arms. "If this is all some game you're playing..."

"It's not."

"Prove it."

"I thought I just did," he snapped.

"Not well enough. You owe me an explanation," she said. "Especially if you can't bring yourself to actually say sorry. You owe me that much."

He closed his eyes briefly. "All I wanted was to get the answers I needed from you. When that took too long I became angrier and more impatient. I hated you. I wasn't used to not getting my way."

She didn't respond.

"I took my frustrations out on you and that was not fair. I was stupid and I could have killed you..."
"I'm sorry."

His eyes dropped to the ground. Neither spoke for some time.

At last, when he had regained some courage, he looked. She stood frozen, staring at him, an unfathomable expression on her face.

"I can't feel my knees, Granger. Let me up before I gain the legs of an old man."

"You used past tense."

"What?"

"You said 'hated.'"

Shit. This was getting out of control. He was revealing more than he wanted to, and if he let her carry on, he would be sorry.

"Send the letters and get this over with," he said impatiently. "I've had enough." He tried to stand again, and couldn't.

"I will if you don't answer me."

"Merlin, just get on with it. Is that why you've waited so long? So you could have me beg? Is that what you want? I'm already on my knees, for fuck's sake."

She let out a mirthless huff of laughter. "Well, this all sounds familiar, doesn't it." Her expression was bitter.

Draco worked his jaw. "Did you plan this?"

"No." She raised her brows. "Shocking, isn't it? History repeats itself."

Draco felt his limbs unlock. He stood up carefully, not wanting to fall in front of her.

"I'm still not entirely sure I believe you, but this is a start. Don't expect forgiveness so soon, either, if you even care for it."

Draco forced himself to meet her eye. "And what if I did?"

She stared coldly at him, one hand on her neck. "Then you'll have to wait."

"May I have my wand back?"

"I'll be honest," she said. "I'm tempted to keep it."

"I'd rather you didn't."

Hermione raised one eyebrow. "You're in no position to argue."

Draco's head was beginning to hurt quite badly, to the point it was difficult to maintain control of his face. He rubbed at his temple. His legs felt half-frozen, his trousers and coat were wet and crusted with ice. He wished he hadn't come. The Mark stung on his arm periodically, as if an invisible Peeves was beside him, jabbing him with a needle.

*You can just buy another,* he told himself. *You could buy yourself houses full of wands and she could*
break every single one and you could still buy more. Just go. Don't let her win.

Those last four words surprised him. It was just what he would have told himself a year ago, when she'd been nothing but a Mudblood with a secret.

If he left, there wouldn't be another chance. She would keep his wand, break it, burn it, lock it away, deliver her threat and never talk to him again. But what happened if he stayed? Draco didn't know what he wanted. His head pounded viciously and he fought to keep standing still.

"Please."

She paused, tilting her head as she looked at him.

There was something unsettling about his expression, like he was one hair's width away from collapsing. Hermione frowned.

"Are you alright?"

"Please, Granger." He held out his hand, and it was useless to try to hide the shaking. Red flashed across his vision.

Another moment passed between them. He could practically feel her indecision, but finally she held out the wand to him. Draco took it gratefully.

"Come inside," she said, "you look like death."

The Mark burned suddenly, searing across his skin. Draco fought not to hiss in pain.

"No."

"It's not a suggestion," she said firmly, and took him by the arm. "You can't stay out here."

First she taunted and humiliated him and now she pretended to care. The sudden change was enough to trigger that old hate to bubble up again, though a small voice in the back of his head pleaded with him to reconsider. Draco had had enough. He pulled away.

"Just go, Granger. You got what you wanted, didn't you?"

"Not exactly. I still have questions."

"Merlin, but you always do. I'm not going back inside."

"Fine," she said, picking up her scarf from where it was still on the frozen ground and slinging it over her shoulder. "Suit yourself. I won't force you."

She turned and left, and didn't look back once. Draco turned too, and walked a little further out into the courtyard and behind some trees, where he let himself fall back against a tree heavily and finally emptied his stomach, the Mark on his arm burning hot as the sun.

"How did it go?" Pansy asked.

Hermione looked around themselves before speaking. They'd chosen to sit in a more secluded area in the back of the library at a table surrounded on all sides but one by bookcases. Even with the added protection, she couldn't help but feel paranoid.
"Oddly."

"What do you mean?"

"He apologized. You were right." Hermione gave her a small smile.

"But do you believe him?"

Hermione frowned, looked down at her hands.

Something was different about him. Aside from the physical aspect, of course, but she'd felt and seen that for months now. He seemed less confident than before, to be sure. When was the last time she'd seen him properly angry? He must have been advised to keep control of his temper, and to his credit, he was doing a good job of it, though she had the overwhelming feeling that there was something within him on the verge of breaking down, and she didn't want anything to do with it. She thought of the Map, all the hours he was hidden from it. It was worrying and suspicious. No wonder Harry was so convinced he was up to something.

"I don't know."

And this was what annoyed her most.

Could it all be an act? Or has something happened to him?

The way he'd almost panicked when she'd clasped his hands around her neck…

Hermione felt herself flush a little—she hadn't planned that. She really shouldn't have done it. Gods, she'd been so mad she'd taken a page from his book and had acted out of anger. What if he'd actually taken her up on her offer? Gods, she'd acted so irrationally, she felt like a proper fool.

It can't be genuine, she thought, furrowing her brow. This all has to be a trick. What reason could he have to be sorry?

She must have looked really worried, because Pansy suddenly hugged her.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have suggested that in the first place."

"I care about you two," Pansy said as she pulled back. "I know you might never end up getting along, but I just want you to resolve it, if possible." She blushed suddenly. "And I'm now just realizing how terrible it was of me to intervene. Gods, I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," Hermione said. "I think you've been wanting to bring this up for a long time."

"I didn't want you make you uncomfortable by bringing it up. I think I did that anyway."

"I was already uncomfortable dealing with it," Hermione said. "And if he's truly changed, I appreciate you wanting to help."

Though I don't think it will do any good.

She pictured him, standing with his hand held out, his eyes tight, exhausted, as if fighting off something invisible that was constantly on the attack. The way he'd almost begged. It was nothing she'd ever seen from him before, and it made her head spin.
"I'm hungry," Pansy said, stretching. "Are you?"

"Not really, no."

"Oh. Well I'm going down to the kitchens."

"Okay." Hermione gestured to her books. "I'll be here for a while longer. Will we see you later for the fireworks?"

Pansy gave an apologetic smile. "I was thinking of just going to bed early. I haven't been getting much sleep lately."

After Pansy had left Hermione pushed her book away and crossed her arms, chewing on the inside of her cheek as she thought back to earlier in the day.

"You're only saying that because you got caught."

"I'm glad I was."

She rubbed at her temples. The necklace Ron had given her was in her pocket. She didn't know why she'd decided to wear it that morning, but after the talk with Malfoy she'd taken it off, as it felt like it'd been tightening around her throat. She still kept getting goosebumps from remembering his cold touch on her neck.

"What have I got left to lose?"

He'd kept his distance. He had kept to her conditions. Each time they had actually interacted had been either by accident (according to him) or by someone else's doing (Snape, for example). She'd done some asking to figure out the general location of the Slytherin House, and it turned out he'd been right when he'd said her rooms were along the way to their dorms. Harry was often a lurker late at night, too, and who knew how many others? She'd caught a number of them during her patrols after dinner, but of course everyone else must have known when the patrols ended, and it was easy enough to slip away once the Prefects were back in bed. Hence Malfoy's midnight walks.

Pansy seemed strangely eager to plead for Malfoy's case. Hermione knew she could trust Pansy, but it was different when Malfoy came into the picture. Pansy had known him practically all her life, and clearly had seen better sides of him than Hermione had been shown.

What if she's wrong? Hermione thought. What if she's seeing what she wants to see from him?

But he'd said sorry. He'd said he regretted it. Was it enough to clear what he'd done? It was likely to be the only apology she would ever get from him. She simply couldn't picture it happening again anytime soon. Hermione felt like very, very little had changed, even with his admission of guilt. She was not as angry as before, perhaps, but there still remained the distrust. He could talk about regret all he wanted, but how could it be proven he was really changed? What more, would it really matter if it was all true? Would she actually forgive him?

"Please."

It had felt so satisfying to have him kneeling in front of her. She wouldn't stoop so low to humiliate him the way he'd done to her, but knew she'd gotten her point across. She'd seen the regret on his face the second he'd said that quip about troll dung, had seen the acknowledgement of the blunder in his eye.

What if I told Harry and Ron? The answer came in a strong feeling leaning to the negative. They
knew enough—things would get too complicated if she told them everything else.

"There you are," came a voice from her side, and then as if out of nowhere Ron sat down beside her. Hermione, realizing suddenly how tense her posture had been, allowed herself to relax.

"Where'd you come from?" she asked.

"I ran into Pansy on the staircase and she told me you were here."

Hermione leaned her head on his shoulder. "And Harry?"

"With Dumbledore." Ron shifted his shoulder down so she could rest on it better. "Ginny's cross, she wanted us to play Quidditch."

"Ginny's back already?"

"Yeah, came back early. Dunno how she managed it, with mum being clingy as she is this time of year, but Tonks and Mad Eye came by really early this morning and saw her through the gate. Bill and Charlie must be visiting if mum allowed it. First thing she did when she got here was change into her Quidditch stuff."

"Then why aren't you playing with her?"

"She sent me to find you," Ron said. "On orders to persuade you to play Beater."

Hermione gave him a mock serious glare. "She sent you on a fool's errand."

Ron laughed.

"Will you come, then?"

Hermione blinked. "Sure. First I've got to put these all away." She gestured to her stack of books. Ron made a face.

"You know I can't just leave them here," she said, gathering her scarf from the back of her chair.

"Are you not wearing your necklace today?" he asked, an odd tinge to his cheeks.

"It's right here," she said, pulling it from her pocket. "I only took it off to...do my hair."

Ron gave her an odd look. "It's loose."

"Yes, well, it was in a braid earlier," she said. "I didn't want it to get caught."

Because she was afraid of hurting his feelings, she began to put it on again, first pushing all her hair over one shoulder. Ron watched, still pink, but after several unsuccessful tries Hermione managed to get it caught in her hair after all.

"D'you need help?"

"Please."

Ron took both ends of the chain and tried untangling the hairs from them.

Hermione winced. "Ah—gently, please—ouch!"

"Shit—sorry, Hermione."
Somehow he managed it without further pain on Hermione's behalf, and when he was done, he pulled her hair gently off her shoulder again, slow enough that she felt there was more meaning to it than normal. Hermione stood still, her hands grasping her scarf, realization dawning over her.

"Do you want me to carry your books?" he asked, heading to the table.

"No, I'll get them." Hurriedly, she put on her scarf and coat on, and hoping he wouldn't notice her self-conscious blush, she grabbed the books and rushed into the maze of bookcases.

"Wake up, you idiot."

Something tapped him lightly on the forehead. Draco frowned.

"Draco, get up, for Merlin's sake."

"Go away." He felt her fingers tap him on the forehead again, then dance down his face to his neck to his armpit. She wiggled them there, and he flinched awake.

"Aha."

Draco rolled over to face her. Having just woken up, she was nothing but a blur in his vision. "Fuck off."

"Good morning, beautiful!" she snickered. "What are you asleep for? It's almost midnight! Get up, get up!"

"I prefer sleep, thanks." His voice was muffled by his pillow. "Happy New Year in advance from me. Now go." He waved his wand towards the door.

The bed shifted, and he groaned groggily as she sat on the bed beside him.

"If you don't get out of your damn bed this instant I will sleep here with you until morning tomorrow, and I believe you are familiar with how much I kick when I sleep."

"I'll push you off."

"I'll climb back up and kick harder." She stretched out on the bed beside him, placing her hands underneath her head. Draco sat up sullenly, rubbing at his face.

"You're a demon."

"Yes, yes, I've heard that before. Now get dressed, we're going to the Astronomy Tower."

"We can watch the fireworks from inside, did you think of that?" He stood from the bed and pulled on a thick jumper. It hung off his frame. Pansy eyed it, frowning, but said nothing. He summoned a pair of socks and pulled them on, then his shoes, not bothering to change out of the bottoms he'd been wearing in bed.

"I love the look you've got going there," Pansy remarked, picking lint off her arm. Draco looked down at himself. "Mismatched, uncoordinated swine?"

"Not at all. I had friends back home who went to Beauxbatons, and they actually offer arts classes
there. I was so jealous when they told me, since here all we got was a useless Duelling lesson that lasted a couple of weeks, and all anyone talked about was Justin-bloody-Finch-Fletchy and that snake."

Draco scowled. Not that anyone had noticed, but he'd sliced his finger on the platform after Potter had knocked him backwards. He still had the scar, and every time he looked at it he was reminded of the humiliation. "Don't bring that up again."

"Well the point is that they all looked impeccable in those uniforms of theirs, but when I saw them over summers they dressed absolutely drab like the way you look now, only they made it look sinfully glamorous. You would have put them all to shame." She smiled. "But your hair needs some dressing."

Draco passed a hand through it. It was in need of a wash. "Should we go?" He collected his coat and went to the door, sticking his wand in his pocket.

They perched on the edge of the tower, legs dangling in the air, arms slung over the protective railing.

"I haven't seen you much since Christmas," she said. "How are the potions working?"

"Excellently." He bent his head low, met her eye. "I've been feeling better. Thank you."

"Good." She pulled her scarf tighter around her throat. Draco eyed it, knowing it wasn't hers.

"So I take it you had a guest that day."

"What?"

"That's what you wrote to me for, isn't it? Why you needed the Room of Requirement?"

"Oh." He attempted a smile, and thankfully, she was convinced. "It's none of your business."

She laughed.

"I thought you would be off with them somewhere," he said to change the topic.

"I wanted to spend it with you," she said. "You shouldn't be alone so much, Draco."

"There's nothing wrong with being alone, Pansy."

"Not when you're like this," she said.

Draco looked out to the sky, eyes jumping from star to star, seeking constellations. "It helps me think."

"Well you think too much."

"Unfortunately true."

Pansy wiggled closer to him.

"She spoke to you today."

Draco turned to face her, alarmed. "She told you."
"Not everything," Pansy neglected to inform him she had been the one to start the whole thing. "How did it go?"

"Well we're still not best friends yet, so you can imagine what happened," he said drily, and she tutted at him.

She looked at him from the corner of her eye. "You didn't…do anything, did you?"

"Merlin, Pansy, no."

"I had to ask."

"Yes, we all know I'm some savage," he snapped.

"Draco, don't be mad at me," she said. "You know full well you got yourself into this with that temper of yours."

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose. "I know. I know."

"So what happened?"

"She got even, more or less."

"I suppose you won't tell me what that entails."

"Spot on."

"I wish I'd seen it."

"Oh, thanks."

"I love you," she said, "and I want what's best for you, and if that means you get your arse kicked a little then I'm alright with it. But only because you deserve it."

"And she doesn't."

"You're really asking me that." She cocked her head at him, eyes narrowed.

Draco sighed. "Sorry. I'm an idiot."

She grinned. "Spot on."

A sudden boom made them both jump. Sparks lit the sky.

"Merlin, I almost screamed," Pansy said, laughing.

Neither of them had thought to check the time. There were high-pitched whistles and thin trails of light streaking up, then blooms of multi-colored sparks spreading across the sky. A half second later the actual pop of the rockets exploding registered.

Draco leaned over the railing and looked down. A smattering of other students who'd stayed for the break had gathered on the front lawn. He searched among them for three individuals, and specifically for one within the three.

"Well, Happy New Year," Pansy said, yawning.

Draco spotted her suddenly, hatless, alone, among the back of the crowd. Through the dark, it was
hard to tell, but he could see a scarf wound around her neck again. She had her arms around herself, face upturned to the sky. Another figure joined her suddenly, and it was only from the light of the fireworks that he was able to tell that it was Weasley. He wondered why Potter wasn't there, but didn't care enough to ask. If he was invisible and spying on him still, he would see nothing suspicious about him merely watching the display with a friend.

"Happy New Year, Pansy."
Regression and Progression

Three days into the New Year came the first attack. It was the weekend, and students had been coming back from the holiday in steady streams; on Sunday there was a trip to Hogsmeade, which everyone happily took advantage of to meet with their friends and talk about how they'd spent their vacation.

The shops and cafes and pubs of Hogsmeade were filled to near capacity with raucous students and residents taking refuge from the heavy snow storm that had crept up behind them during their trek to the village. The storm was fierce, blowing snowflakes and bits of ice like darts into the faces of anyone who dared step outside. The snow fell so heavily from the sky that students walking back to the castle had to be clever in their approach to getting back to the castle, casting extra warming charms on their cloaks and shoes and some even going as far as casting Bubble-Head charms over their faces to see if it would protect them from the snow. (It didn't.)

Nobody really minded the weather. A storm was a storm and they couldn't do much more than shake their fists and the sky, sigh, and stay inside until it passed. One stranger dared face it, among few others, and decided to use it to his advantage. A concealed package in his robes, he went into the Three Broomsticks and came out some time after, preferring to wait in the fierce cold than to stay inside the crowded pub. The temperature was dangerously low but he did not have long to wait. The sleet and snow obscured his identity, and he had not much else to focus on than to see if his plan would work.

While making their way back to the castle three witnesses saw Katie Bell staggering through the snow as if possessed, clutching an unwrapped parcel, her face white as the snow, she was trembling all over, and after a moment she levitated into the air, a great and horrible scream coming from her throat. And then she'd fallen back down into the snow and suffered a seizure. Her friend, who had caught the attention of the witnesses by her loud, concerned voice, screamed and called for help. The witnesses immediately rushed forward to investigate. By a stroke of luck, Hagrid stumbled across them and immediately took Katie and her friend back to the school. Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed him. Harry held the strange parcel-an elegant necklace wrapped in black fabric. Throughout all that spectacle no one thought to look around for a had, they would not have found him. By then he had already fled the area, masked by the falling snow, and hid in the Forbidden Forest. The howling winds and torrents of snow obscured his form and drowned the sound of his panicked retching onto the frozen ground. Nobody had noticed him slip back into the castle, appearing haggard but that was simple consequence of having faced the brunt of the storm and no one thought it strange since everyone else who came in shortly after had just about the same look. He'd had a change of clothes stashed in the Room of Requirement, and after washing up there and changing, no one was the wiser.

Katie Bell had been taken back to the school to receive immediate care, and from there, because of her serious condition, was transferred to St. Mungo's. The witness's accounts were taken. Aurors combed the area for several hours afterward, but because of the storm, were not able to find anything else aside from the necklace, which had been taken to the Ministry. No culprit was found, and only a few suspects were taken in, but were released promptly after questioning revealed they had no ties to the attack. As the news spread, Professors went down to the village to collect the remaining students before panic ensued.

Draco placed himself out in the open in the Slytherin common room, pretending he wasn't sporting a nasty headache, to make sure he was seen by many. No one had noticed him get out of bed so early,
they'd thought he'd still been asleep. The news came out of the attack and he made a point to ask questions and then appear mildly shocked. The air around the common room was unsure, afraid. Nobody knew what to do.

Draco retired early instead of going to lunch, and by grace of it being Sunday, had the rest of the day to do nothing. His hands shook and his mind felt fraught with the weight of what he had done. He changed his clothes once more, downed a bottle of Pansy's sleeping potion, and collapsed onto his bed. His head was ringing loudly in sudden silence from the booming voice that had erupted into existence the moment everything had gone wrong.

FAILURE FAILURE FAILURE FAILURE FAILURE, it boomed,

so loudly that he felt his bones rattle with every repetition, but within moments of him taking the potion it was choked out, and he had only a second to relish the complete silence before a drugged sleep took hold of him.

He awoke some forty minutes later, skin slick with sweat, lungs wrenched to the point where it almost hurt to breathe, his eyes smarting at the ever-present images his dream had conjured.


Draco sat up in his bed, breathing heavily, afraid to blink for fear the images would appear in the brief seconds of darkness. The smell of the burning flesh had stayed in the air around him, and though it was all due to memory and imagination he felt he would retch from it.

He twisted himself out of his sheets and sat on the edge of his bed, running his hands over his face. His elbow hit something cold, and he jumped, but it was only the potion bottle he'd used.

Strange—he remembered putting that in his bedside table drawer, not leaving it on his bed. He parted his curtains to check and indeed, there was the original bottle. He stared down at the other in confusion. It was new, still heavy with its precious content. His hand folded around it tightly. But where had this come from? The rest of his stash was hidden along with the wine.

It definitely was not one of Pansy's bottles for all hers were unlabeled and this one clearly was from the Infirmary, as indicated on the fresh label, and it was still sealed.

His eyes fought to stay open. The potion hadn't worn off, then.

I don't want to go back to sleep.

But his eyes were so dry, if he closed them for just one second he would be ok. He did, and it was a struggle to open them again. The canopy of his bed stared at him expectantly.

Perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing to fall back asleep. What were the chances of getting two nightmares in succession? He laughed audibly at the thought.

'Everything comes at a cost,' his father had told him once. How easy it was to forget sometimes.

He'd wanted sleep, rest. He'd gotten it, briefly. But what came next? What did he do now? The wine remained, and if he failed with that too, would he still have a chance? The cabinet was his last option. He had to get it to work. He had already hurt one person. The Dark Lord would hear of it, and he would laugh at him.

The potion tugged his eyelids down—he felt himself relax despite his anxiety.
You can't escape what you've done, an uninvited voice spoke up. You never will.

Pansy and Ginny heard the news directly from the trio as they'd sat down to dinner together. There'd been a brief announcement by a grave Professor McGonagall, and a tense, agitated silence had permeated the Great Hall for the entire meal. Dumbledore was absent. Word was that he'd gone to Mungo's at once and then to the Ministry. The youngest students appeared the most frightened by the news, looking around the room as if expecting to find the attacker in one of its corners. Suspicious, scared whispers filled the air.

Hermione was distracted, trying her damnedest to not give herself away as she ran her eyes over the Slytherin table, searching for Malfoy. She found him at its very end, farthest from the staff table and closest to the entrance. His chin was in his hand, he stared down at the table as he ate. She looked away quickly, and focused back on her meal.

"Is she still in the Hospital Wing?" Ginny was asking them.

"She's in Mungo's now," Harry said quietly, rubbing at his scar. "Dunno for how long."

"Gods," Pansy looked sick. "I hope she'll be alright."

"What do you care?" someone asked suddenly from further down the table, in a tone that jolted most everyone else into silence.

"Is there a problem?" Pansy asked, frowning at the fourth year, who had stood up and come closer to where she and Hermione sat together.

Ruddy faced and sharp nosed, the fourth year crossed his arms.

"Go back to your own table, Slytherin. Don't pretend to be innocent."

"What are you going on about?" Pansy demanded, narrowing her eyes at him. "By the way, who the hell are you?"

"My name is Charles, and you heard me. Don't think no one's noticed how suddenly you started hanging around here for Merlin knows whatever reason, and then a Gryffindor gets attacked."

"You've got to be joking." Pansy scoffed in distaste. "You really think I did that?"

They had drawn the attention of more people, and the hall went quieter still. Malfoy looked up, from his seat, frowning.

"As a matter of fact, I do," the newcomer said.

"You've got some nerve making accusations like that when you clearly don't know anything," Ginny said hotly. "She was here inside the castle with me when it happened."

Charles crossed his arms. "And what were you doing with her?"

"I think you should sit down and mind your own business," Hermione said suddenly, "before I assign you a detention."

"What's she done to get you to defend her?" the boy asked rudely. "Don't tell me you think she's innocent."

"I'll do you one better, mate," Ron said, turning to glare at the accoster. "We know she's innocent."
And you're being a prick."

The boy didn't look convinced. "So she's convinced you, too?" he asked haughtily. "Well, I guess I'm not surprised you were bought off."

Ron stood from the bench and Harry followed, a warning hand on his arm.

Charles looked surprised. "You're defending her?" he asked Harry.

"Pansy's been sitting with us because we're friends," Harry replied coolly.

"That's right," Pansy said, an angry flush on her cheeks. "I'll sit where I bloody like. There's no rule saying I can't sit here."

"Succinctly put, Miss Parkinson," came the Headmaster's voice, and they all jumped and turned to find the aged wizard standing behind them patiently. McGonagall was at his side, looking most displeased.

"There is no better way to give into fear than to point fingers blindly," Dumbledore told Charles. "Lives can be put in danger when accusations fly without support or evidence."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Bartleby," McGonagall said, her brow bent so severely it was a wonder it didn't divide the whole of her face into two halves. "Miss Parkinson has shown nothing but exemplary behavior at our table. You might deign to do the same if you think our House in danger. Incivility rarely solves disputes well."

"But Professor-"

"If you are so concerned about the safety of your peers, you may discuss the matter with me over detention tonight."

The fourth year's face went red. "Yes, Professor."

"Excellent," Dumbledore said, nodding his head. "Now, I believe an apology must be made."

The boy's face went redder, but he turned to Pansy and said rather stiffly, "I'm sorry," and Pansy accepted it.

McGonagall strode off with Charles following angrily. Dumbledore followed soon after, but not before Harry found himself holding a note in his hand. He read it silently and then stuffed it into his pocket without saying a word.

"Are you okay?" Hermione was asking Pansy.

"I'm fine." Pansy looked at the doors. "Do people really think that of me just because I sit here?"

"They're afraid," Hermione said. "And he doesn't know you as well as I do. If anyone else has something to say I'll send them straight to McGonagall."

"Say the word," Ginny said, winking, "and I'll take them for a speedy little flight around the castle."

Pansy laughed. "I think I'll let the karma sort itself out, but thanks."

Days passed quickly, and by the start of the following week Draco had depleted his store of potions. On Tuesday night he drank the last drops of each bottle, hoping it would be enough, but still spent
the night half-awake, jittery, feeling as though he'd never actually gotten some weeks of regular sleep at all over the break. He got about an hour of sleep. Perhaps less. He was too afraid to make sure.

Things started moving in his peripheral vision again. His energy levels plummeted, and his moods soured. Again, he withdrew from Pansy. She was insistent on seeing him regularly and though he loved her dearly he couldn't work up the interest to respond to her notes or invitations to go to Hogsmeade together, to take food from the kitchens and eat by themselves away from everyone else like they had done at the start of the month. Draco felt that seeing each other in class was enough—when she didn't sit with Granger she sat with him, and once he'd waved off her concerns of his being ill again she sat in bleak silence, not knowing what to think.

He did eat, though—and it was hard, because most of the time he had absolutely no appetite at all, but he packed himself full meals and ate alone, or dragged himself down to the Great Hall to keep up appearances, and ate enough to keep himself from really catching everyone's attention. He could feel Granger's stare from across the room and ignored it.

"You have to eat," Snape had told him once after class, his black, void-like eyes boring into him, staring pointedly at his robes that had become much too loose on him. "Force yourself if necessary. Your parents will not be happy if they hear you are doing this to yourself."

"It's not their business," Draco had said sullenly.

"They are relying on you to keep them alive," Snape had said so sharply that Draco flinched. "Starve yourself again after term ends, if you're so determined. But you will need your strength and energy for your mission. The Dark Lord will never forgive you if you cannot complete it because you couldn't bring yourself to eat a blasted sandwich."

So he ate. He fed himself, and at night sometimes even tried to go to bed earlier than usual to get himself to sleep, but was usually awake through the night until morning.

The first few times were the worst. He was no stranger to sleeplessness, of course, but it still stung to be back at this point, to never have progressed at all without the aid of a potion. At night he had nothing to do but think. Even when he very carefully tried to keep his mind blank, it was flooded with thought immediately, hundreds of conversations and fragmented lines of thought that he couldn't grasp, images that haunted him even when his eyes were open. Sometimes, out of complete desperation, he'd bring his textbooks onto his bed and did all his late assignments until the sky had grown light again. His writing was lazy and sloppy, and soon his sheets were scattered with splotches of ink.

It was a torture of its own, and he felt it would push him to madness if he didn't take care. Once out desperation he'd gone so far as to use a sleeping spell on himself, but something had gone wrong, and he'd spent the rest of the night vomiting in the boys' toilet, laughing at his own stupidity and misfortune.

He fell asleep in class instead, by some miracle managing to wake himself up in time to avoid the ire of his Professors. Understandably, though, this didn't assays work. After his third detention for sleeping during class he resorted to charming his wand to shock him when he started nodding off. It was extremely effective. He got another detention for shouting in pain during a Potions lesson. He had approached Slughorn after the bell rang and after promising he would try to boost his marks, Slughorn had cheerily rescinded the detention, and Draco skipped his next class to go try and sleep. He had been so tired he hid in an alcove in a generally vacant area (by Trewlawney's classroom, of course) and slept fitfully there for a half hour until dinner.

Some nights were absolute trolls, where he felt no tiredness whatsoever and spent the whole night
awake, tossing and turning, trying all the usual tricks: slowing his breathing, visualizing emptiness, attempting to drain himself of tension, reading, even counting owls, but nothing worked. His eyes felt raw from all the rubbing, heavy from exhaustion he barely felt, so dry blinking rarely relieved the discomfort. When morning dawned he would still be lying on his back, his heart beating harder than normal—he could feel his heart beat without having to try to be aware of it. It felt sick. Perhaps it was sick, seeing how he got on average one to two hours of sleep some nights, if he was lucky.

After the first week of this he couldn't bear to spend any more time walled between the curtains of his bed so he went to the Room of Requirement instead, deciding that if he had so much time to do nothing he might as well use it to continue his work on the cabinet.

Fenrir didn't always answer his messages through the galleon, and without his and Borgin's 'help' on the other cabinet there was only so much he could do. Draco would tinker on it, working little by little, trying to send things through it until he realized he might as well try living things, since that was what it would have to transport.

But what?

He spent hours looking around the convoluted mess of things in the Room, thinking perhaps a rat might do, but none could be found, to his utter amazement. Instead he found the usual: books, pornography, broken furniture, lost possessions. He wound deeper and deeper into the mess, but found nothing living, and that was that-

Until one day, when it was two in the morning and the first rays of light were peeking shyly into the high windows and he distantly heard the sound of a bird singing, and then it struck him.

It probably wouldn't work, he told himself. But it was his last chance. If not, he would have to actually go outside and catch something.

I need birds, he asked the room, pacing, eyes closed, because he didn't know how else to do it. Small ones. In a cage.

There was a small chirp behind him and he turned wildly, his heart pounding painfully, to see four little birds in an old, worn cage set up on a bureau.

They were lovely, though he didn't know their species. Ordinary enough that he might have seen one a hundred times but couldn't recognize if it landed on his shoulder. They were a mix of grey and light blue feathers, dappled with black spots. They chittered softly at him and pecked his hand as he ran his finger gently down their spines.

When he was fairly confident about his work on the cabinet, he carefully took one bird—the fattest one, fluffing his little feathers and hopping excitedly as Draco held his crooked finger to it in the cage—and placed him carefully inside the cabinet, closing the door before it could fly away, though it seemed content to just sit and hop around, perhaps hoping to find food.

Draco sent a message through the coin. Expect arrival.

He waited a moment or so, resisting the urge to peek in and see if it'd worked.

He messaged Greyback again. Anything?

The reply came quick. Nothing.

Draco opened the cabinet. Confused in the dark, the little bird had tucked into itself, as if to sleep, but when the light hit him he raised his little head and chirped, tilting his head this way and that, hopping
back onto Draco's finger, who then secured him back into the cage.

And he was back to square one.

Draco felt quite disappointed though he knew he shouldn't, seeing as this was a first try and all. Still, he spent more sleepless nights wondering what exactly had gone wrong. He had followed Borgin's directions, after all. The odious man couldn't have tricked him, not with Fenrir keeping tabs on him as Draco had asked. Perhaps he needed to do it over the exact same way. He was bound to have done something wrong, what with this insomnia problem of his. He would work harder. He would try again.

The following week he devoted the nighttime to working on the cabinet, sending message after message to Fenrir through the galleon and following the instructions he gained from Borgin. The Room provided water and feed for the birds and he placed odds and ends that he found around the Room into their cage to keep them happy—a bright bit of jewelry, a little mirror, a bit of rope he tied to the top and attached a broken bell to its end. Things like that.

At the end of that week he was struggling to form coherent thought, often off-balance like a drunk, becoming overwhelmingly sleepy even while standing, but he felt it was time to try again.

This time he chose the shortest of the birds, still an infant, perhaps—he didn't know, but it hopped onto his finger curiously, nibbling the treat he held for her. Draco placed her in the cabinet and repeated the process.

Place the bird in, close the door, send the message, and wait.

He about jumped out of his own skin when a terrible little squeak emitted from the cabinet.

Draco flung open the door and there it was, its wing twisted and bleeding. His heart dropped and he picked her up as gently as he could, hearing the little squeaks of pain and distress from her and the calls of the other birds, as if inquiring after their companion.

There was a little smear of blood on his palm. The bird's breast moved frantically as it breathed, her little head resting on the fingers of his cupped hand. Her wing was a ruined mess. Draco willed back the wetness at his eyes.

"I'm sorry."

What do I do?

Hagrid. He would have to take her there. How odd that would look. But it didn't matter. Draco bolted out of the room, the injured avian held between his cupped hands, flapping her good wing in fright like she wanted to get to safety. Draco shushed her quietly and went down the floors carefully, but as fast as he could.

When he got out the entrance doors the sun blinded him. It was already afternoon. Draco staggered. Sweat dripped down his forehead and suddenly it struck him how hungry and tired he was.

He hurried through the slippery snow as best as he could, praying that the feeble movement of the bird in his hands was not because of his movements but because she was still alive. Once or twice he slipped and managed to right himself in just enough time that he didn't fall, and heart stabbing through his chest, he moved on.

He hadn't thought to bring a coat or even his cloak. He was shivering, jaw clattering, feet frozen to the point of near uselessness but he clambered on until the hut came into view and grew nearer and
nearer. Smoke was coming from the smokestack.

Thank Merlin.

When he approached the door the boarhound, Fang, began to bark, and Draco felt a flutter of frightened movement between his hands. Feeling weak with relief and adrenaline, he kicked at the door with his foot in way of knocking, fearing that if he used his hands he would jostle the creature with the movement and injure her further.

"Open!" he shouted, his whole body shaking from the cold so badly it changed his voice. "Open up!"

He heard a voice behind the door, and after an excruciating moment, the door swung open, and the half-giant filled its frame. The boarhound continued to bark loudly.

"A'right, a'right!" he said, scowling through his enormous, bushy beard. "What's burning yeh? Fang, back!"

His disgruntled gaze dropped and landed on Draco. "Oh." Then he frowned, his eyes almost disappearing beneath the weight of his brows. "What're yeh doing here?"

"I need help," Draco said, trying to brush aside the strangeness at his own self being there.

Hagrid looked suspiciously at his hands. "What're yeh holding?" he looked over his shoulder. "Back, Fang! Sit!"

"She's hurt," Draco said, removing one of his hands to show the gamekeeper. "It's the wing..."

"Blimey." Hagrid's face softened a little, but then he stared at Malfoy hard, almost in an accusatory fashion.

"It wasn't me," Draco said quickly. "I found her like this. I think a cat got to her."

"Well—" Hagrid squeezed himself back into his hut. "Bring her in, then. Fang, no. Outside. Go on, yeh nosy beast."

Draco followed the half-giant inside, stooping low to avoid being clobbered in the head by a low-hanging copper-pot. There was dirt along the floor in places. The boar hound's paw prints were stamped into the floor in others, even scratch marks along the length of the door. Blankets and handmade clothing were strewn about—clearly he had not been expecting visitors. Or perhaps it was usually this way. Draco flushed when he caught Hagrid looking at him a little self-consciously. A month ago the untidiness of the living space would have revolted him, but having been spoiled by the grandeur of the Room of Requirement, he paid it no mind. The malicious things he'd said about his former Professor floated back to him, and he turned red.

"Put 'er here," Hagrid said, clearing a bit of space on the tall table in the center of the hut. Draco approached it and gingerly laid down the bird onto a block of carved wood that was likely a cutting board. The smell of raw meat hit him and he looked behind him to see some cut up meat, ready to be put into the stew that was hung over the fire.

Hagrid was bent over the animal, poking gently at her wing with some tools he had wrapped in a leather pouch. The bird cried weakly and he cooed at it to comfort it.

"That's a'right, yeh poor thing. Not bad as it looks, eh?"
"Will she—it be alright?" Draco asked.

Hagrid turned to look at him, as if he'd forgotten he was there. "Oh. Er—she'll be fine. Not much blood loss, Jus' mangled a bit. I can set it right."

He straightened and went to a shelf along the wall, searching through the numerous bottles and tools he had there.

"Yeh don' have to stay," he said to Draco rather dismissively, as if he expected Draco to be glad to leave. "Yeh shouldn't be outside anyhow."

Draco looked to the bird. "I didn't know where else to take her."

Hagrid paused, and then caught himself and took a tin of salve from the shelf and brought it to the table.

"Migh' as well use yeh," he said busily as he opened the tin. It smelled of rosemary. Draco frowned. How was lip balm going to help?

"'s'not poisonous," Hagrid said, sensing Draco's confusion. He held the tin out to Draco. "It's a healin' salve for open wounds. Made it meself fer acciden's."

"Oh."

"Go on," Hagrid pushed the tin at him. "Apply it ter the wing."

Draco balked. "Me?"

"I'd do it meself but I'd be afraid of crushin' her bones," he said. "Usually I work wit' bigger creatures."

No kidding. Draco could feel the boarhound's stare through the small window beside the fire. It looked quite unhappy to be outside. Merlin, that thing could be as big as him.

Draco took some of the salve on his fingertips and approached the wing cautiously.

"Gently," Hagrid said.

Draco touched the redness, and his vision wavered suddenly.

Not here, he prayed.

Not here.

He applied the salve quickly, guiltily, and when he was done Hagrid offered him a rag to wipe his hand on. Draco took it without thinking and wiped the ointment off his skin. Already the creature had fallen asleep, soothed by the scent of the salve. The torn skin was knitting itself back together, the feathers shifting as it happened.

"That'll do it," Hagrid said, putting his tools away. "I'll let 'er rest before I get ter the actual mending."

"Thank you," Draco said. "I'm sorry to have bothered you while you were busy."

Gods, how shit he must sound. He had a bad habit of being too formal when nervous.
Hagrid noticed, too, because his eyebrows raised quite high, and giving Draco a closer look, they lowered again.

"Yeh haven't even got a cloak on!" he exclaimed, looking outraged. "How're yer not frozen through?"

"I forgot it inside," Draco said quickly. "I was too worried about——"

He buckled under the weight of the heavy mass of fur the half-giant threw over his shoulders.

"No thank—I really don't mind—I'll make it back to the castle alright," Draco stammered, absolutely floored by the gesture. Warmth from the fur swathed him and he felt a sudden surge of exhaustion grip him. It had been by the fire, that's why it was already so warm.

"No excuses," Hagrid was saying. "If yeh get sick goin' back it'll be my faul'. Yeh already look like yer gonna fall over. Blimey. Yeh sound jus' like Harry."

Then they both froze.

"I'll be fine," Draco said a beat later, pretending he hadn't heard a word. Hagrid looked utterly astounded at himself. He began to shrug out of the furs, his face redder than the beets on the table. He was starting to wish he'd never come. "Really."

"Take it," Hagrid said gruffly. "If Minerva's at the door, tell 'er you were wit' me."

The weight of the cloak was almost as much as the shame he felt for his behavior towards the man in the past. Draco wanted to apologize for that, but didn't know how without it feeling out of place, or even fake, as he'd begun to fear his apology to Granger might have seemed to her.

I'm giving them out like sweets, he thought almost bitterly. I wonder who's next.

Hagrid led him to the door. "I'll send the bird to yeh when she's healed."

"Thank you," Draco said awkwardly, and stepped out of the hut, the long cloak trailing behind him like something made for a king. His ears glowed with heat.

When the door closed he hurried up the sloping grounds, wondering if all that had happened was just a dream. Maybe he'd fallen asleep in that armchair by the cabinet back in the Room, and the birds would be fine and he would be late for lunch.

But the cloak hung heavy and hot around him like a physical manifestation of his shame, and his face turned even redder from it. The second he reached the castle he took it off and carried it on his arm, intending to just drop it off in the Room. McGonagall wasn't at the entrance, nor anyone else, for that matter, so he just rushed up to the Room, sweating from the effort and trying to breathe evenly.

I shouldn't have gone, he thought. I overreacted—I made a fool of myself. He's going to ask questions. What if he tells Potter?

Running all the way outside just for a bird—he flushed, his ears went hot. He could have gone to Madame Pomfrey instead. Did she even tend to animals? He remembered once Daphne Greengrass had gone to her when her cat had taken ill, but didn't remember what happened after.

He was badly out of shape. By the time he reached the familiar hallway and got past the door and to the cabinet his head felt alarmingly light, and black spots danced across his eyes more intensely than ever before, crawling across his vision to join abruptly in the middle. His lungs burned. His legs felt
weak, like bits of straw. The fur fell from his arms and he collapsed, the birds chattering in alarm for the second time that day.
By the following week there was still no good news on Katie's condition. A group of Katie's closest friends had been authorized for a visit to see her in hospital, and Draco had considered going before realizing how strangely everyone would take that. The guilt still clawed at him whenever he heard her name mentioned, which was often.

No further details were disclosed about her condition, other than the fact that she had woken after being unconscious for several days. After her friends came back they had little to report—they had only been able to see her for ten minutes to drop off some cards and gifts, but she had been almost too weak to talk. Draco wasn't satisfied. He was anxious to know if he had really hurt her, if there would be any lasting damage.

He'd woken in the Room of Requirement, dazed, his head hurting, mouth so dry he felt like he'd never tasted water in his life. At the thought a pitcher appeared before him on the floor and he'd rushed to it weakly, snatched his wand, and muttered a hoarse 'Aguamenti.' A stream of water from his wand filled the pitcher and he'd drank it down so fast he choked, water spurting from his mouth like some pathetic creature that had forgotten it couldn't swim. The image had him laughing to the point of rolling on the floor until a loud sound broke his stupor and he'd sat up, blinking rapidly, looking for the source, but heard nothing. A nearby stack of books was swaying slightly, as if disturbed, but upon investigation Draco was convinced he was still alone.

Hungry, he'd gone to the kitchens for food. He'd left the fur cloak from Hagrid rolled up beside the cabinet. He didn't know what else to do with it.

Thankfully, he'd been able to sleep normally that night. The rest of the week, however, he stayed mostly awake.

There was still the wine to make use of. Draco held his head between his hands. The early morning light gave a fuzzy glow to the cavernous Room of Requirement. The birds in their cage had begun to sing hours ago, and while it had been annoying at first he was now deaf to it, barely hearing it over the sound of his own thoughts.

Now he saw how foolish he'd been to not heed Pansy's instructions. She'd given him enough potions to last him until March, perhaps, as long as he took small doses, but he'd gorged himself on sleep and now didn't dare trouble her by asking for more.

Going to class was an absolute nightmare. Lack of sleep reduced his focus and ability to pay attention, which proved disastrous in some classes. Potions had used to be his favorite lesson but now Slughorn had made a joke of it with his bright, cheery room and obvious preference for Potter. Draco scoffed bitterly.

*Potter,* who'd suddenly become more adept at potions than he'd ever been since stepping foot into the school. Draco didn't believe it one bit when Slughorn had loudly assumed that Snape must have squashed his genius. He'd grit his teeth so hard they'd made a loud enough clacking sound to draw the attention of whoever sat nearby. It was more believable that Granger was helping him or even letting him pass off her work as his own, though he doubted she'd ever do that. Still, it rankled deep every time Slughorn practically glowed over Potter's cauldron as if he'd managed to recreate Merlin's face out of beetlewings and powdered thestral bone when all he'd done was manage to make an acceptable Calming Draught.
But none of that mattered now.

Draco dragged his hands over his face and let out a slow breath. The Mark was beginning to smolder on his arm; he pressed it against the cold wall for relief but it did nothing.

The Dark Lord had probably already heard of the attempt. Draco burned with shame. He'd expected to receive some sort of sign, a message, even, of what he thought, but so far all he'd gotten was silence.

Silence, and nothing else but the languid twitching of the snake's tail on his arm that Draco could only guess meant that the Dark Lord had been amused by his paltry effort.

*But he won't be amused forever,* he thought.

Time was running out. The snow would begin to thaw soon, and if he didn't hurry summer would be upon them all and he wouldn't take one step into his own home before his corpse would be cold.

*The wine, the wine, the wine.*

The poison was still hidden under the floorboard, waiting its turn. The cursed necklace had been taken as evidence by the Ministry, and its purchase had been traced back to Borgin and Burke's, where Borgin had given the identity of his alias thanks to Draco's precaution.

There was currently a search for a man with long brown hair and black eyes and a rotten tooth. A man who didn't exist. A man who had no name. Draco wished they could trade places.

This one had to work. Or at the very least it had to go farther than the first attempt to reach its actual target. He didn't know what he'd do if it didn't. He had no other ideas. The cabinet was his best chance, and if he couldn't get it to work…

*I don't want to. I can't.*

*You have to,* the voice hissed, stirring from its depths in the back of his mind. *He'll kill you before you can beg for mercy. You've seen him do it to others. He'll do it to you and laugh. He's waiting for you to fail again.*

There was a loud buzzing in his head. His eyes felt so tired…

*TAP TAP*

He jumped violently, wheeling around to find the source. His heart crashed repeatedly against his ribs.

*TAP TAP TAP*

He looked was an owl at the closest window, and it took him a good ten seconds to recognize it as Pansy's. It held a scrap of parchment in its beak and an accusing look in its great yellow eyes.

Draco raised his wand to open the window, watching as it shook the snow off itself and then settled on top of a stack of books above him. A cold burst of snow and wind tumbled into the room and he fought back a shiver. The owl unceremoniously dropped the note, which landed on his lap, and then busied itself in grooming its wing.

Draco didn't pick it up. He knew what it would say. There had been others, all from Pansy and he hadn't had the courage to open them, because he knew they were about the Katie Bell incident, and
he had begun to worry that she was starting to piece things together.

The owl hooted and glared at him from its perch above him, as if urging him to open it.

"I can't open it now," he said to it. The owl blinked and without taking its eyes off him, clicked its beak, as if replying.

"I don't want her to know," he explained, feeling absolutely stupid for talking to an owl. It was a good thing he wasn't in the dorm. How had it even known he was here? "If she finds out I was behind that, she won't be able to find a reason to stay friends, no matter how long we've known each other."

_In the end, she'll find out anyway._

"Shut up," he hissed.

The owl stared at him curiously, cocking its head at an angle.

"I wasn't talking to you," he said exasperatedly, and then realizing he had gotten himself into an argument with an owl, abruptly shut up. It stared back evenly. Suddenly he felt bad for not remembering its name. The birds had gone quiet beside him in the presence of the owl, who seemed not to care for them anyway, choosing to focus instead on him.

Draco felt a prickling at the back of his neck. "I'm still not going to read it," he told it.

He'd left the window open. The owl perched clicked its beak again, continuing its unfathomable stare. Draco felt more self-conscious than he should have.

"She's probably waiting for you," he said, nodding at the window. The owl looked at it and then back at him.

"What, you're waiting for a response?"

The own blinked slowly.

"I won't write you one," he said. "I can't talk to her. Not now."

Preferably not for a while, either, though he knew he couldn't avoid her forever. She was probably anxious and thinking he was mad at her.

_It should be the other way around._

The owl was looking at the window again.

Draco's stomach growled loudly for several seconds. He sighed and looked around for his wand. The owl didn't seem surprised by the noise. He might have imagined the look of disdain the owl gave him.

"Don't do that. You'd do it too if you were in my shoes."

The owl seemed to shrug by shaking out its wings, then rose into the air, looping around once before launching itself out the window, dipping out of sight, and then after a moment he saw her rise higher into the darkening sky and glide around before slipping out of sight.

"Perhaps not." He stood again, and closed the window after it.
Hermione looked up in time to see Malfoy enter the Great Hall for breakfast, sit down and begin to fill his plate. She watched him serve himself an omelet, ham and toast as she pretended to have trouble cutting her hotcakes.

It was good to see him eat. Whatever her feelings were toward him, it was nice to know he wasn't skipping meals again. His clothes were starting to fit him normally and his face was not so gaunt like it had been a month ago. She thought of how he had looked in the snow, on his knees before her, looking like a destitute man, lonely amidst church pews.

She frowned. What had to be going on in his mind to have changed him so much? At the same time she desperately wanted to know another part of herself shied from it, fearing she wouldn't like the answer. Harry was convinced that Malfoy was behind the attack in Hogsmeade, and had become obsessed with proving it beyond a doubt, despite Hermione's frequent advising to use caution, as none of them knew if he was really a Death Eater or not.

She sighed, bored. Harry and Ron were still asleep, Ginny was off with Michael Corner again, and Pansy had been feeling too ill to even come to class. Hermione wished she could have visited her but felt whereas Pansy had been welcome to mostly everyone in the Gryffindor Common Room, the same would most definitely not apply to herself with the Slytherins, so she sent her notes via owl and made a copy of all her notes from every class they ought to have shared that week, for which Pansy was grateful.

Ron had seen her transcribing her own notes and shook his head.

"You're going to scare her off, one day," he'd said. "Just wait."

She'd hexed him in the arse, and he'd wisely kept quiet for the rest of the day. Harry was too distracted in watching the Maurader's Map every second he wasn't doing anything else, likely waiting for Malfoy to reveal himself doing something that could finally prove his suspicions.

She glanced at Malfoy again, who was lost in thought as well, his face like a mask, his eyes set on the front of the hall, where Professor Trewlawney had just knocked over a pitcher of pumpkin juice and had burst into tears.

A bad omen, perhaps, she thought, rolling her eyes. She tore a strip of bacon in half and popped one into her mouth.

What if Malfoy was behind the attack? Hermione shivered.

Why? What could he gain from it? Why Katie? What had she ever done to him? Had he cracked?

If he was really a Death Eater he might be acting on orders. But what could those orders be? With the way he'd been acting lately, could she believe it?

Hermione glanced at the Slytherin table where Malfoy had been sitting, but he had gone. She couldn't help but wonder where, and if perhaps she could still catch him.

Just to see what he's up to.

If she let another moment pass, he would be hidden up again wherever he usually went, and not even Harry's map could help her.

Hermione left the Great Hall. When she reached the corridor it was empty. A cold draft rushed past her as she looked in every direction quickly. There were voices coming from up the stairs. She recognized them at once, and followed them to the base of the staircase, peeking up carefully,
clinging to the banister with sweaty hands.

There they were, higher up, oblivious to her eavesdropping. She could hear their voices, distant and beyond comprehension.

*I need to get higher. I can't hear anything.*

They would notice her, though. Rarely anything got past Snape, and Malfoy would definitely not be pleased to see her after their last meeting.

But they were arguing!

*I really need to hear this.*

She hesitated, and drew out her wand.

When she was sure the Disillusionment charm had worked she began to creep up the stairs, softly enough that her shoes wouldn't make a sound against the marble, even considering taking them off, but the argument above was coming to an end, and so she hurried up, keeping as close as she could to the banister and crouching low.

Their voices had lowered. She inched closer, her eyes trained on the back of Snape's head, at Malfoy's scowling, impatient face.

"Your father insists you answer his letters," Snape was saying. "He is anxious to hear from you, and I grow weary of having to remind you to keep up with your post."

She heard Malfoy scoff. "He can wait a little longer."

"Take care, Draco," Snape said stiffly. "With strange occurrences like what happened to that girl, your parents will only grow more afraid for your well-being, and it would not to do ignore their concern when they only want to help you."

There was a long silence. Hermione waited, her body aching for a good stretch.

"Surely they raised you better," Snape continued, his voice low and full of disdain. "If you are angry with them, have the decency to tell them yourself rather than hide and keep silent like a petulant little boy."

Hermione started. She had always assumed Malfoy was Snape's favorite. It was a surprise to hear him speak to Malfoy like he was anyone else.

"They don't want to help me," Malfoy said, and it was shocking to hear the hate in his voice directed at his own parents. "They only want to make sure I'm not going to embarrass them."

Hermione frowned.

"You'd let them hang in the face of danger out of spite? Your own parents..."

Malfoy was about to fire back a reply—his face was furious, suddenly strained, like he was about to cry—Hermione leaned in, but before he'd even said one word there was noise from below, from the rest of the world. People were exiting the great hall. Dinner was over.

Damn.

She turned back, her heart still pounding. Malfoy had composed himself again, but the frown had not
"Reassess your anger, Draco," Snape said softly. "Save your resentment for a better time, when you will not harm someone."

Draco held his stare for a moment, and then stalked away. Snape turned and did the same quickly, his expression inscrutable. He went directly towards Hermione, who shrank back, almost falling backwards in her haste to get out of his way. He advanced, oblivious to her presence, until she had flattened herself into the corner of the landing, holding her breath as Snape passed by, inches away.

As he went down the steps she could still hear Malfoy walking away, and without waiting to think whether it was a good idea, went back up the steps and went in the direction he had gone, not realizing in her hurry that her heel clipped the floor louder than she wanted, and that Snape, still descending, heard it, and paused.

Malfoy came into sight just as she turned the corner, still advancing through the long corridor. Hermione bit her lip and followed before she could talk herself out of doing it.

The problem was that Malfoy walked too quickly and she had to half-run to keep up. More than once she feared he could hear her—he would look around, over his shoulder, but only for the briefest second, and each time she froze, sweating, hoping that she hadn't given herself away.

They turned another corridor, her creeping along behind him, wondering why he was heading to the Room of Requirement.

_Is this where he's been spending so much time? What could he possibly be doing in there?_

They came to the short corridor with the dead end and the alcoves. He stopped at the door, head bent pensively. She watched from around the corner of an alcove as the door appeared and he opened it.

Moving on impulse, because her extreme curiosity had got control of her, she rushed forward, preparing to slip in after him.

He began to enter the room, the door wide open, but closing rapidly behind him. Hermione held her breath and wedged herself past the gap fluidly so that the door didn't get caught on her.

Hands seized her and shoved her to the wall before she could even get a proper look at the room. A gasp tore itself from her throat despite her effort to keep it in—his arm barred across her throat—instantly, the memory of the last time he had done this came slamming back and she reached for her wand.

"He knew. He knew I was following."

His eyes were chips of ice, nearly colorless but for the pupil in their center and she could see them waver as he watched her avidly—though she was still invisible she knew that as she struggled he could detect her movement. She grabbed her wand and brought it to aim at him—he caught the movement and caught her arm just like he would catch a Snitch, like he could see it clearly though she couldn't see herself.

"Expelliarmus."

_No!_

Her wand slipped free from her hand and clattered far off behind him, still invisible. Hermione tried to speak, and couldn't. His arm pressed painfully into her neck—she reached up to try and push it
away frantically.

His eyes were nothing but cold fury, and Hermione could remember exactly the last time he had
looked at her that way. Her words died on her tongue.

"You're a shit sneak, Potter," he said, his lip curling.

_Potter?_

She opened her mouth to clarify. He let her go swiftly, aimed his wand at her.

"Petrificus Totalis."

An invisible wave of ice water washed over her. Hermione tried to shield herself, but the spell caught
her anyway.

_Oh Gods. Oh Gods. No._

What would he do? She couldn't even speak to call out that she wasn't Harry, to undo the freezing
charm, to please not look at her like he wanted to kill her again, because it made horror clog her
throat so badly she couldn't breathe, and if it weren't for the spell she'd be shaking uncontrollably.

Malfoy stepped away, raised his wand again. His face was cold, emotionless. Hermione wanted to
shut her eyes but couldn't.

"Revelio."

_Oh Gods._ He was going to be furious. He was going to kill her this time, and she was frozen against
the wall, and she would die that way.

Hermione felt a tingling in her limbs as they came back into view, but her fear demanded all her
attention.

Revealed fully before him, she was forced to watch as his demeanor changed entirely.

Malfoy's mouth went slack, his eyes went round. The fury fled his eyes at once. His wand arm
faltered.

"Granger."

She stared at him, her expression of terror unable to change, her skin ice cold, the memory of her
former victory over him long gone. Hermione's lungs burned, screaming for air. She felt her face turn
red from it. Merlin have mercy, she was going to pass out in front of him.

"Fi-finite Incantatem," Malfoy said, his eyes still glued onto hers.

At once Hermione collapsed to the floor and sucked in a huge, trembling breath. Her hands shook so
badly she let them lie uselessly on the floor at her sides, her chest filling with air again and again so
quickly her head felt light.

"Fuck."

Suddenly he was kneeling before her and she flinched, seeing his hands reach for her.

"Don't—_don't you touch me,"_ she wheezed between breaths. "Don't you—" she coughed, choking
on her own breath.
"Are you okay?"

He was bent towards her, his eyes worried.

Hermione stared at him, frowning in confusion, her lips still open, taking in breath more slowly.

"W-what?"

"Goddamnit, Granger, are you okay."

Her lips faltered on her first attempt to answer. She tried again, glaring at him. "I'm fine." Her hands scrambled to push off the floor, to scoot away from him, because there was no way that he could have just gone from looking like he was about to cut her down in cold blood to looking at her like she were an owl that had broken its wing in a matter of seconds without it being a ruse of some kind.

Still kneeling, he settled his hands on his knees, his wand on the floor beside him. He ran a hand through his hair, and in the shifting of lighting on his as he did so she was struck by the hollows around his eyes growing more prominent, like the gaping sockets of a skull. His skin seemed so dull in the daylight.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice unaccustomed to the sentiment. "I-I thought you were Potter. If I'd known, I would—I wouldn't have…"

Hermione's eyes wouldn't leave him. He pinked, but there was no denying the genuine concern in his face. He looked to her neck and his arm twitched. "I shouldn't have done that…what you said last time—you're alright?"

She nodded, her eyes still wide and disbelieving. He relaxed a little, and the worry shifted to irritation.

"Why were you following me?"

At this she returned to herself—she blinked, and trance broken, her eyes refocused and she blushed.

"I-I don't know."

He scoffed. "So you saw me walking and decided to just tag along, is that it?"

Yes, actually. Or nearly enough.

"I was checking on you, to see if you were still ill."

The lie came so quickly she had uttered it without even thinking, but it was out now and she couldn't take it back.

He looked surprised, but doubtful.

"And why would you care if I were ill?"

Damn.

"It would be a dreadful shock for any student to come across your corpse in the corridor."

His lips quirked. "Worse things have happened in this school."
Not knowing how to reply, Hermione looked at him suspiciously.

He was still kneeling in front of her, unarmed. He had asked if she was ok after attacking her. He had apologized, again. She resisted the urge to pinch herself.

He seemed to realize this as well, and turned away, picking up his wand. Hermione's breath caught, but he didn't point it at her.

"Accio," he said, and Hermione's eyes doubled in size as he collected her wand and turned, handing it back to her.

She took it quickly before he could snatch his arm away, thinking he meant it as a joke. Clutching it in both hands, she stood and inched away from him, alarm creeping into her eyes.

"Get back," she said suddenly, pointing her wand at him.

Alarmed, he stood and complied.

"What is it, Granger?"

"In First year, how did we meet?"

Draco squinted. "What?"

"Tell me. How did we meet?"

He looked incredulous. "What for?"

Hermione stepped closer threateningly and he held up his hands. "You were sitting alone. I came in and saw you had a map of the first three floors of the school you'd drawn yourself."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "And?"

Uncomfortable, Malfoy sighed. "We talked. You showed me the spells you'd been practicing. I told you about the four Houses but you already knew them."

He trailed off there, and her arm, which was beginning to fall back to her side slowly, crept back up.

"Is that it?"

He swallowed hard. "No. You told me you were Muggleborn."

Her arm fell. "I did."

"And I reacted...poorly."

"You spat at me."

His eyes closed in shame. "I did."

"You called me names and left."

"I was a bastard."

"Yes."

Draco looked pained. "Why bring this up? What does that memory have to do with this? Besides the
obvious."

She pressed a hand to her forehead, suddenly looking exhausted. "You're acting so different...I thought perhaps you were someone else under Polyjuice, I had to make sure."

Draco couldn't help but laugh. "That's the funniest thing I've ever heard."

She glared at him. "Then what happened to you over the summer that you're suddenly the opposite of everything I've ever known you to be?"

He blanched, and the Mark on his arm crawled, as if it had turned into a mass of ants.

*Don't think about it. Push it away.*

"You should go," he said, his voice colder than before.

"No. I need to know, Malfoy." She let out an exasperated breath. "I don't think you realize how confusing it is to see you and expect one thing, and get another."

He looked up, his eyes troubled. "You thought I was going to—"

She winced through her glare. "Yes."

"It wasn't meant for you," he said, his voice thawing out. "If I'd known from the beginning it was you I'd never have done it. I saw your reaction when you made me last time—I...Potter's been following me everywhere—I thought you were him, and I wanted to tell him I've had enough."

"Now you know how it feels," she said, but her voice had no anger in it. She held her arms at the elbows, her wand tight in one fist.

"I'm sorry I frightened you."

Her eyes flicked up to his, startlingly angry. "Will you stop apologizing?"

Malfoy looked at her in shock. "Why? You just told me I made you think I was going to...choke you again."

"I know," she said, and suddenly her face crumpled. Damn him, now she was going to cry and she couldn't control it. She thought of his hands around her neck, and now, the contrite, genuine expression in his eyes. What was she supposed to think now? Did she even want to forgive him? How she regretted having followed him. She should just have kept her nosy arse in her seat and spared herself this confusion.

*You were right, Pansy,* she thought, *and even after he confirmed it last time I doubted it, and even when he looks at me like this I don't believe it.*

The first of the tears fell and she wiped at it, turning her head angrily.

"Granger..." He saw the tears in her eyes and looked extremely uncomfortable, but took a half step forward. She stepped away in response and he stopped.

"I don't know how to feel," she said suddenly, in a burst of honesty and resentment, that he was unwittingly forcing her to think very seriously about forgiving him when she had planned on not doing so before. "It feels like a trick of some sort, that you're trying to fool me into believing you. Every time you apologize it feels fake to me, somehow."
He looked away. "Granger…"

"You may be sorry," she said shakily, "but I don't know that I believe it. And I don't know if I ever can."

His expression was almost unreadable, but Hermione detected something in his eyes—pain?

"I understand completely," he said softly. "I've been horrible to you for years. That cannot be easy to put aside."

She looked away. Silence stretched the space between them.

"I shouldn't have followed you," she said suddenly. "This was my fault. I-I'm sorry."

Hermione turned, reaching for the door.

Malfoy stepped forward. "Granger—"

The door closed behind her.
Doubt is Death

Another unopened letter from his father lay on his bed, having been delivered only moments ago. Draco came out from the bathroom, freshly showered and changed, his hair still wet and dripping. The dorm was empty. He stared at the letter on his bed as he dried his hair, running a hand through it to shove most of it to one side.

The letter lay patiently there, expectant, reprimanding. Draco already knew what it would say. He could hear his father's sharp voice in his head quite clearly.

Shoving it away, Draco went to pull out a fresh set of robes from his trunk and shrugged them on. He collected his wand from his pillow and picked up the letter, staring down at it blankly.

This time it had been shrunken and hidden inside a chocolate piece from a box of them that his mother had sent. It had been some time since his mother had sent him any sweets, so he had known at once the reason for it, and had inspected each one until he'd found the miniscule letter within a dollop of caramel in one of the candies, protected by an Impervius charm.

What would his father have to say now? He was impatient, that much was obvious. Snape's increasingly frequent pressuring to answer and to hurry his mission were annoying enough, but the angry letters only made him angry rather than eager to continue. Draco had had enough chastisement. It was hard enough to focus as things were and to be spoken to like he was still a child was unbearable.

He pressed his arm against his side, feeling suddenly as if it had heated up. 

_You don't get to tell me what to do anymore_, he thought, glaring at the letter. _I listened to you for too long and look where it led me._

As passed the center of the room he slipped the letter into the warming stove, waited for it to catch fire, and left.

Realizing the truth was never easy. Over the course of the past year up 'til now it had come up gradually, piece by piece, and lately he was overwhelmed by it. He didn't know what to do. He'd woken suddenly that morning, shocked that he'd fallen asleep after all, but a splitting headache had prevented him from feeling too happy about it, and all the thoughts from the night before came flooding back. The memories he'd revisited, the sense of anger and loss, and surprisingly, betrayal.

_It was all a lie._

Everything he'd been taught. Everything he'd ever believed in.

When he'd seen Granger's blood during her detention, it wasn't at all how he pictured a Muggleborn's blood would look like: black or brown, of a thicker consistency. It was red, it was just like his, and it had shaken him to his core.

Then came her break down in Umbridge's office after he had threatened her again.

"_What does it say about you that you try to make me feel less than what I am?_"

She was right. And he had stumbled, and she had won over him because with just words she had managed to make him doubt himself. And that had been the start of everything.
I've never been better than her, not even with my supposed 'Pureblood'.

How hadn't he realized it then, when her blood had been flowing over that parchment? He'd felt a sense of confusion, to be sure, but hadn't placed it until after she'd left the room, and that small puddle of red lay on the floor.

Did anyone else know the truth? Or did they not care? Or was there some other reason to explain it all away?

Draco had never felt so lost.

I believed all of it, for so long.

It stung to think about. He'd been wrong all his life, stuffed up on ideals and prejudices that set him higher than others. No wonder most people outside his own House couldn't stand him. They'd all known he was full of shit, too. Draco's ears burned red. To think that he had been called out numerous times for it and hadn't listened.

The inclusiveness. The secretive and highly illegal nature of their dealings. The murderers. The corruption. The beliefs shoved down his throat, starting from birth. The demand for obedience and silence.

How had he never thought it strange that as a child he was allowed to meet only with other Pureblood children? That the hunts all their fathers went on were not for animals, but Muggles? How had he never realized how wrong it was, the things he had been exposed to at such a young age?

It was normal for me. Why would I question it when it was the only thing I knew?

He'd been asked to kill and torture as his first act of obedience for the Dark Lord, and he'd done it without thinking twice.

That isn't normal, a calm voice said.

Draco began to walk faster down the corridor, ignoring the other students nearby who gave him funny glances.

Would he go to the Room to continue working on the cabinet?

He thought of the letter again. Abruptly, he turned and went the other way.

Hagrid had delivered the bird the day before, coming across him as he'd been leaving the library, handing him back the creature with a warmer smile than he deserved. When Draco had asked him if he wanted his cloak back he had insisted for him to keep it, and Draco relented awkwardly, not knowing what he could do with it other than keep it inside the Room of Requirement.

The bird was happily back in her cage with her other bird companions, wing neatly mended, but Draco's guilt remained. He had hardly touched the cabinet since the accident, fearing that he would never fix it to his needs.

The snow would begin to thaw soon and he was running out of time. It was time to act again.

A shiver of dread crawled up his spine. Bile burned at his throat.

Suddenly he regretted not having brought his broom along that year. Flying might clear his mind better than walking.
The wine. What would he do with it?

He couldn't give it directly to the Headmaster without raising suspicion or having fingers pointing back at him if something went wrong. It would be nigh impossible to slip some into his goblet. More and more the Headmaster's absence was noted at mealtimes. What was he doing? And why was Potter usually missing, too?

His best bet was to pass it along to someone, usually with a little suggestion to give it to Dumbledore.

It wouldn't work. It was clear as day that it wouldn't.

*The best it can do is buy me time.*

Draco made his way up to the Astronomy Tower, his thoughts agitated.

*What do I do?*

What if he hurt someone else? And what if they weren't as lucky as Katie Bell?

The latest news was that she was finally able to stand and walk, but was still not released from hospital due to nerve damage that had come from her touching the necklace.

And it was all his fault.

He thought of the letter again, gritting his teeth.

It probably would have been wiser not to burn it, as he knew his father would not take his silence kindly.

*Good.* Draco hoped he felt just as scared as he did.

He couldn't help his resentment. It had been winding itself around him tighter and tighter and he felt trapped with no way of releasing some of that frustration.

It was a little unfair of him to blame his parents entirely for his situation, as he'd been the one who'd willingly taken the Mark, but it was still harrowing that he had been raised to believe in something that was so…wrong.

*And I ate it all up. I never questioned anything until now, and it's too late.*

He had been too young to have been filled with so much hate. Too young to be molded into something like a weapon, nothing more than another mindless puppet to take orders and add another number to their side.

*That's all I am to them.*

And he was dispensable. He had to be, else the Dark Lord would not have given him an impossible task.

Draco reached the top of the tower and stood behind the railing, the wind whipping at his damp hair, ice blowing into his eyes.

They had made him feel like he was special. They had made him feel like he was important. Would they have embarrassed him like they had done his father, stripping him of all power, all for one mistake? Would they have taken the blinders off before executing him?
Draco wiped at his eyes. How had he not noticed it before? Any of it?

The grounds below were a sea of white and brown from the dormant trees. Hagrid's hut was a neat little circle to the far left. Draco could see the boarhound pacing in the garden.

What might have happened if his eyes had never been opened? Would he still be satisfied? Would the Dark Lord still have punished his family for his father's capture?

How differently would he have turned out? How many less nightmares?

Granger would never have looked his way again. He never would have had the chance to apologize, and he was glad he had, though she still didn't believe him.

It didn't matter. He couldn't force her to believe him. The only thing that mattered was that he showed her he meant it.

He thought of her terrified eyes, her frozen body against the wall, hands half raised to protect herself as he pointed his wand at her, ready to curse.

The shock and hurt that had filled him then had been so strong, he'd almost forgotten how to speak. For that brief instant his stomach had dropped to his feet to think that after all this he had failed again, and that she would never see him as anything other than a threat. A monster.

*But you are one,* said the insidious voice softly. *You didn't attack her. What a mercy. Did you congratulate yourself for it? Is that something to be proud of? How does that compare to the life you've already taken?*

Draco shut his eyes tightly.

*Stop.*

*You're still in love with her.*

Draco's heart skipped a beat. *I am not in love.*

*Then why do you care so much what she thinks of you?*

He didn't have an answer to that, and the voice went quiet, almost gloating in the back of his mind.

He tried again. *I am not in love with her.*

*Then why didn't you curse her? She was spying on you and you know it. Do you really think she cared that you were ill? Love or not, you care too much for someone so insignificant. She will be your ruin.*

He pictured her frightened stare again, the way she'd cried.

'*I don't know how to feel,'* she'd said. *'It feels like a trick of some sort, like you're trying to fool me into believing you.'*

Draco wished it was all a trick. He would have preferred being his old self and having no trouble with morality and setting right old wrongs than his current state, battling a sudden existential crisis he'd never seen coming.

*But then she wouldn't trust you,* a gentler voice spoke up.
She doesn't trust me now.

She does, enough to tell you she feels lost, too. She didn't have to tell you that.

Draco shook his head. It's not the same.

Is it?

The bell rang for lunch. Draco couldn't bring himself to go back down all that way. He would have to see her face, and how would she look at him now?

"Why are you up here?"

Draco jumped, turning to find Pansy at the entrance to the tower. Her face was tightly drawn.

"Nothing."

"How are you?" she demanded, her arms crossed.

He was tired of being asked that. "How do I look?"

"Like shit."

"You have your answer." He turned away again.

"I brought you food." Her voice was flat.

"I don't want it."

"I don't care." She tossed the parcel at his feet. "Take it. Eat it or don't."

Draco stared at her. "What's the matter with you?"

She laughed. "Funny you ask me that, because I came to say the same to you."

"How did you even know I was here?"

"Never mind that," she said impatiently. "You're ignoring me again and I want to know why."

Draco rubbed a hand over his face. "I'm too busy for socializing, Pansy. Forgive me if I hurt your feelings."

"You call this busy?" she looked positively scornful: arms crossed, brows furrowed so deep a wrinkle appeared between them. "Don't treat me like a fool, Draco. You know me better than that."

Draco sighed angrily. "Pansy, I just want some peace for once."

"I think you've had too much of it by the look on your face," she said stiffly. "Look at you—you look like you've sat through hours of Binn's lessons. Whatever's on your mind, get rid of it."

Draco laughed, the sound as brittle as he felt. "If it were that easy, I'd have done it ages ago, don't you think?"

Here her face softened. She stepped forward.

"What's wrong?"
"Nothing, I told you."

"Don't lie to me." Her glare was ferocious. "You've been wallowing too much this year."

"Everyone's allowed a good wallow now and then."

"Yes, but not every day," she snapped. "You realize I want to help you, don't you? Why do you think I'm here when I know it's annoying for you?"

A wind so strong blew through them, threatening to steal Pansy's scarf. They both staggered under its strength, covering their faces with their hands until it died down. They lowered their hands to reveal pale, half-frozen faces, hair wet and stiff with ice, slightly runny noses.

She smiled a little, knowing how silly they must look. Draco's face remained grave.

"You can't help me, Pansy."

She touched his arm. "Yes, I can. I don't care if it gets me in trouble."

"Or killed?"

She froze, her eyes suddenly full of dread.

"What's going on?"

"I don't want you to get tangled in this," he said softly, his eyes anguished. "I can't do anything, but you still can. Don't take the Mark. Don't try to help me."

He looked so cold and desperately unreachable that she felt her heart constrict painfully. Her face crumpled, her eyes grew wet.

"Don't push me away, Draco."

"I'm not."

It was hard to speak through the fear clogging her throat. "Then why do I feel like I'm at risk of losing you again? Only this time it feels worse."

He faltered, guilt compelling the truth from his tongue. "I have to."

Her hands grabbed onto his sleeves. "Why?"

Draco pulled her closer and embraced her, and Pansy leaned into it gratefully, her tears absorbing into the fabric of his robes. He was shaking badly. He whispered his answer, giving in to the paranoia that somehow, the Dark Lord knew what was happening, or that the Mark could feel his fear and helplessness.

"He'll know if I get help. I have to do this alone."

Pansy's blood turned to frost. She let him go abruptly. Her face had gone pale.

"Draco," she whispered, her voice wavering, "has He threatened you?"

He shook harder, and nodded.

Pansy shuddered, her eyes squeezing shut. A new wave of tears washed over her cheeks. She felt
moisture on her scalp and saw it fall from his eyes and land onto her robe.

"What will we do?"

The wind whipped at them. Draco wouldn't let her go.

"He's going to kill my parents if I don't do what he wants," he said, his voice tinged with panic.

"Oh, Gods." She couldn't feel her hands anymore or most of her body but she was distinctly aware of Draco's tears falling onto her head. "What do you have to do?"

He didn't reply, and Pansy had to suppose that was a blessing as well as a curse, because she was sure she already knew, and she was just waiting for confirmation, though she wasn't sure she wanted to hear it despite her asking.

"Draco, I'm scared for you."

"I'm going to die, Pansy."

She pulled away, her hands still on his arms, to look at his face. He looked utterly defeated, scared, like a boy who had lost his way in a darkened street. There were fine lines around his eyes where there shouldn't have been, probably from sleeplessness and exhaustion. His lips were grimacing, as if holding back screams. Pansy's heart broke, and in the same instant a deep hatred formed within her, aching and terrible, aimed at the person whose Mark her best friend bore.

"No, you won't."

His eyes were reddened, wild. "I can't do this."

"You need to tell someone," she said.

He pulled away sharply. "No. My family will die if I do anything other than what I'm told."

"Someone must be able to help you," she said, and by the tone of her voice he knew exactly who she was about to suggest.

"Don't say it," he said angrily. "Don't you dare suggest they'll actually want to help me. They'll lock me in prison and He will murder my family, and it'll be only a matter of time before he'd come for me, too. They'd just as much want to see me dead."

Pansy said nothing, not knowing what else to do. She wiped at her tears with her scarf.

Draco stared at her, guilt on the edges of his mouth but in his eyes there was a cold, hard resolution.

"Don't tell anyone."

"I won't."

"Not even them."

"I won't, Draco. I swear it."

He hesitated, and nodded. His cheeks were damp and half-frozen. He nodded, and left, leaving Pansy in the cold, empty tower.
The day was warmer than normal—not warm enough to go outside without a coat, however. Hermione took off her scarf and stuffed it inside her bag as she headed towards the exit that led to the courtyard.

The second of the Apparition lessons had ended an hour ago, and everyone was leaving the room slowly, talking amongst themselves in a rather subdued manner, all of them sporting headaches. The lessons were not long but the act of learning to Apparate was more taxing than they had thought, but their excitement was greater than their fatigue and they all boasted of how they were sure they had almost got the knack of it, and that the next lesson would yield success.

Wanting to take advantage of the brief weather change, Harry and Ron had left quickly to get their Quidditch gear and find Ginny to go for some flying during their free period. They had all agreed to meet by one of the Gryffindor stands.

Hermione had been delayed for some minutes by speaking with the instructor of the course to see if he could recommend any books or tips on how to better learn how to Apparate. He hadn't been of much help, but Hermione was resolved to look it up on her own at the library later on in the week, as she was afraid of injuring herself, or worse, failing the lessons.

Dean Thomas had already splinched himself in the leg, to everyone's horror. They had all heard him shout and turned around to see him fall backward onto the floor outside of his testing hoop, his right foot missing.

He wasn't the only one. Others had missing fingers, and in one case, a pinky toe, which had all been set back to rights quickly, but not fast enough for the panic and fear to get the better of many of the students. Dean Thomas had been rushed to the Hospital Wing but everyone was reassured by the reedy-voiced instructor that he would be alright.

Malfoy had been in attendance, and had stationed himself in the farthest corner of the practice room with Pansy beside him. Hermione had sensed lately that Pansy had distanced herself from them, and was confused as to why. They still sat together when Gryffindor and Slytherin had shared classes, but Pansy for some days now had seemed uncharacteristically silent and tense. Hermione had asked her what was wrong but Pansy had insisted she was fine, which she didn't believe for one moment. Even Ron had noticed, and had strived to make her laugh more often, or to cheer her up by offering to play chess with her again, but Pansy only declined and claimed she was just worrying about the upcoming exams, though that wasn't for months to come, which only added to Hermione's concern. Even now, Hermione had looked in her direction once they were dismissed to approach her but found her already gone.

Hermione wasn't quite sure what to think, but decided it was best not to go after her, Ron's warning about chasing her away having affected her more than she wanted to admit.

*She might be afraid of learning how to Apparate.*

Hermione could certainly sympathize with that. Nearly everyone was, especially after the Dean Thomas incident.

Hermione hadn't managed much in that timeframe, aside from feeling a rather unpleasant feeling along her limbs, like they were independently aware of the dangers ahead of them. She was put off a little by this, having had the goal to be the first one to successfully Apparate, but was consoled by the
fact that no one else had come close to achieving it either. Harry had looked like he could have managed it, but confessed afterwards that he’d felt dizzy all through the lesson, and Ron had spun himself on his toes in a circle on the first try with his eyes closed, and when he’d opened them and saw her in front of him, had whooped and thought he’d done it, only to blush and laugh when she informed him no such thing had happened.

As she came up to the exit Hermione happened to look into an adjoining corridor and caught a glimpse of Ron there, crouched on the floor beside someone who she immediately assumed to be Harry.

She stepped forward quickly, afraid something bad had happened.

"Ron?"

It was Lavender Brown, not Harry. She was sitting hunched over on the floor, her hands covering her face, sobbing silently, her shoulders heaving. Ron had his hand on her shoulder, and looked quite pale. Hermione rushed over.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Lavender, are you alright?"

Lavender shook her head without looking up. Perplexed, Hermione looked to Ron for an explanation. He shook his head. Hermione pulled a handkerchief from within her bag, knelt beside Lavender, and offered it to her. Finally uncovering her face, Lavender took it, and began to wipe at her reddened, puffy face.

"My brother was kidnapped this morning," she said shakily, her breathing uneven. "They found You-Know-Who's mark carved into his door, and his house was torn apart and no one knows if he's alive…” her voice was cut off by a sob and she bent over again.

Hermione's hands rose up to her mouth. "I'm so sorry, Lavender."

"Hang on," Ron said. "I thought they only cast the Dark Mark when someone's been killed. When they leave it like that, like a carving, I'm sure it means they've kidnapped someone."

Lavender looked at him, a mix of hope and horror in her eyes.

"Is it true?" She looked from him to Hermione wildly, seeking confirmation.

Hermione hesitated. "I've never heard of that before," she admitted. "Ron, how do you know that?"

"My dad heard it from some of his Auror friends," he said, and looked at Lavender again. "I'm sure your brother's alive."

She shook her head, covering her mouth with Hermione's handkerchief, wrinkles forming on her forehead. "I don't know what's better, him being dead or alive with them." She began to cry again, falling back to lean against Ron. He and Hermione looked at each other hopelessly.

"Come on," he said to Lavender softly, "I'll take you to the Hospital Wing."

"There's nothing wrong with me," she protested, but standing up anyway with his help.

"A calming draught will help for when you try to sleep," Hermione told her.

She watched them walk away slowly. Ron looked back briefly to signal that she go on ahead to the Quidditch pitch. After a moment, Hermione did just that.
Poor Lavender. Being an only child, Hermione couldn't imagine what it must be like to hear one day that a sibling had vanished. Lavender spoke of her brother often, always proud of his job as an apprentice for Ollivander and the times she'd gone to visit him, how he'd been there to help her pick her wand when she turned eleven.

She really hoped that what Ron had said was true, and there was a chance he was alive, though like Lavender, she didn't know if that would amount to a good or bad thing in the future, as there was no telling what he might be going through if he was really a captive of Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

_But why him?_

This was the first kidnapping she was intimately aware of. There had been others, certainly, all members of prominent families or people who worked in unidentified jobs at the Ministry. There had been rumors that the owner of the _Daily Prophet_ was missing as well, as far as four months back, but no body had ever been found and there was absolutely no other information to go off of other than word of mouth. _The Prophet_ seemed not to have changed much according to Harry and Ron, who read it every morning, aside from the failure to report the kidnappings of members of the families of their schoolmates, who learned only by panicked, grieving letters written by their families—whoever was left.

But every now and then Harry and Ron would nudge her during breakfast and point to a tiny, almost insignificant article that would announce the new appointment of an important position within the Ministry to someone new. Normally this wouldn't have been cause for alarm had the position not been handed off to a known Death Eater.

Umbridge had been the first, given the new and terrifying position of Head of Muggleborn Detainment and Inquiry. Shortly after came Antonin Dolohov, who was granted Head of Secret Intelligence for Welfare of Wizard-folk. Then Rudolphus Lestrange was given charge of Surveillance of Travelling Networks. Alecto Carrow was given charge over Dementors, and sightings of the foul creatures had increased around both Diagon and Knockturn Alleys, to everyone's alarm and discontent. They were being stationed everywhere, and no one knew why.

For each of these strange appointments there hadn't been a picture or even a quote from the Minister, which was standard practice. There hadn't been any reason why any of these people had been given these positions, nor exactly what each of them entailed, but they could only guess, and none of them liked what they came up with, the gist of it all being that Voldemort was launching operatives to spy on everyone and gather intelligence. What for, they could only guess, but it meant he was going to make a big move soon, and it was frightening.

During this time _The Quibbler_ had a resurgence as the most heavily subscribed-to paper in the school, as it was the only source that remained mostly unbiased and free of corruption, and it was the only place the students could reliably learn the details on the latest missing persons, the most recent deaths. It was independently run and published, as everyone remembered, and ran little risk of being cut down. By her suggestion her father, its main writer, had taken a page from the students' books and incorporated the use of secret passwords to reveal the actual paper.

To anyone who was not aware of it and happened to come across a copy, they might be delighted to learn of the latest findings on the existence of the Peruvian Smoke Swallower or some damning photographs of a Loch Ness serpent. The more informed reader had the option to tap their wand to the paper and say the latest password, and could read up on the latest murky happenings at the Ministry, or warnings to stay away from specific areas, as Fenrir Greyback had claimed his latest victim there, or how both neither Lucius or Narcissa Malfoy had been seen for months, leading to speculation that they might be dead.
When Hermione had read that article on the Malfoys she had been alarmed to find herself concerned for Malfoy. She had looked over to him from across the Great Hall and found him listlessly eating mashed potatoes by himself. He had to know. Surely if his parents were in danger he would not look so calm. He had turned away to sneeze, and she had been oddly reassured by this display of normalcy.

Speculation was only speculation, she had to remind herself. It wouldn't do to give into it without further proof to support the claims being made.

As she neared the Quidditch pitch she unbuttoned her coat, having sweated through her thick layers. The day was still cold, but not enough to need one's coat buttoned. Her breaths came out in little puffs as she walked across the snow and finally found Harry and Ginny together on their brooms by the Gryffindor stands, taking turns catching the Snitch that flew around them.

Harry was laughing; in Ginny's company he looked the most relaxed Hermione had seen him in months. Despite her troubled mind, Hermione smiled to see it. Since Sirius's death Harry had grown much quieter than normal, and though she and Ron had done what they could to help him heal, it seemed he was finally starting to move past his grief. Hermione was glad Ginny could help more than she or Ron could—she wondered if whatever lay between her two friends could grow into something more. It was clear as day that Harry liked her, but Ron was so far oblivious to Harry's crush on his sister, and she wondered what his reaction to learning about it would be.

When they saw her face they stopped immediately, dismounting their brooms to stride up to Hermione.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked.

"Lavender's brother has been kidnapped," Hermione said. "Ron found her crying in the corridor and took her to the Infirmary."

Harry's expression turned grim.

"Merlin, another one," Ginny said, the Snitch buzzing softly between her hands, its wings beating frantically.

"That's the fourth disappearance this week," Harry said. "And the Prophet still won't say a word."

"I thought we already gave up on that," Ginny said, loosening the straps on her arm guards. "The Prophet is dead. They've censored it enough to run it to the ground."

Hermione sighed. "I got a letter from Viktor today. It's been reviewed and words have been blacked out all over irreversibly. They've begun looking at our mail again."

"Oh, they've been doing that for at least a month now," Ginny said. "I got a letter from dad two weeks ago, he just wanted to tell me a funny story from work that involved a rubber duck and they took all of it out except for the end." She scowled. "Now I'll have to wait until the end of term to find out what happened to Mrs. Wilkins from the Magical Law Department and that cursed duck that led her to hospital with three chickens stuck to her arm."

Hermione forced down a laugh.

Harry shook his head. "They've got to know the DA isn't active anymore. I don't know what they're looking for."

Hermione dropped herself into the seat between them. She pulled off her glove to rub at the scars
over the back of her hand. "I thought this all ended with Umbridge."

"Apparently not," Ginny said.

Harry winced and rubbed at his scar. "I wouldn't be surprised if they tried planting her here again."

Ginny scoffed. "Oh, Merlin, no. I'd sooner fling myself off the Astronomy Tower than live through that again."

"I doubt they would," Hermione said. "She's sitting cozy at the Ministry with her self-made occupation, rounding up Muggleborns and giving them her damned tea. She's got more power there now than she ever did here, even as Headmistress."

Ron came into view suddenly and without preamble sat down beside Hermione, putting his arm around her shoulders. Hermione shifted to give him more room.

"I take it we've abandoned the Quidditch playing."

"How is Lavender?" Hermione asked.

"Still crying. I think McGonagall's going to let her go home for the weekend to be with her family."

Ginny swung at the air with her broom like it was a beater's bat, frowning. "If that happens, she won't be coming back to Hogwarts."

"You think she'll go missing too?" Harry asked, his eyebrows rising.

"Susan Bones was the first one to have a relative go missing," she said, letting the Snitch free at last. "Remember? And then Ernie Macmillan. They were both allowed to go home for a few days, and Susan didn't come back. McGonagall said her parents thought it was safer that way. I think they said they would go to the United States for a while. Dad said they'd gotten loads of threats before that, and thinks they went to hide. Then last month Henrietta's dad got sacked from his job at the Ministry and her mum got detained by Umbridge. I heard they took her wand there and have barred her from getting a new one. She went home over Christmas break and didn't come back in January. I heard Flitwick talking about it to Hagrid—her house is empty, and no one knows where they are."

Hermione wrapped her coat closer around herself. Why had she thought it was warm outside? She had begun to shake without even realizing it. Ron scooted closer to her, and grateful, she leaned against him heavily, letting her head fall against his chest. His hand came up to her shoulder.

"I hope they're okay," she said.

"Even Henrietta?" Ron asked, sounding surprised. "She did betray us, after all."

"That doesn't mean she deserves that happening to her mum," she said, frowning. "Now I feel terrible for that hex I put on her last year. And I made it so hard to come off, too…"

"It's not like you knew what would happen a year later," Ginny said. "And besides, she ratted us out. Last year could have ended differently if that hadn't happened."

Hermione pictured Malfoy coming towards her in the library, the altercation outside the library. She remembered the feel of his lips on hers, the hard, half-frozen bark of a tree scraping against her back as he held her against it.

None of that ever would have happened. She would not be in this position now of judging his
character to see if he really was remorseful. It was a sore wish to hold, and too late to be thinking it.

"Umbridge told her that her dad would lose his job if she didn't tell," she said. "Would you have done the same if it was your dad?"

Ron frowned. "Oh."

And even when Cho Chang told me that, I didn't lift the hex, Hermione thought, her cheeks burning with shame. I was still angry. Now I might never get to apologize.

Hermione supposed that had to be the last thing on Henrietta's mind if she was on the run. Still, she could only hope that her former classmate was okay, wherever she was.

"Why did they take her mum's wand?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Ginny said pulling some loose hairs away from her eyes. "But knowing Umbridge, it can't be good."

Hermione looked down at her hand.

I must not reach above my station.

Her voice came out more bitter than she meant it to. "I suppose she thinks we're not deserving of our magic."

Ron rubbed her shoulder comfortably.

"D'you think she'll be targeting students, too?"

"Not so long as Dumbledore's here," Harry said, and he sounded so sure she almost believed him."

"Right," Ron said. "We'll see her turned into a Chocolate Frog before she tries to take your wand."

Hermione smiled, but the scars on the back of her hand had begun to pulse, the memory of pain resurfacing as if it were still fresh.

Pansy looked down at the school grounds, her arms wrapped around herself. She could see Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny huddled together at the base of one of the Gryffindor stands; little specks of life among the snow.

They're going to start to think you're avoiding them, a voice told her.

I'm not. She looked behind herself at Draco, who sat with his back to her, looking out the opposite side of the tower, arms slung over the railing.

They had been here for an hour, possibly longer, without saying a word to each other. She had found him up here, staring silently at the melting snow.

How long had he been there? Had he even eaten at all?

You need to tell someone. He's going to let himself die.

Pansy blinked back tears. I promised I wouldn't. He'd never trust me again, and it took him months to get to this point.
Then what else can you do?

Pansy didn't know. She hated that she didn't know, but it was the truth, and she was so scared all she could think of was the worst outcomes this mission could have.

Draco, dead. The both of them, captured. Or the both of them, dead. Draco tortured for his failure and then killed along with his parents. The Mark branded onto her own arm. Being forced to do things she didn't want to for the sake of keeping herself and those she loved alive.

Never speaking to Hermione again. Or Harry, or Ron. Having to hide her change of heart about the way she'd been brought up. Being forced to see them as nothing but an abomination. A target. A blood-traitor.

Things I believed when I didn't know better. She looked at Draco. Neither of us did.

He had told her his doubts. His fears. The reasons for his nightmares. Now it all made sense.

Most of it, anyhow.

She had never thought too deeply about most of the things he'd brought up. He was right—why question it when no one else did? Why doubt when everyone else had firm belief? Why stray from their perfect life?

The Mark was intended more for wizards than witches, although in recent times that had changed and more were choosing to go through the initiation. She had been glad at first, to see that women were being allowed a more active role within the Dark Lord's circle, but realized too late that it would put pressure on her to join, as she was now of age and some of the other Slytherins like Millicent Bulstrode and Astoria Greengrass had already spoken openly of their wanting to take the Mark when the term ended.

They spoke of it proudly, as Draco once had years ago, relishing the thought of proving themselves to the Dark Lord. The other Slytherins were so supportive of them, offering congratulations and trading stories and tips from older siblings who had long ago taken the Mark. Pansy wondered if they would be as supportive of her if she told them of her disillusionment with their ways and her wanting nothing more than to break free.

Millicent had said her bit and sat back and enjoyed everyone's praise. Astoria had been laughing with everyone else, happy with her own news. Her sister Daphne was standing beside her, admiration in her expression as she looked at her older sister. Pansy had caught Astoria looking at her briefly, an invitation to join in, as if she expected her to announce that she too was going to take the Mark. Pansy looked away quickly, pretending to have dropped something, and had mercifully been left in peace.

Others would begin to wonder, too.

Where does that leave me?

Out in the open, available for scrutiny. Her father was already waiting for her to announce when she would do it though her mother didn't agree.

Would the Dark Lord care? Would he expect her to?

Pansy put her face in her hands. What if she did? Would that help in any way?

No.
She would have to do what Draco did unless they thought of something different for her, and it likely would be among the same lines anyhow.

*Could I do it?*

She tried picturing what Draco had told her about what happened at his initiation, at her insistence. He hadn't told her the whole of it but she could imagine it just as well through the gaps in his recollection.

'It didn't matter if I wanted to. I had to.'

They would not ask her either. They would present it to her, and she would have to act.

'I couldn't hesitate or they would curse me. They didn't care if I enjoyed it or hated it. The only thing that mattered was if I did it. They said I would learn to like it.'

And that was what they wanted, wasn't it? If they happened to like it as much as Bellatrix, or Dolohov, or Crabbe and Goyle, or the Dark Lord himself, then that was a plus, but they weren't looking for sadists. They were looking for soldiers.

Draco's voice broke through the silence distantly.

"Are you hungry?"

She turned to face him. His face was red and raw, whipped and dry from the wind. He had wrapped his scarf so tightly around his neck it looked about one tug away from strangling him.

"No."

He nodded—he wasn't, either.

"Did you want to go somewhere?" she asked.

"To sleep, preferably." His voice was quiet. "I haven't felt right since the end of that Apparition practice."

"I know," she said, "my stomach hasn't given me peace from all that turning round and round. I can feel how the magic starts but it leaves me feeling sick because I can't complete it."

They continued down the steps slowly.

"Thank you for the potions," he said when they got to the first floor. "You've gone to too much trouble."

"You don't have to keep thanking me for them."

"You don't have to sneak them in," he added. "You can come in at any time, you know, as long as you make sure others know you're there else they'll think you're up to something."

She frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"The potions you've been leaving in my things." He was frowning now, too. "I've been finding new bottles of sleeping potions in my trunk, on my nightstand, under my pillow. Is that not you?"

"No. If you needed more you could have asked, but I haven't sent you any more from the ones I gave you at Christmas."
Draco's expression was deeply troubled.

"Have you used any of them?" she asked urgently.

He hesitated. "Yes."

Her eyes were wide, agitated. She clutched at his sleeve.

"If you don't know who they're from, you shouldn't be taking them."

"I thought they were from you."

"Think, Draco," she said. "Have you felt anything out of the ordinary after taking them? Do you think someone could be trying to make you ill, or poison you?"

"Other than make me fall asleep? No, and who?"

"I don't know," she said. "But you have to be careful. Potions don't just show up out of nowhere, magic or not. Somebody put them there for a reason."

They had begun to walk again, faster this time, towards their common room.

"What are we going to do?" Pansy asked. "Are you still going to go sleep?"

"Fuck sleep," he said, sounding both rattled and yet more determined than she could remember in how many months?

They reached the common room quickly, and ignoring everyone else giving them curious looks, rushed up to the boy's dormitory.

Draco led her to his space and brought out the newer bottles from his nightstand. He turned to face Pansy, who had pulled open the curtains on his four poster and was staring down at his bed, with its still-rumpled sheets and misplaced pillow.

"What is it?"

She was staring at his pillow. He followed her gaze.

A new bottle lay there. Draco felt himself go cold.

Their eyes met.

"Draco," her voice wobbled. "Who's doing this?"
Feel

Five days after, Draco found another potion by his feet on his bed where there had not been one the night before.

It was full. It was sealed. It was not from Pansy.

Draco didn't know what to think. He didn't know how the potions were reaching him. He always slept with his curtains drawn and his wand under his pillow. He slept little enough that he was shocked he did not notice when the mystery potion-gifter made their appearance. Even when he did manage to sleep, it was in short intervals, though he suspected he was not a light sleeper as he used to be, considering his exhaustion, and therefore that must have been the optimal time for this stranger to pop in and leave their potion.

Somebody was coming into the dorm and opening his curtains to put these bottles here. He had been asleep and there had been somebody nearby, possibly going through his things, leaving these bottles for him to find, and it had happened more than once.

But if there really was someone after him, wouldn't it make more sense to kill him outright, while he was asleep and unaware? What use was it to kill him slowly?

Draco had never felt more paranoid in his life. It was a little hard to conceive that somebody might be targeting him, and although he couldn't imagine who would want to besides Potter, as he'd become more and more hostile towards him lately, though Draco didn't pay any attention to him.

The day after he and Pansy had drained his collection of new bottles he had been pleased to fall asleep naturally and without much trouble, for once. It had felt like he had finally done something right though it contributed nothing to his mission. It had felt more cathartic than he'd expected. He and Pansy had drained the bottles down the sink in the lavatory and he'd thrown the bottles away after, and it had felt good.

The Potter theory didn't quite make sense to either him or Pansy, however. Pansy was staunchly of the belief that Potter would not do such a thing despite their dislike of each other (which irritated Draco very much), and Draco was absolutely certain that Potter couldn't ever get into the Slytherin quarters, much less infiltrate their dorms. It simply wasn't possible.

Draco lay in bed miserably, wishing he had saved at least one of the mysterious potions, at least a handful of drops to get him through the night. He was starting to realize he'd become too dependent on it, but when the situation was as dire as it currently was, he wasn't going to think too much on it. He had enough troubles as it was, and this was the least pressing.

When he got ready for class that morning he spent some time in private practicing his wandless magic. As of late all his spellwork was not as strong as it normally was, and it was unsettling to not be able to perform a simple Lumos at night when he needed it, or to be able to keep up in Transfiguration, a class in which he had never once struggled. Put together with the fact that McGonagall had already punished him twice for catching him sleeping during a lesson, it left him more irate than ever.

He told himself this strain in his performance was a result of his exhaustion and sleeplessness. He told himself it was because he was not concentrating properly. That it was because his wand was
malfunctioning, though this one terrified him rather than comforted him. If it was true, how could he hope to complete his mission with a malfunctioning wand? He doubted he would be let go to Diagon Alley to get a new one, crisis or not. He could still picture Weasley's absurd taped-up wand, the way all his spells had hilariously backfired.

Draco looked at his wand as if his anxious gaze might persuade it to work better. He couldn't risk being defenseless when the time came.

He could feel Potter watching him most of the time. Ever since his confrontation with Granger in the Room of Requirement he was more aware of his surroundings and took care to conceal himself better, though that was difficult when his magic was not working as well as it should. Paranoia won the best of him and he found himself glancing over his shoulder frequently as he made his way around the castle every day, waiting for Potter to pull that damned cloak off his scarred head and confront him.

Potter had to know. He had to know something to warrant this level of suspicion, and it gave Draco great anxiety, because he could ruin everything if he decided to tell. The only question was did he really know, and if so, how much?

It was just another thing to add to the lengthy list of thoughts that kept him awake. The thought of Potter sealing his fate was unbearable. He had already gotten his father locked up, and though he had broken out, it usually only took a little scene from Potter and his crew and his whole family would be rotting in cells for the rest of their lives.

Unless we're killed first.

He thought again of Pansy's offer.

They can help you.

He was tired of hearing this, of thinking it. They couldn't, and they wouldn't. They would ruin everything. They would have him killed one way or another when they knew what his plan was.

The wine was ready. He had shrunk it down and fit it into a pocket in his robes, to catch Slughorn after class. It was lucky that he would be in his last class for the day. That way there would be less trouble, hopefully. The only thing that gave him pause was that he would share the class with Gryffindor.

Preferably, Draco would have waited longer in between the first attack and this next one, but of late the snake tattooed on his arm had grown restless, lashing and writhing on his arm like it was impatient, angry.

He demands, and I obey.

The majority of the day passed uneventfully. He saw Granger once or twice but she was not aware of him, talking to her classmates and conducting usual Prefect business in her normal, easy manner. He envied that normalcy. He craved it.

During lunch they accidentally caught eyes and she held it for a moment, expressionless, and he was afraid to look away, afraid to keep staring though she seemed not to mind. After a few seconds she finally looked back down at her plate, a tinge to her cheeks that he must have imagined, her face still unreadable. He didn't know what she'd been looking for but supposed she must have found it, judging by her behavior afterward. Before that she had been talking to Potter and the two Weasleys quite animatedly but after the eye contact she grew quiet and visibly pensive and had left a short
while later. Draco had seen her leave and wondered what she could have been thinking. Had he made her uncomfortable? She had initiated the stare, but what if he had frightened her somehow?

He didn't let himself dwell on it much. Her words from that day in the Room still refused to leave his thoughts and he didn't dare do anything that might upset the waters. It was a bit of a struggle, but he kept his mind carefully blank as he went to Potions.

Slughorn had them all brew a Memory-boosting potion. Pansy was sitting beside him—he went to get all the ingredients and she stayed at their desk to prepare the cauldrons.

Most everyone else was still copying down the instructions at their desks, so the storeroom was fairly empty of students.

Except one.

She had her back to him, but turned immediately upon hearing steps behind her. Draco paused at once, his hands jumping up to flash his palms at her, a silent message.

She stared at him briefly, gauging what to do. When she couldn't think of anything she simply turned back around to grab several more ingredients, and Draco, not daring to approach her, stayed awkwardly at the door.

She finished eventually, and carrying a slew of small bottles and bagged ingredients, made her way towards him, her eyes set on the classroom behind him, as if he wasn't there. Draco moved aside to let her pass, but just as she reached him some of the items fell out of her careful hold and at his feet. One of the bottles shattered loudly.

They both froze. Tensed, clutching her wares, she was looking over his shoulder at the classroom, petrified.

They waited for the sound of footsteps and Snape's furious presence.

Instead, they got Slughorn, whose belly nudged Draco farther to the side as he entered.

"What's this?" he asked. "Has there been an accident?"

"I'm sorry, Professor," Granger blurted nervously, "I was carrying too much and one of the bottles broke."

Slughorn had to turn sideways to be able to see the wreckage.

"Oho!" he laughed. "No need to fret, Miss Granger. It's only a little spill, and powdered tarantula legs are nothing to fear, unless you have a fear of spiders."

Visibly relieved, Granger let her shoulders drop. "I'm sorry, Professor."

"Don't apologize, my dear," Slughorn said. "These accidents do happen."

He seemed to realize suddenly that Draco was there, and patted his back.

"Draco, be a gentleman and help her, won't you?" with that, he left.

She looked as if she wanted to protest, but her arms being occupied, she didn't have much success withdrawing her wand from her pocket.

Draco pointed his at the powder. "Evanesco."
It vanished, thankfully. He'd been afraid the simple charm wouldn't have worked. Not only would it have been embarrassing for someone else to see but it would likely rouse her curiosity, and he did not want to deal with that. Still, unwilling to keep pushing his luck, he vanished the broken glass as well, too conscious of her standing awkwardly in front of him.

He collected the remaining two bottles that were undamaged and offered them to her. There was a clinking of glass as she shifted to reach for it. She was looking at him seriously, her gaze searching again.

She did not seem afraid of him as she had been the last time, but there was still a hesitant air about her.

She took it slowly, and their fingers brushed together. Draco wanted to say something but didn't know what.

Her voice was soft. "Thank you."

Then she left.

Shortly after, Draco emerged from the storage room, bearing enough ingredients for his and Pansy's individual potions.

"What happened?" she asked at once. "I heard something break."

"A bottle fell," he said, knowing that she had seen Granger leave only a moment before, and knew that they had been in there together and wanted to know more, but he went silent and thankfully, she didn't press.

Granger was working with Weasley, who was standing so close to her their shoulders pressed together. He had bent his head to speak into her ear and her shoulders shook with laughter. Draco looked away and focused on weighing a toad heart.

He and Pansy worked quickly, barely speaking to each other.

Ever since he had broken down in the Astronomy Tower she had been almost ill with worry, and he'd seriously regretted telling her anything.

He should have kept silent and continued to ignore her. He should not have let her push through.

But he was lonely. He was afraid. And he was tired of lying to her.

*What if she gets hurt because of me?*

He would do anything to keep that from happening. She wanted to help him, but he was already gone. The best he could do was make sure that she did not get involved at any cost.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Potter rifling through his textbook, his eyes glued to its pages like they'd never been before. Weasley was leaning back to take peeks at it, too, only to rear back when Granger smacked him on the arm.

Pansy was already stirring her potion. Draco tipped in the toad heart and hastily copied her.

When the end of class came near Slughorn went around the room, judging the potions. Blaise's cauldron was emitting some sickly grey fumes that made the whole room smell foul; he was standing well away from his desk when Slughorn approached and then promptly reconsidered, turning to peer
into Potter's cauldron instead.

The stench from Blaise's potion was filling the whole room, even after he had cleared it from his cauldron, scowling all the while. Theodore Nott snickered at him, shaking his head.

"Perfect again, Harry!" Slughorn was covering the lower half of his face with his robe. "An outstanding potion to aid in your memorization skills before an exam! Your mother would be proud!"

Draco grit his teeth, not even thanking the Professor when he finally came 'round to his and Pansy's cauldrons, which he deemed merely 'exemplary'.

Because the smell was really quite intolerable, everyone cleared their messes quickly and all but raced to leave the room.

He was wondering what to do to get Pansy to leave without him when she picked up her bag and hung it on her shoulder.

"Will I see you at dinner?" she asked.

Draco hesitated. "Don't wait for me."

She gave him an odd, worried look, but left.

He looked around. Slughorn was in the storeroom, putting things away. The classroom was empty. He slung his bag across his body and approached the storeroom silently, to not make the Professor aware of his presence.

His hands were steady, for once, belying the panic that ran rampant inside.

"Imperio."

Slughorn, who had been inspecting a high shelf, straightened and went still.

Utterly relieved that the spell had worked, Draco felt himself relax though his hands and legs still shook.

"If you recognize my voice, you will not remember whose it is. When I leave you will not remember that this happened but you will follow my orders and you will never tell anyone."

His voice was steadier than he felt. No surprise, considering all the practice he'd had in the months leading up to this.

"Do you understand me?" he asked. "Speak."

When he spoke, Slughorn's voice was flat, emotionless as Snape's. It was quite eerie, considering the usual tone of cheerfulness he held.

"I understand."

Draco walked forward slowly, reaching into his pocket for the bottle. Slughorn did not move or even turn around to face him.

Draco restored the wine to its original size, his ears on the alert for anyone that might come in and discover him. So far, there was only silence and his own voice.
"I am going to give you a bottle of wine, and you will give it as a gift to—"

There was a sudden rush of footsteps. Startled, Draco fumbled his wand, and the spell wavered. Two familiar voices. A surge of hate and fear filled Draco.

"I don't see it. Maybe Slughorn picked it up."

*Weasley.* Draco's heart sank. *Potter must be with him.*

"No need—look, there it is."

"Thanks, mate. I didn't even know I'd left it behind."

Heart pounding frantically, Draco stepped away from the Professor, who had seemingly woken from a trance. He was turning, the wine still in hand, blinking confusedly at Draco, who had hastily stashed his wand back into his pocket.

"Why, Draco," he said pleasantly, the blankness fading from his eyes somewhat, "I didn't know you were still here. Did you have a question for me?"

"No," Draco said, his nerves rising as he heard the two sets of footsteps come closer to the closet. He turned to find Potter and Weasley standing there.

Slughorn looked at the bottle in his hand, slightly surprised to find it there. Draco could see his brows lowering, his pulse stuttering in the suspense of it all.

"Professor?" Potter called. "Are you alright?"

Slughorn gave a loud laugh, and they all jumped.

"I'm afraid you caught me about to take my evening glass of wine," he said. "A little uncouth, perhaps, but every Professor in this castle has their own way of unwinding after a long day. Did you boys need something?"

Potter refused to break his stare. Draco fought to keep his face neutral.

"Ron forgot his quill, Professor."

"Did you find it? I have extras if you need one, Mr. Weasley."

"No thanks, Professor," Weasley said. "I've got it right here."

Feeling faint with the shock of almost having been caught, Draco turned to the Professor.

"Ron forgot his quill, Professor."

"Did you find it? I have extras if you need one, Mr. Weasley."

"No thanks, Professor," Weasley said. "I've got it right here."

Feeling faint with the shock of almost having been caught, Draco turned to the Professor.

"Thank you for helping me with my question, Professor," he said as calmly as he could. It was too dangerous to stay on and try to get the wine back—he could feel his stomach turning flips quite violently. He had to leave or risk appearing even more suspicious to the two Gryffindors.

Slughorn didn't even seem to remember that Draco had not asked him anything. Nodding, he said, "Enjoy your weekend, Draco, and I will see you next week."

Draco left quickly, sweat dotting his forehead, not saying a word to Potter or Weasley. It was too late to do anything else. The best he could hope for was that Slughorn would not drink in front of his favorite student, and he wasn't like to share a good bottle of wine anyhow.

He made his way to the nearest bathroom, running his hands through his hair, sweating more
profusely. He would have to go back later, soon, to get the wine back or try again with the Imperius.

But you couldn't even cast that properly. Look at how weak you are, that your own magic won't obey you.

No, Draco thought, his head spinning. I had him. They distracted me and the spell broke.

The bathroom was empty when he burst inside the farthest stall and landed before the porcelain, vomit already pushing against his lips. He expelled it all with a hideous groan, shuddering violently. He couldn't shake the feeling of dread that had come over him in the storeroom. Something was going to go dreadfully wrong, and he was behind it, again.

Hermione looked at Harry and Ron's empty seats at the Gryffindor table.

"I wonder what's keeping them," Ginny said, serving herself another hearty slice of cheesecake. "I can't remember the last time either of them missed a meal. Aside from when they've been injured, of course."

"They told me they'd meet me here," Hermione said. "Perhaps they stayed to talk to Slughorn after class."

"I can't imagine them wanting to do that," Pansy said around a mouthful of ice cream as she approached them where they sat, carrying her bowl of dessert. "I'm sorry I haven't been around lately," she said a little less confidently.

"That's alright," Ginny said, "though we did miss you."

"Aw, don't make me blush." She took another spoonful and winced, gritting her teeth. "Ah, hell, that's cold."

"Were you ill?" Hermione asked.

"Just busy," Pansy said, rubbing her forehead. "I had some late assignments to cram together and a lot of other things to think about. I missed you too, though." She looked around. "Where're the other two?"

Hermione smiled. "I think I heard Ron say something about forgetting his quill."

"But it would only take a minute to go back and get it," Ginny said, frowning. "Dinner's nearly over. I can't imagine them taking that much time just to find a sodding quill."

Professor McGonagall approached them suddenly, her face grave.

"Hello, Professor," Hermione said, and then froze at seeing her expression. "Is something wrong?"

"Something has happened," their Professor told them gravely. "Miss Weasley, this affects you the most. Come with me, please."

Ginny abandoned her cheesecake and stood at once, wiping her hands on her skirt.

"What's wrong, Professor?"

"Your brother is in the Infirmary," McGonagall said. "You will want to see him in case..." she trailed off, her eyes, usually so impassive and sharp, were now troubled. "Follow me, please."
"Can they come with me?" Ginny was pulling Pansy up beside her. Hermione stood at once, her eyes wide and worrying.

"Of course."

They walked quickly with the Transfiguration Professor, who did not say a word until they reached the doors of the Infirmary.

"Your brother is seriously ill," she said in a quiet voice to Ginny. "He has accidentally ingested poison."

"Poison?"

"Potter and Horace were there with him—Potter was able to give him a remedy, but we fear there may have been more damage than appears."

Ginny was clutching at her stomach. She'd turned so pale all the freckles on her face stood out more prominently than ever. "So he's okay?"

"We hope so. He is conscious, but Poppy is running tests."

"Can we see him?"

McGonagall pushed open the door, and they rushed inside.

The only occupied bed was Ron's. Ginny was the first at his side, and he looked at her, his eyes a little pained.

"I never thought I'd be happy to see you," he said. "Blimey, you look awful."

She hit him on the shoulder, hard. He let out a shout of pain.

"Ginevra!" came McGonagall's reprimanding voice from the entrance.

Ginny ignored them both.

"Ronald Weasley, you absolute fucking idiot," she said, her voice shaking, "do you realize what mum would have done to me if you'd died? What're you going around drinking poison for?"

His eyes went wide. "I'm older than you!"

"Like it matters, you'd have died if Harry hadn't been there!" She looked around. "Where is he?"

"With Dumbledore," Ron said, rubbing at his shoulder where she'd hit him.

"Looking well, Weasley," Pansy said, smiling faintly. "We were wondering what you were up to."

Ron gave a weak smile. "I hope you lot saved me some grub."

"I think you'll have to stick to the food Pomfrey gives you for now, or she'll have our heads."

He winced. "Ah, my head hurts."

"Serves you right," Ginny said. "What happened?"

"Er—I actually don't remember much," Ron said. "Slughorn offered Harry and I some wine and then I woke up here."
Their expressions turned to shock.

"Slughorn gave you poison?"

"He swears he didn't know it was poisoned," Ron said, shrugging. "He says he found it in his storeroom and doesn't remember when or where he got it, that it was likely an old gift."

"Blimey," Pansy said, looking ill.

Hermione felt Ron's forehead. "You've got a fever. Maybe you should rest."

"I feel fine," he said, though his forehead was damp with sweat and his eyes looked a little distant. His hand grabbed hers. "Don't tell my mum, okay?"

"I think it's too late for that," Hermione responded. "Likely she's already received a notice of your being here."

He paled. "Fantastic."

"She and your father will be here shortly," McGonagall said. "Weasley, Parkinson, Granger, you ought to let him rest before they arrive. You might be able to see him tomorrow."

"Might, Professor?"

"It depends on how his condition progresses."

They all went quiet.

"Ginny," Ron was the first to speak up. "If I die, you can't have my room."

"As if I'd want it." She reached out to hold his hand briefly, her features softening. "I'm glad you're okay, Ron."

He pretended to look bashful. "Thanks, Ginevra."

She scowled. "Don't you start." She left the room.

"I hope we'll be seeing you in class soon," Pansy said, patting his feet. "Be well." She followed Ginny.

Ron looked at Hermione once they were alone.

"Harry said to wait up for him in the common room," he said quietly, so no one would hear. "I don't know how long he'll be."

Hermione nodded, rubbing at her temples, fighting wetness at her eyes. "Okay."

She leaned in and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'm glad you're alive," she said.

His arms wrapped around her in turn, and he pressed her closer suddenly, to Hermione's surprise. Before he could overthink it, Ron kissed her on the cheek, close to her mouth.

"Me too."

Hermione feared her blush might make him catch fire. He let her go, and she gave him a quick, awkward smile before joining the others outside the room.
If they noticed her blush they made no mention of it, except for Ginny, who gave her a small, sly smile. Hermione turned away, still feeling Ron's kiss at her cheek.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Pansy was asking Ginny once McGonagall had left them to deal with an extremely anxious Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"I'm sure," Ginny said though she still looked shaken. "Now mum and dad are here I feel like he has a better chance, if that means anything."

"I hope so." Pansy folded her arms over her middle. "I'll see you two in the morning?"

"Count on it," Ginny said. "I don't feel like eating breakfast alone tomorrow."

When Pansy had gone Ginny turned to Hermione. "I should go see my parents or they'll storm the common room."

They hugged, and Ginny left, leaving Hermione alone. The common room had emptied while they were in the Hospital Wing, since no one was yet aware of Ron's condition. Hermione curled up on her favorite armchair and fell asleep waiting for Harry.

She awoke to a rustle of sound and turned to find Harry on the couch beside her asleep, mouth open, glasses askew.

"Harry," she shook his arm and he jerked awake, his glasses flying off. He picked them up clumsily and put them back on, relaxing once he caught sight of her.

"Sorry," she said. "How's Ron?"

"Asleep, probably," Harry said. "Pomfrey said he's like to stay there for longer if his fever doesn't go away."

Hermione drew her knees up to her chest. "Do you think Slughorn lied about not knowing about the poison?"

Harry pushed his hair away from his forehead, exposing his scar. His expression hardened.

"I think Malfoy did it."

"He was there with Slughorn when Ron and I went back to the room," Harry said. "He said Slughorn was answering a question about the class, I think, and then left before Slughorn gave us the wine."

"You think he might have coerced him?"

"I wouldn't put it past him to use the Imperius," Harry said bitterly. "I bet his dad taught him that one."

Hermione bit her lip. This was a serious accusation indeed.

"But why would Malfoy want to poison Ron? And here? It doesn't make sense."

"He's acting on orders," Harry said tersely. "He's got to be. I don't think Ron was his target. I think we just got in his way."
Hermione sucked in a breath. "You mean you think he wanted to kill you?"

"I don't know." Harry removed his glasses to rub at his eyes. "He could have been going after anyone, really."

"Did you tell Dumbledore?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

The fire flared suddenly; they both turned to stare at it for a moment.

"He said it wasn't likely." Harry's disappointment was clear in his tone.

"You don't believe him."

"He's too busy to know what Malfoy's been up to. He's gone half the time now; he doesn't see how weird his behavior's been."

Hermione bit her lip. "Shouldn't you trust him, Harry?"

Harry turned to face her. His eyes were bright, fevered. "First Malfoy went after you. Now Ron. How soon until he comes after me on Voldemort's orders?"

Hermione didn't know what to say. She pictured Malfoy's stricken face when her Disillusionment charm had been stripped away. The sound of his voice when he'd apologized. Could Malfoy really just have tried to murder one of her best friends? Somehow, the thought didn't seem plausible. She couldn't connect the crime to the face.

*Why attack any of us? What could his orders be?*

The sun was beginning to rise, and its light filled the room. Everything glowed fiery red. Gold ornaments around them glinted brightly.

"You've been watching him all this time. Has he done anything out of the ordinary?"

Harry shook his head. "He spends more time in the Room of Requirement than we did for the DA, but mostly at odd hours. He hasn't gone walking around at night much either, but that might be the case since I keep falling asleep."

"Better to keep your mental health than watch that map until morning, anyway," Hermione said, yawning. "Even Malfoy has to sleep at one point or another."

He awoke in the bowels of darkness, fighting to breathe amidst a nightmare that faded immediately upon waking, and the realization that he was not in his bed.

The floor was cold. He was standing, not lying down. Draco looked around wildly and saw nothing but black. His wand was in his hand, held so tightly the muscles were cramping. He switched it to his other hand, nearly dropping it from all the shaking.

His hurried breathing was all he could hear. The air felt close, like he was being buried alive.

"L-Lumos."
A weak light emitted from his wand, and he was so relieved he almost dropped to his knees. He looked around, his eyes fighting to recognize anything.


He was in the Room of Requirement.

How the fuck did I get here? Was I asleep? Why can't I remember?

The last thing he remembered was being sick in the lavatory. He'd gone back to Slughorn's classroom after, and had found the room empty. A puddle of sick lay on the floor by the front of the room. Immediately he'd known what must have happened and fled, rushing to the dorms before he was sick again, before he gave himself away.

What had happened? Had all three wizards been poisoned? Was anyone still alive? He was too afraid to check, to ask around in case the news was being kept secret temporarily. He'd stayed awake for hours, trapped between his curtains, not knowing what to do.

Then the gap in memory came. Had he fallen asleep? Had he made a conscious decision to come here and then blacked out upon arrival? The uncertainty was sickening.

There was a soft chirp from the birds behind him—had he covered their cage? He didn't remember leaving that cloth over it. He turned, and as if the Room sensed his panic, it illuminated itself as it normally would be, the windows turning clear again to reveal that it was day.

How long have I been here?

The soreness of his feet was telling—and unsettling.

The cabinet had been in front of him and he hadn't been able to tell because it was so dark. He must have been working on it before waking.

How?

A headache had formed from the glare of the light—Draco pulled open the cabinet's doors and stared inside.

His stomach twisted.

A bird lay there, its head twisted the wrong way around.

Oh Gods.

It was the same one whose wing had been injured only weeks before. He could spot the gap in between feathers where her bones had been broken.

Hagrid had told him she would be able to fly again within a month. Now that would never happen.

If his stomach was not empty he would have emptied it then. Guilt tore at him.

I did this?

A defenseless creature. Why had he done it?

This is what is expected of you, the malicious voice said. You are weak indeed if you feel this much over a pathetic creature. Look at it and feel nothing. You will die if you let yourself feel.
Draco tried to remember killing the bird, and failed. He looked at his hands, but they were clean. Still, he could see the red as if he had just dipped his hands in a bucket of it. Sweat rolled off his forehead.

*I'm losing control.*

He reached down to pick up the tiny body, and only then noticed a bit of parchment underneath it. Draco picked it up cautiously.

*Nice work, but this one barely got through. Needs more tinkering.*

Only one person could have sent this. But what did that mean? Draco looked at the cabinet warily, then back at the bird. He flipped the note over.

*Send better meat next time.*
"Now. Continue, Draco."

He was looking down at the ground. A body lay limp there, barely breathing. He had dark blond hair and a broken, bloody nose. The man was incapable of speaking, but his terrorized eyes were half open and red and wild, the irises wavering as he tried to look around. The man's eyes landed on Draco and the man let out a broken, rasping gasp, as if trying to say something. He began to claw in the mud; his leg had been broken—Draco could see exposed bone—every time it moved he threw his head back into the ground, mouth wide open but no scream ever came, his hair became soaked and turned darker from the pond water.

"Crucio."

The man had no energy left to scream, but his mouth opened and all they could hear was a guttural clicking sound from deep inside his throat; the screams were silent but they saw the force behind them as the tendons in his neck strained visibly, ropes taut to the point of breaking. All features of his face became twisted, contorted from the pain beyond recognition. His hands scratched and tore at his own chest, his arms, and came away bloody. The self-made gashes wept as he writhed.

"Do not look away."

He couldn't anyway. Draco felt like he was outside himself. Like something else had inhabited his body. His eyes were stuck on the blood.

There was more of it underneath the man's body, staining his clothes, seeping into the muddy ground. The water was tinged red. The clicking hadn't stopped, but it had grown slower. The man's eyes had closed. His stomach rose and fell sharply with the speed of his weak breaths.

"Look at him, Draco. This is what happens to anyone who dares betray me."

The Mark looked more vivid against the deathly pallor of the man's skin. His arm was limp, floating and swaying with the movement of the water his body was half-submerged in.

"Will you take my Mark?"

The man twitched violently, but his eyes were still closed. A spurt of blood squirted from between his lips.

Draco bent on one knee, lowered his head. The scene around him was so bleak and grey, and his mind kept flashing back to that image of someone he'd tried very, very hard to forget, draped in the gold of the sun. Back to vibrancy. Back to life.

He pushed it away savagely.

The man's breathing was extremely labored. There had to be some sort of fluid in his lungs. A vicious stab of pity went through him, and Draco let it pass through him unaffectedly.

This was the way it had to be.

"Yes, my Lord."

The tip of a wand pressed into his shoulder.
"Will you be faithful and loyal, and pledge your service to me?"

"Yes, my Lord."

The feel of lips against his on a cold Spring night. Draco's brows lowered, trying to block it out.

"And will you betray me, Draco? Will you be seduced by the promises of the other side?"

The man had turned his head. Draco could see him from his peripheral vision. He was trying to speak.

"My Lord," he said fearfully, his voice so full of remorse it almost broke Draco's heart. "F-f-forgive me—forgive me, m-my Lord. I'm sorry—I—"

He cried out suddenly, writhing again. Somebody had cursed him. Draco dared not look but the Dark Lord cleared his throat and the man stopped, his lungs heaving. He retched again onto the ground coughing like he was about to spit up his insides. Draco felt sweat form on his brow.

"Never, my Lord," he said, pressing his fist over his heart. "I would die before I fail you."

"My Lord," gasped the traitor through a swollen tongue, which he'd bit in the throes of agony, "my Lo-Lord, please, I did not betray you w-willingly...I was tricked...please..."

The Dark Lord's voice was indifferent, bored. "Willing or not, you broke your pledge to me, Wells. This was your third strike." He turned to the group of people watching. "Did I not warn him? Did I not tell him that the third infraction would mean death?"

"Yes, my Lord." Came the chorus.

"And it might be true that you tried to listened to me, for a while," the Dark Lord said, not even deigning to look at the disgraced Death Eater. "But you were weak, and you let yourself be swindled by the Order posing as your colleagues."

"Forgive me, my Lord," the man called Wells said, his voice so damaged it sounded nothing human. "My Lord, m-my King, you know I would neh-never have given them that information had—had I known the truth."

"You served your purpose well enough, I suppose," the Dark Lord said, ignoring the pleas of the tortured man. "I would have thought the training you had received would have prepared you better to serve me." He turned to address the assembly again.

"Am I often wrong, my children?"

"NO," came the universal reply, and Draco shook to hear it.

"Am I not a good Lord?"

The cheers and bows from the assembly showed him their devotion.

"Am I not merciful to have given three chances?"

More assent.

"Would you have me give leniency to a traitor?"

"Never!" came the cries.
"Let him die!"

Wells sobbed loudly behind Draco.

Draco's mind was blank. It had to be. There was no room for any other thought than what was happening now. The only thing he could focus on was getting through this. That and keeping his emotions from revealing themselves. If anything of what he felt showed or was detected by the Dark Lord he would be punished. Nothing could show. Doubt meant death.

"Enough."

The roars died down at once. The Dark Lord turned to face the condemned man.

"My Lord, my Lord," Wells struggled to rise despite his mangled leg. He howled and dropped back down before he'd even gotten to his knees.

"I have no use for traitors," the Dark Lord said coldly, his red eyes dark as dried blood. "Rise, Draco."

Draco stood.

Unable to move, unable to resist or plea or flee, Wells laid in the dirty, red-tinged water, his hands over his face, sobbing wretchedly. His body twitched spasmodically. The air was rank—he had soiled himself. Draco wanted to look away but forced himself to stare at the prisoner.

"I gave you the highest honor of being my servant," the Dark Lord said, his voice holding no emotion. "I gave you my Mark and trusted you with information I do not hand lightly to others. I have been patient with you, as I have been with all my other followers. I wasted my time and effort through you and will have received nothing in return other than the satisfaction of seeing the life stripped from you."

Wells sobbed harder, and screamed as another curse hit him. Froth formed at his mouth. His head turned from side to side. His neck strained. Draco's stomach twisted horribly—his eyes had gone black. Blood leaked from the corner of his mouth and nose and dribbled down the side of his face.

When the curse was ended he gasped for breath and reached out with hands covered in his own blood all around him, his eyes open but not seeing.

"My Lord, please," he begged, his voice a raw, desperate whine. He had gone blind.

Beside him, the Dark Lord grinned, his hand clasped on Draco's shoulder.

"Kill him."

Draco awoke immediately, shaking so hard it gave him trouble to grab his sheets to push them away. He threw them off, rolled to the side, and vomited, heaving loudly and choking on his own breath. The black of the night pressed in on him—everything was spinning. Draco gripped the mattress underneath him and heaved.

The curtains around his bed obscured his vision but he knew the whole room was dark—he waited for a moment for his breath to calm. Heart still pounding, Draco opened the curtains around his bed. Nobody had heard. Everyone was still asleep. Theodore Nott's loud snores were the only source of sound in the room and that was only because he usually slept with his curtains open. Relieved, Draco enclosed himself within his curtains again. The stench of his mess irritated his throat—it had landed
all over the side of his bed and some of his curtain. Coughing, he cleaned it wandlessly as he rolled onto his back and then wiped his mouth.

How he wished he had a sleep potion. Draco didn't care if whoever had been giving him those new sleeping potions was trying to kill him—as long as they let him sleep in peace, he would take them. His shaking had gotten worse and he suspected it had to do with withdrawals. One was not meant to rely on the sleep potions for extended periods of time, but when the situation was so grave, what could one do?

_You can't hide from it_, whispered the sly voice. _Face what you've done. You can't hide from it. You chose your path. If you stray, you die._

His whole body ached. His head, especially. A sharp pain had started in his head the moment he'd woken, and to his chagrin had not faded away yet. It made him restless and drove him further from the possibility of sleep. In that moment he'd have given up his entire fortune to be able to sleep the rest of the night without disturbance, but the bottle of vodka he'd pilfered from Blaise's secret store in his bin was empty and the glass of water beside him (where had that come from?) unappealing.

What he needed was a walk. When was the last time he'd had one? Too long. Well he would be more careful this time. The bottle of vodka glinted annoyingly, as if trying to tell him he'd already failed. His mouth still held the taste of alcohol. Still, he felt most of it had worn off in the wake of his nightmare.

_Now's as good a time as any._

After he'd rinsed out his mouth he set off for a different course this time, one that would lead him far away from where he least wanted to be. His concealment spell was not as good as usual but did just the trick; he evaded Mrs. Norris and Filch quite easily and without trouble—having seen them from a distance at the end of a long corridor he simply turned and went in the opposite direction, keeping to the darkest of shadows to conceal his own.

The walking had no effect. He liked to pretend otherwise but it seldom did. He still felt like a raw, frayed wire exposed to a nearing electrical charge.

He'd tried so hard to block the memories; Snape had taught him how long before it had happened, but the cracks were bleeding through and his defenses were shot from so long with so little sleep. Even with the help of Pansy’s potions, he either had too much energy or too little, and most of the time it was a gargantuan effort to keep awake wherever he went. He'd actually had to perform Keep-Awake charms on himself during every class and those were taking their toll; he felt his Professors knew what was happening.

He had nearly gotten Weasley killed. Though he'd never been his favorite, it still was a shock to see how badly his plan had backfired, and that he could have added another tally to his body count that was not intentional. He remembered the haggard, red-eyed faces of Granger and the other Gryffindors the next morning. The crushing guilt that he had been the cause. He knew he shouldn't have left the room when he did. Though it would have looked suspicious he should have stayed and found some way to prevent it happening, to take the wine back and try another time. But he was a coward, and he'd run and been sick like a child, and now he was one foot lower into his own grave.

Taking turn after turn after turn, walking silently down corridors longer than his own house and ghosts that were ignorant to his presence, Draco fought to clear his mind, but it was almost impossible.

There was movement in the corner of his eye and he whirled around to get a look at it, and stepped
back in horror as an enormous snake slithered up the wall and along a column, its eyes like two
glowing red embers. Vomit reared up his throat. He only knew of one serpent of that size. How had
she got in? His jaw locked in fear.

You deserve it. You made your choice. Look at your arm and see how you’ve grown. If you doubt,
then you are weak as your Father feared.

Draco winced. I’m not weak.

Then prove it, the voice hissed. You only have your remorse to be ashamed of. There is no reason to
fear unless you have doubt. Remember, doubt is death.

The serpent looked at him as it coiled around the column, its tongue peeking out of its mouth. Draco
clutched at his head.

It can’t be real. It can’t be here.

He scrunched his eyes shut, and forced himself to count to twenty. With each number that passed he
felt the pounding of his head and heart grow steady again.

He opened his eyes and the creature was gone. He let a whisper of a breath out, shaking. The rest
was trapped in his lungs, and it took him a moment to remember how to breathe normally.

A sharp pain in his head made him pause where he stood, and clutch at his head. It grew more
intense, and he fought to not fall to his knees.

I’m being eaten alive by my own thoughts.

There was a noise nearby and his heart jumped, but his head was aflame and he suddenly didn’t care
if Dumbledore himself found him there.

This isn’t what I wanted, he thought, and the pain increased to the point where tears sprang up in his
eyes. There was a louder sound, even closer, and he felt movement nearby.

Why did this have to happen? Of all people, why should he have been the one to have this happen
to? From the day of his initiation and even way before that, things had gone wrong. It was supposed
to have gone the other way. It was supposed to have been easy. He was not supposed to be
struggling like this. He was supposed to want to do it.

You came into this for the wrong reasons, a calmer voice told him. You thought it would wipe away
your problems. All it’s done is give you more.

This was what he was supposed to do. This was what was expected of him. But here he was, getting
sick from nightmares and crying over what he’d done. He would die in shame, and his parents would
follow.

Something touched him, and he fell backward, landing on his elbows. His vision was blurred by the
pain—someone stood there where he’d just been—he couldn’t make them out.

His first thought was Potter. It had to be him. It was only a few days before that Draco had noticed
him following him around the castle again, after all. Had Granger told him about his wandering at
night?

Neither said anything for a moment. Draco struggled to get his breathing back to rights.
The voice was unsure, hushed. He had no trouble recognizing it. "Are you alright?"

Draco’s head spun. How had he ended up here again? How? He'd all but tried going to the opposite side of the castle just to avoid this happening again. Had the path he'd thought he'd taken only been a hallucination? And for good measure, how had she even known he was outside? Though this was a troll of a headache, he'd still been careful not to make too much noise.

Now he understood how she must have felt the year before, when he had been following her. Though she certainly had put in no effort (for all he knew), here he was, delivered to her door like an unwilling crustacean creature being lowered into a boiling pot. And him, he’d hastened to follow her tracks like a bloodhound, putting tracking spells on her quills when he realized she was also talented at evasion. She'd made it clear she wanted nothing to do with him after the blackmail and yet he kept ending up here.

There was the door. There were the rectangles of light: the door itself, the inside of her quarters, indistinguishable. Its twin, leaning at an angle on the opposite wall, as if trying to reach him. There was her silhouette, framed in the light pouring out. It was all more familiar than it should have been.

At this point he shouldn't have felt the slightest surprise. He should have known this would happen. It was like the castle was forcing them together repeatedly just to punish and humiliate him. He felt like an utter idiot. He should have learned his lesson the first time. He ought to have just stayed in bed.

Draco didn't trust himself to talk, or even move. She advanced slowly, and as his vision cleared he could see her face, that unmistakable look of worry. She repeated her question but it was drowned out by another wave of pain, scraping the insides of his skull. Draco gasped and doubled over, clutching his head. Cold sweat dripped from his forehead.

"Merlin," he heard her mutter, and she asked something else, but that went unheard. Draco ground his teeth and closed his eyes, pressing his palm to his forehead. The embarrassment was still there but it hardly mattered anymore. It was already too late, anyhow. She'd seen. The pain was the only thing he had energy to feel or care about.

Her hand was on his arm again, near his Dark Mark—the touch brought him out of his stupor briefly—he looked at her, confused, panting. Her voice was coming through again, distant, but growing stronger. He pictured the muggle radio he'd found in the Room of Requirement without knowing why.

"Malfoy, what's wrong?"

Draco ignored her. His head pounded so hard he hardly heard her. There was conflict in her eyes, and he knew she would have preferred anything to being here with him, alone, in the dark, again.

"What can I do?"

"Leave," he rasped. It took so much effort to speak, his throat was so dry.

She hesitated and then crouched beside him. She crossed her arms, nervous. "I shouldn't."

The pain in his head had been reduced to a bubbling simmer without warning. Draco winced and rubbed his temples. He gave a curt nod without looking at her, and struggled to rise. His balance was way off, however, and he fell back down, dizzier than he'd ever felt in his life.

"Fuck," he said, winded. He rolled onto his back. Everything hurt. His lungs felt they could not take in as much air as normal. He struggled to breathe deeply.
Slowly, she came closer, and then her hands were around his arm, trying to pull him up.

Shocked, Draco pulled away, hard enough that he accidentally pulled her along. She fell beside him with a shocked squeal and then stood quickly, backing away, her wand out but not pointed at him.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked reproachfully.

He sat up shakily, his mind reeling. His face hurt. His head, his legs, his chest. All aching, and he was so tired.

"Go back to bed," was the only thing he could say. His voice was hoarse.

All he could make of her was her shadowed figure. She had a defensive stance.

"How do you expect me to sleep when you're like this?" she asked. "What were you doing out here?"

"I don't know."

She watched him for a moment, as if deliberating, and then gave a small shake of her head, knelt on the ground and came closer. Draco recoiled, but her hands were on the sides of his head, brushing the hair from his face and she was leaning in, looking into his eyes. Too stunned to pull away, Draco blushed and avoided her eyes.

"Look at me," she murmured.

He sighed and met her eyes. The light from her room blinded him again; he squinted, his face contorted.

"What are you doing?"

"Making sure I don't need to send you to Madame Pomfrey." She bent closer, peering into his eyes. "Have you taken any drugs? Be honest."

"I'm fine. I'm not going there."

She sniffed the air. Her brow furrowed, and she released him swiftly.

"But you still reek of alcohol."

"Leave me alone." He turned to go.

"No." She grabbed his arm, forcing him to stop. "I want to know why on not one but two occasions I find you outside my quarters drunk and walking around in the dark past curfew. I will drag you to Dumbledore this second, Malfoy, if you don't turn around and tell me why."

Draco paused.
"I don't have a reason, Granger," he said angrily. "When I can't sleep I walk and for some bloody reason I keep ending up back here. It's not intentional, believe me."

"Yeah, I'll fall for that. For the third time?"

"You said two first and now you say three. Which one is it?"

"It's three. That was you again, a month or more ago. There was a sound outside here, in the corridor. A rock, something made a noise. And I heard footsteps."

Draco remembered.

"Why can't you keep inside your room for once?" he snapped. "Any strange noise outside your door in the middle of the night inside an ancient castle isn't bound to be any good. You, of all people, should know that."

She rolled her eyes. "If you recall, that time I didn't go outside. You still haven't answered my question."

"It's along the way to the dormitories, alright?" he conceded. "I'm sorry you sleep so lightly that a feather falling can wake you up, but it's not like I knocked on your door asking you to come out. Now go back to sleep before we're both caught."

She didn't reply. He could feel her gaze on his face. Her hand was still around his arm—he felt her heat through his clothes. He hadn't realized how cold it was.

"You're bleeding."

Suddenly aware of the warmth dripping from his nose, he reached up and touched it. Some of the blood had already dried—it was just a small trickle, but in the darkness, his blood appeared black, and as he looked at it his vision began to waver.

No, not here.

"Let me go," he said. She withdrew her hand.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

There was a long pause. Another bit of blood dripped from his nose and he wiped at it. She hadn't looked away from him once and he was starting to feel uncomfortable, remembering Pansy's owl. Granger had the same inscrutable stare.

Her voice filled the darkness. "No, you're not."

Suddenly she walked away, and disappeared. Draco stood there for a moment, but before he could leave light flooded the area, coming from the doorway he hadn't noticed since her light had been off all this time. Her figure appeared in it. He squinted. She said something he didn't catch.

"What?"

"Come here."

He did, slowly, without a second thought. What would she do? Slam the door in his face? Summon Filch? Curse him? Whatever it was, he wanted it over with. He was so aware of how tired he was he
felt he might drop there where he stood.

By now he had grown accustomed to the light, wincing only a little as he came to a stop before her and she signaled with her finger, peering from one end of the corridor to the other.

"Wait here," she ordered, and closed the door with a quiet snap. He barely noticed. His eyes felt so raw that blinking was uncomfortable but he closed them and stood there, playing a game of how still he could stand. Was she going to come back with the letters she planned to send after all? Had she only gone to get her wand so she could return and threaten him at wandpoint to leave? Or would she just leave him here for the rest of the night as some sort of cruel joke?

The corridor was void of sound—he felt his heartbeat rather than heard it, and there was a static rush in his ears that threatened to overwhelm him and at the same time, calmed him. It wouldn't come as a surprise if she just left him there all night. His head felt so light it was a wonder it didn't float away. He wanted to rub at his temples and almost reached up to do it but remembered his game at the last second and resisted the urge. He was doing well, so he might as well see how much longer he could last.

There was the sound of someone clearing their throat, and he opened his eyes. When had they closed? He struggled to open them, swaying lightly on his feet. The game was lost.

The door was open a little wider and she stood there with a handful of brown glass bottles in her arms. Now he could see her better—her pyjamas were mismatched—the top had a rose print dotted all around and the bottoms were too large and striped. Her feet caught his interest the most. She wore some absurd kind of slipper, but in the form of a threaded boot. They looked absolutely absurd, and he wondered how they held up in the snow though they didn't look like they were meant to endure the elements. He'd never quite seen anything like them, and didn't realize he'd been staring until she cleared her throat again.

His face burned. He looked away. "Sorry." If he were less exhausted he wouldn't have failed to notice how simply the word had come from him.

She paused. "Don't be."

Abruptly she remembered herself and pushed the first bottle into his chest, and surprised, he looked down and grabbed it after a two second delay. Their hands brushed as he did so—her skin was soft and warm. His hands felt so weak he almost expected the bottle to drop through his fingers.

"You'll be needing these," she said, pressing one after another into his hands until he held them all clumsily and too hard, in fear of dropping a single one.

"Stress-relieving potions mostly," she said matter-of-factly. "Some sleeping potions too. Take a small dose of each one before you go to bed," she instructed him. "A small, one, mind you. Some of these can have unpleasant side effects if you take too much."

Draco didn't bother reading the names of the bottles. For all he knew she was lying and they could contain arsenic and other poisons but he was sure, for once, that he would do just as she said.

*It's like Christmas again.* If only Pansy could see. How she would laugh. He looked down at the bottles.

*Do I look that ill?* He was tempted to ask her, but didn't.

"Get lots of sleep," she kept on, unaware of his thoughts, "and have a drink nearby too. Preferably water," she added, eyeing him carefully. "Some of those taste dreadful."
She met his eye, gave him a serious look. "Above all, please eat something."

Draco held her stare, aware of the faint flush that crept up his neck. She inclined her head, trying to gauge his thoughts, but he just looked to the side of her eye and nodded.

*Why are you doing this?* He wanted to ask, but held back for fear that it would shatter the tenuous peace. Was it even peace? Whatever this was, he wasn't even sure it was real. For all he knew that headache could have knocked something loose in his head, or for that matter, he could still be asleep in bed, dreaming drunk, fuddled dreams that he would never be able to remember.

Would this be one of them? He wasn't sure he liked that thought. He knew which category this dream, or whatever it was, fell into.

She was looking at him, and he realized that the silence between them had gone on too long since she had stopped speaking. She didn't seem too uncomfortable, thankfully—though she had every right to be, considering whom she had for company. Draco shifted on his feet. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to do. She'd never been so kind to him, and he, well...

He supposed through all his cruelty he never had a chance to let her be kind, and he'd been too stupid and brainless to be kind to her.

*Start now,* the kind voice whispered to him. *While you still have a chance.*

The snake on his arm writhed. Draco held his breath.

"Thank you."

This time, she hid her surprise well, but he caught the way she leaned back ever so slightly, as if struck by it.

The shock wore off, and her lips did something that may have either been a smile or a grimace of acknowledgment. Then she caught herself, and took a small step backwards.

"Go now, before you're caught," she said. Her voice was low. He couldn't bear to look at her, but forced himself to. He felt as if already in a dream, everything felt distorted to him. He fought the temptation to touch her to see if she was really there.

The door closed, and after Draco was sure he had a firm enough grip on his precious cargo, he turned and left.

His luck ran out the second he stepped foot into the dungeons. By then, he had put the bottles in his pockets for fear of dropping them, and was doubly glad he'd done it when Snape stepped into his view.

Irritation washed over his exhaustion.

"Still can't sleep, Draco?"

His nightclothes were plain and black, like his regular robes. Draco wondered if he had ever worn any variety of color in his life. He tried to remember any occasion from his childhood, and failed. Snape had never worn anything that was not black.

"It's getting better," he said carefully.

"The bottles in your pockets have something to do with that, I assume."
Draco narrowed his eyes. "That's not your business."

"It will be, if it so happens you have acquired them through…questionable means."

"I didn't steal them."

Snape came closer.

"No, they were given to you, weren't they."

Draco froze. Oh, of course—he was using Occlumency, and Draco had been too stupid and half-witted through exhaustion to notice. Merlin, and he hadn't even noticed 'til now! Snape's presence in his mind made itself known, and furious with himself, Draco closed off his thought stream, turning his mind blank and quickly shoved all memories of recent events aside, but Snape had already gotten what he needed.

"Interesting…” His face showed no emotion, but his eyes gleamed.

"Stay out of my head," Draco said angrily.

"You were with her again. Why is that, Draco? Is there something I need to know?"

"It was an accident. Like the first time." What else could he say?

"Just accidents?"

"I don't care if you don't believe me. I wasn't there because I wanted to be."

"Yet it's happened more than once." He advanced slowly towards Draco, his voice turning colder.

"You are taking too many risks and not enough caution. If you are not careful you will be found out, and your family will suffer."

Cold sweat trickled along his neck. "That's not going to happen."

"We will soon see. Fenrir has paid you a visit."

"Yeah. I asked him to. I didn't get caught. It doesn't matter."

"Snape's looming shadow leaned forward. "You weren't careful enough. Do you think the castle's protective wards would not have sensed him? If you had made the decision to lead him inside the castle you would have been caught, and neither your Father nor I could help you if you had gotten convicted for aiding a criminal in breaching the castle. Think of the pain it would cause your mother."

Draco sneered. "If you think I would have actually let him inside-"

"No, but you made him a promise, didn't you?" Now his Godfather's voice had turned mocking, acidic.

Draco balked, but kept his face still.

"You thought he wouldn't share the news of his new appointment. You were thoughtless, and you were wrong. What price others will pay for it, I wonder…"

"Nothing's going to happen," Draco said stiffly.
"That could be. But accidents never knock before entering, and you should take care who you ask favors of."

Draco glared at him.

"I don't want to hear that you were talking to her again."

The weight of the bottles seemed to grow.

"You won't."

"I hope that is true, Draco. You're in danger enough, and associating yourself with her will not help your case in any way, regardless of the outcome."

*It's none of your business*, Draco wanted to say, but felt that he would give the wrong message, so he kept quiet, and walked away.

By some miracle he made it back to his dorm without encountering anyone else. The room was dark but illuminated just enough by the moonlight that he made his way to his bed without stumbling. Luckily everyone else had their curtains drawn so he didn't have to worry about anyone seeing him.

He was tired enough that he could already feel himself falling asleep naturally, but paranoid that he would wake up and not be able to fall back asleep, he took a dose of some of the potions, wondering all the while how long she'd been watching him if she'd known about his skipping meals. Her request was not needed, however, now that he'd begun feeding himself again and had gained back some of what he had needlessly lost. He didn't have too long to think about it, though. Just before he fell asleep he felt the Mark burn, as if he'd held it over an open fire.
"You should not have let him back, Albus," Minerva said, shaking her head. "He should have been expelled."

"What would that achieve, Minerva?" Albus asked, flipping slowly through an ancient book; the arm bearing his injured, cursed hand lay folded on the desk before him. His office, crammed with strange artifacts and little devices that made odd sounds, was empty but for the two of them.

Minerva, ever the restless spirit, had sat for all of five minutes before she'd got up to walk around the room as she expressed her thoughts. Albus, long since used to this behavior, looked up only rarely from his book to watch her.

"Our students would be safer," she said stiffly. "Don't tell me you've forgotten what he did last year."

"Of course not." He flipped a page. "Do not presume me to forget something so serious."

"There is tension between him and Potter," she said, beginning to pace around the office. "I see the way they look at each other—it was the same with his father and Severus when they were at their worst. Nothing good will come of it."

"All things reach a breaking point," Albus said softly. "If they do not resolve it now it will be worse later."

Minerva stopped. "And how do you propose they resolve it?" she asked.

Albus didn't look up from his book. "As all boys do."

"With violence?"

"It is better for them to lance and drain that boil than to let it fester," he said, and she made a face.

"And if one or both of them are irreparably harmed? Or worse, killed? All because you turned a blind eye?"

Albus toyed with the teacup that had appeared before him but did not drink from it. Another had been sent for her, and he motioned to it, inviting her to drink, but she did not move.

"I have confidence in both of them that they will not attempt something so foolish."

Her lips were set in a grim line. "They are boys. They hate each other. They have been carried away by emotions before, and you think it won't happen again?"

"I must believe in the best of them, Minerva. I know Harry will not disappoint me, and I have reason to believe Draco is not what he used to be."

She did not say anything for a minute, her eyes shrewd, her brows lowered. Finally, she approached the desk. "Albus. Why did you bring him back?"

"He will not be safe at his home. He will be under stronger influence from Voldemort than he already is. If we send him back we lose our chance."

"Having him here places the students in danger," Minerva said coldly, "especially Hermione Granger, whom he almost killed last year." She rapped on his desk with her knuckles. "He is already
in the clutches of the Dark Lord, if what you say is true. He has already nearly killed two students. There will be a third, and what will you say if he manages it?"

"He does not have it in him," Albus said, placing his hand over Minerva's. "He is struggling with what he must do."

"Then his parents should be dealing with it," she said dismissively, pulling her hand away. "They are the best equipped to help him with the indoctrination. You are putting us all at risk if you know that there will be more victims and yet say nothing. If anyone else knew you would be facing the Wizengamot."

"We have been tremendously lucky in the fact that he has killed no one yet, and that his heart does not seem to be in the task," Albus said. "Severus has been watching him to ensure no one is seriously hurt."

"Weasley ingested poison, Albus," she said angrily. "How is that not harmful?"

"He is alive and recovered, thanks to Harry."

"And if he hadn't been there?"

He raised a brow at her. "You do Slughorn a disservice, Minerva."

She calmed at once. "But you do understand my concern?"

"What else can I do, Minerva?" he asked quietly. "Push him into the arms of someone who wouldn't think twice about eating him alive?"

She remained silent.

"We helped Harry when he was an infant with nowhere else to go," he said. "Draco may not be a child any longer, but he is clearly confused with his sense of identity, and what he has believed all his life. You would leave him on his own?"

"He is almost an adult," she said, frowning. "He has made adult choices long before this point. He will have to deal with them, and I will have no part of it."

"He is a boy still," Albus replied, his voice rising. "Just as Harry is. They are the same age. They are both lost, and both are in need of guidance."

Minerva stared at him, her eyes suddenly narrowed with understanding.

"You think he can be saved."

Albus inclined his head, his eyes closing briefly. Fawkes the phoenix watched from his perch, his shiny black eyes curious. His shimmering plumage gleamed brightest above the other ornaments in the room.

"It is not too late to turn him away from the path he has chosen."

"What makes you so sure?" she asked suspiciously. "What makes you think you can do it?"

"I fear that if I reached out to him it would turn him immediately back to Voldemort," he said, chuckling. "We can't run the risk of turning him hostile else he will become desperate. The task falls to someone else."
She frowned, the creases between her brows deepening.

"You mean—"

He nodded again. His spectacles slid down the length of his nose with the motion, and he pushed them back up with a blackened finger. His hand shook uncontrollably.

She made an exasperated motion with her hands. "You cannot believe that will succeed. You will be throwing her into the hands of her near-killer."

"We have all done things we grow to be ashamed of, Minerva," he said, and she calmed. "Nonetheless, we as humans are gifted with the capacity to learn from our mistakes and our pasts and we hold the power of making a choice to either change, or remain the same." He took a long drink from his cup and when done, dabbed at his lips with his sleeve. "I have been made aware that the effort has already begun."

She did a double take. "They know, then. And they agreed to it?"

Albus chuckled. "Goodness, no. This has all happened organically, for lack of a better word," he said. "I was not made aware of this until several weeks ago."

"By whom?"

There was a sharp knock at the door, and Snape entered.

"Severus." Albus waved him closer, but the Potions master stayed in the center of the room. "I was not expecting you. Is something the matter?"

"I caught them together again," he said, his voice stiff, his mouth set in a curve to show he was displeased with his own news. "Last night."

Albus leaned back in his chair. "And what was it this time? Nothing terrible, I'm sure, or you'd have come sooner."

Severus's face was composed and calm but a sense of unrest pervaded the air around him.

"No. I saw his memories. He is on the verge of a breakdown, I am sure of it."

Albus sighed and rubbed at his forehead. "I had hoped he would have gone to Poppy for aid by now."

"He is too proud," Minerva said, shaking her head. "Just like his father."

Albus folded his hands over his desk. "What happened between them, Severus?"

"She found him outside her door. He was nearly incapacitated with some sort of pain. A migraine, I believe, but like none I've ever seen. The girl gave him potions to relieve it."

The room was filled with the shock of the other two.

Minerva's mouth had gone slack. She closed it quickly.

"She did this willingly? He did not attack her?" she asked.
"Yes. No."

"Did you get a sense of his feelings towards her?"

Here Snape's demeanor changed. He raised his head higher, as if wanting to shake something away. "He cares for her."

Minerva was the first to react after the second wave of shock.

"That cannot be."

"This is wholly unprecedented," Albus said, his brows raised. He leaned back more heavily in his chair.

"Do not tell me this is not what you wanted," Snape said, and the unrestrained anger that graced his countenance was almost frightening. "You hoped for it. You think this," he shook with the force of uttering the word, "is the way to save him. By throwing them at each other like knives as if they will stick."

"The way you say this makes me think his feelings lie deeper than simply caring for her," Albus said, looking at Snape from over his spectacles.

"I cannot tell," Severus said tightly. "I could feel his regret. He is afraid of her."

"Regret, fear..." Minerva shook her head. "This is all poppycock. Why would she help him, knowing what he's done to her? Why would he care for her, considering what he stands for? The Mark on his arm?"

Albus's eyes were fixed on Severus, who stood so stiffly that the strongest wind couldn't hold a single hope of moving one inch of him. Severus stared back at him, his face like stone, eyes hard and blank.

"She must have forgiven him or she would not have gone near him at all," Albus said.

"I doubt she has forgiven him completely," Minerva sniffed. "Pity can override the strongest of hatred. My only question is if she regrets it."

Severus's face hardly wavered, and Albus finally looked away.

"This was not their first interaction, as you have told me, Severus."

Minerva looked up sharply.

"No," Severus said.

"Did you get a glimpse of them?"

"She does not trust him. It is not merely him who fears her; they fear each other." Severus paused. "He wants her to forgive him."

Minerva's brows threatened to overtake her hairline.

"He also believes he will be killed along with his family."

"Then the Dark Lord truly is holding them hostage," Minerva said, recovering from her surprise. She began to pace around the room again. Fawkes watched her idly from his perch beside the
Headmaster's desk. "And Malfoy's mission…"

"We have been over this," Albus said gently.

"It will not work," she said. "You are relying on nothing but speculation, Albus."

He cracked a thin smile that was almost obscured between his beard and mustache. "Yet my record stands superior to yours."

She *humphed* and turned away. Severus rolled his eyes.

"I am trusting in you both," Albus said. "When the time comes you must both play your part. Everything relies on you doing this for me."

"Of course," Severus said, bowing slightly. Minerva still had her back to them, but she nodded.

"And what about Potter?" Severus's lips turned sharp to form the name, as if speaking around a mouthful of glass.

"He knows what he must do."

Minerva faced them again. "And Hermione Granger? You do not think she is still in danger from Malfoy?"

"I believe he is going through a great change," Albus said, finally standing from his desk. "If he was the same as he was last term then he would not be struggling as he is now, and he would have attacked her within the first week. Severus, you have been watching him. Tell me, is he still ill-managing his anger?"

"Not that I have seen."

"I am glad to hear it."

"You aim to protect him, then?" Severus asked.

"If possible. There's a chance we may save him, but interference on our part must be minimal. For now, at least."

Severus clenched his jaw. "And if he falls in love with her?"

Albus smiled again. "I cannot prevent or influence that. *She* may yet fall in love with *him*. It is up to them to sort it out."

"I believe we ought to work to prevent them falling in love," Severus said quickly. "Nothing good can come of it. If his parents or the Dark Lord learn of it, it will be disastrous."

"Lines would be blurred," Minerva said, nodding. "What happens if he turns against us again?"

"Whoever said he would turn to us in the first place?" Severus asked. "He is lost—the last thing he would want to do is join us. Not when the Dark Lord holds his parents over his head."

"I believe he will surprise us yet again," Albus said, stroking Fawkes's magnificently feathered head. "Draco may be confused, but he is intelligent. I expect he has begun to see the truth of what he has been taught."

"You think if he falls for her he will be willing to work for our side," Severus said accusingly, his
eyes flashing. "You have been pushing them together to get them to this point. What happens when
the Dark Lord learns of this, and has him killed? Or worse yet, the both of them?"

None of the three said anything for some moments. Severus waited impatiently.

"Minerva, I'm afraid I must be rude." Albus motioned to the door. "If you would be so kind?"

"Of course." She went to the door.

"I will find you later," he said as she left the room. She nodded to Severus, who bowed his head.

Once the door had closed behind her the Headmaster approached his guest.

"I have had nothing to do with this, Severus," Albus said, clasping his hands behind his back. "I
know it may seem that way to you but I have been far too busy these recent months to meddle
anywhere else."

"Yet you still hope for it. I know you do."

"True, I do love a good romance," Albus said. "If this one ever comes to fruition, and I daresay
there's as good a chance of it never happening as there is of it succeeding, it would make quite a
story. We can only hope that either way we may save him."

Severus's voice lowered. "And if he does die?"

"I will try to ensure that doesn't happen. But I cannot force him to do whatever he does not want to
do. He has to want help to receive it."

Severus remained unconvinced, the suspicion refusing to budge from his expression.

"It will not work," he said sourly, and Albus chuckled.

"For every time someone has said that to me, Severus, I have results that prove otherwise."

"Refusing to acknowledge your failures does not make you undefeated," Severus said angrily. "Do
not make light of my concern for the boy. I have sworn to protect him just as you took it upon
yourself to guide Potter."

Albus's expression shifted. Severus could see a flash of pity in the Headmaster's gaze as he looked at
him, and became resentful.

"Here I begin to think you are afraid that your past and his future will become nearly identical," he
said, stroking his beard.

Severus almost flinched. "Is it wrong of me to want to prevent him unnecessary pain?"

The tinkering and the whirring of the instruments around them seemed to intensify.

"How else do you think he will grow, Severus?"

"They will never succeed together," he said. "If it fails or if she rejects him it will turn him away
from us. It is better to prevent it happening altogether."

"Let things fall as they may," Albus said, and the sudden strength in his voice convinced Severus to
close his mouth as he had been preparing to further his argument. "You know he is already in love
with her and wish to reverse it. You will fail. We cannot hope to stall what is already in motion."
"I—"

Albus held up his good hand.

"On my orders, do not interfere unless they are in danger."

Severus looked most displeased, but gave a stiff bow. "Of course."

"Do I have your word, Severus?"

"I will do as you say," he said, and the Potions Master left the room.
Concealment

After several days of much deliberation and fretful scowling, Madame Pomfrey finally released Ron from the Infirmary on strict dietary guidelines and a warning that he come back without hesitation upon feeling any sort of discomfort at all. Everyone was glad he was not irreparably harmed and did their best to welcome him back heartily, Dean Thomas the chief among them who had returned the day before from hospital with his leg and foot intact, but an odd limp to his walk that he tolerated quite cheerfully, even joking about it when Ron pointed it out.

Despite the merry goings-on of the Gryffindor house, however, the mood around the castle had turned dreadfully tense, and it was all anyone could do not to feel as if Umbridge was back. The two attacks in such a close span of time had everyone on edge. Pansy, for whom it had taken most of the Gryffindor house several months to become convinced of her reform and accustomed to her presence around their table, was suddenly dealt with a reversal of attitude. Neville Longbottom, whom she'd liked to share jokes with to get him to laugh and relax from his anxiety, was now skittish around her again, though once or twice he'd approached her to attempt a conversation to let her know he did not think ill of her. Padma, with whom Pansy had had several conversations with and whose company she quite enjoyed was now avoiding her, and so were the majority of the younger students though Pansy never interacted with them much.

It didn’t take an Auror to figure out that someone was spreading rumors about her being behind the attacks, and she could only guess who that person was. Although she'd asked Charles point blank to his face he'd denied it vehemently, so what was she to do?

Suddenly it was easy to understand how Harry must have felt in the past years when people had accused him of doing things he'd had no involvement in. She'd been one of those very people who had helped in spreading rumors and had mocked him along with Draco, and now she was the one on the other side of it, and it felt awful, though she supposed she'd had it coming for all her past misdeeds.

Her new friends, at least, were her champions, and it made all the difference. Now that she'd taken up sitting closer to the Gryffindors (but not too close, or it would arouse suspicion from her own House) whenever someone made a scathing remark or would stare, Ginny would volley back at them with such fervor that few dared engage with her. Hermione, too, would ask in that sinfully polite voice of hers if anything was the matter, and that added with her challenging, steadfast stare plus her status as prefect would make the aggravator rethink their tactic, and most of the time, they would walk away, displeased but unwilling to keep on for fear of punishment. Harry and Ron would do it less politely, and though she'd been alarmed at first, she didn't mind.

It was not lost on the other students, nor on herself, the utter oddity of seeing Harry Potter and Ron Weasley stand up for Pansy Parkinson. Despite how careful she'd been, her own House had noticed her sudden affinity for their rival house, and while not saying anything direct about it, had made known their opinions by distancing themselves from her. When she, Ginny and Hermione spent time at the library they sat at the far back where less people were bound to come across them, and she'd started to limit the amount of time she stayed at the Gryffindor table during meals, too. She had to sit facing away from the Slytherin table to avoid the looks she was getting. She was glad no one knew yet of her visit to the Gryffindor common room, as she imagined there would be quite the racket over it.

The rest of the student body had worries of their own to keep them busy. Students found themselves glancing up at the walls where Umbridge's decrees had once been held, but the relief they felt at not
seeing them was only short-lived. Throughout the castle on the coldest nights, more than one soul
was kept awake by the harsh memories of their punishments under Umbridge. Though there was no
mention of it in the Prophet, more Muggleborn witches and wizards were being taken into custody,
which the Quibbler had written a piece about. Perhaps most astonishing and grim was the news that
Ollivander had disappeared. A crude carving of the Dark Mark was found on the walls of his home,
and his shop suffered shattered windows and appeared to have been searched, though nothing was
found missing.

Some of the Professors, as they had done during the first attack, did their best to remedy the black
moods growing within the castle. Hagrid was fostering unicorns at his hut again, and droves of
curious students braved the cold to go and gawk at the beautiful creatures. Professor Sprout
requested help from anyone who might give it in tending to her plants, and Neville, her favorite
student, was always the first to volunteer and make hot chocolate for the students (mainly
Hufflepuffs) who gathered at the greenhouse. Professor Slughorn halted his plans for more Slug
Club parties and instead hosted study sessions complete with trivia games for his subject, which
everyone found they greatly enjoyed. He held races to make simple potions and convinced everyone
to play games that tested their knowledge on potion-making and stewed a surprising sense of
camaraderie that nobody had felt in the castle since the early days of Umbridge's hold over
Hogwarts, when they had collectively tried to drive her out.

The students were allowed to split into teams regardless of House, and while it took a moment for
them to get used to being all mixed together this feeling of awkwardness was soon forgotten once the
games began and the competitiveness took over. No House points were awarded for any wins, to
their disappointment, but Slughorn passed out candies and promised extra credit to the victors.

It was all great fun for everyone else, but Hermione, among others, did not participate. She would
have been better tempted to had Ron not almost died. Though she understood what the Professors
were trying to do, she couldn't help but feel that it was having a bit of a negative effect that no one
else could see yet. It felt like they were cheapening the seriousness of the events happening around
them. The takeover of the Ministry and the Daily Prophet, the disappearances and murders, the
attacks inside the school. A few days of fun could only do so much to help them forget, and what
would have been the point of it all when it was over? Everyone would become suspicious again,
fearful. Ron might still be ill, after all, and nothing could shake Harry from his dogged determination
that Malfoy was the one who was behind it all.

In the midst of all this, Hermione found comfort in the oddest of places. Ever the one to remain
unmoved in the face of bleak times, Professor Snape did nothing to contribute to the endeavors of his
colleagues, and held his classes in the same manner of contempt that he always did.

In today's case, it was no different. He had just finished giving his lecture near the end of class, and
having some minutes to spare, coldly instructed the class to sit and read in advance the chapter for the
next lesson. Talking was not allowed.

Everyone obeyed sullenly, not even daring to glance at their watches to see how many minutes
remained until the bell freed them. Most of them only pretended to be reading their books; Seamus
and Dean Thomas were playing a game of hangman, Padma was sketching something discreetly into
her notes, her dark eyes gleaming with intensity as she stared down at her paper.

Hermione wondered whether Pansy knew of Malfoy's late night walks. She had resumed spending
time with Hermione and the others again, and Hermione had welcomed her back without raising
question to her absence over the past weeks, understanding that she needed time to herself, especially
considering her ties to her House, which though they still hadn't talked about quite in depth,
Hermione knew they ran deeper than she could see.
Hermione had just finished the chapter and closed her book when Ron addressed her quietly from behind.

"Your scarf's on the floor."

Hermione pushed back her chair a little and seeing it, bent down to grab it, but Ron had had the same idea; she'd already grabbed it by the time he was leaning down, so when she pulled back a little and saw him there, she reeled back in surprise and slammed the top of her hand and her knee on the underside of her table.

The sound stole everyone's attention. There was the original crack of her bones against the heavy wood, and her pained exclamation immediately after, mingled with Ron's hasty "Sorry!" The rustle of everyone's clothing as they turned to her side of the room was quite comedic, but overshadowed by the sense of dread one felt when something occurred that was not of Snape's approval.

He looked up calmly, as if having expected disaster all along.

"May I remind you, Ms. Granger, that I asked for silence."

The whole class went still.

She flushed. "I'm sorry, Professor." She felt Ron's hand squeezing her shoulder briefly in apology. "I hurt my hand."

"You might have avoided that if you'd followed my simple instructions to read and do nothing else," he replied.

Knee still stinging, Hermione sat up slowly.

"I was finished reading, Professor."

"Then you should have sat in silence and not made a spectacle of yourself."

Hermione frowned.

"I don't know," Harry spoke up suddenly, "this seems more of a spectacle than anything I've seen today. You're dragging on something that lasted only a second."

Someone tittered.

"That's ten points for your lip, Potter," Snape said, his lip curling. "Speak again and I will add a detention."

Hermione held her breath, and so did the rest of the class, but Harry remained silent. Snape's disdainful stare lingered on him for a second longer before he finally looked away.

"Get back to reading," he said to the rest of the class. Everyone obeyed hastily except for Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

Snape's eyes settled back on Hermione. Her book was closed, and she knew he wouldn't like that.

"That means you as well, Miss Granger. I don't care if you have already finished it."

"I've already read it twice, Professor. I know it by heart."

Snape's eyes glittered meanly. She realized an idea had struck him, and waited tersely, not knowing
"Perhaps it would do you good to end your late night excursions with Malfoy, so you may have the energy to remember your manners the next morning. It is not in good taste to brag over oneself."

There was a stunned silence—louder than the one before. She could feel the stare of the entire room on her, and couldn't prevent the blush that overtook her face, hotter than steaming tea, and was inexplicably aware of Harry and Ron's shocked silence. Immediately she was grateful Malfoy himself wasn't in the room, though she knew word would get out the moment the class ended. Somebody was laughing, she didn't dare check who it was for fear of losing her temper.

"That's not true!" Ron said suddenly, standing from his chair. "You liar!"

"Get back in your seat," Snape snarled, "or that will be fifty points in addition to your detention."

Hermione grabbed his arm and pulled down hard; he resisted, glaring at Professor Snape, but sat back down without another word.

"That isn't fair, Professor," she said, fighting to keep her voice calm and unaffected when in reality she wanted nothing more than to leave the room. "For you to make insinuations in front of an entire classroom is not only grossly unprofessional but also inappropriate, and I would be wholly within my right to make a complaint."

There was a loud gasp. A whisper or two broke out. She knew why—she had never defended herself in his class before. Hermione kept her eyes locked onto Snape's, who, if he had been shocked by her reply, did not show it, but his anger was evident.

"See me after class," he said, in the coldest voice anyone had ever heard him use. "Potter, Weasley, you will meet me for detention tomorrow night after dinner." Then he strode back to his desk. Shaken, Hermione bent her head and tried to discreetly wipe her eyes.

Ron slipped her a note from behind.

What the hell was that?

She shook her head and shoved it into her book. I'll have to tell them. But how much?

They were still expecting a reply. Hermione couldn't bring herself to write one.

The second the bell rang the classroom was already half empty. The doorway was crammed with bodies fleeing the room—either to escape Snape's simmering anger or to spread the gossip, or both.

"Hey." Ron's hand found her shoulder. Hermione wanted to shrug it off.

"Hi." She tried to smile.

"We'll wait outside for you," Harry said.

"No," Hermione rubbed at her forehead. "No, go on without me."

"Are you sure?" Ron asked.

"Yes," she said. "We'll talk later."

Harry and Ron left her reluctantly. Hermione's nerve had found itself again—she approached the front of the room without fear.
Snape didn't look up from whatever he was writing. His ugly, deformed scrawl covered half a roll of parchment. He made her wait until he had come to its end before he spoke.

"I do not tolerate talking back in my class. You and your classmates ought to know by now."

Hermione fought not to cow down like he wanted her to. "I'm well aware, Professor, but you crossed a line bringing that up in front of the class."

He looked up at last and put his quill down. There was no better way to describe his gaze than with the word static. His eyes rarely betrayed anything, appearing almost dead much of the time, to an unsettling effect that drove others away from him. Looking at them, it was impossible to determine any emotion other than disdain, if he even bothered to show it, that being his default state. It reminded Hermione of the soulless stares of the Death Eaters that had escaped from Azkaban.

"Anyone who disrupts my class does not receive special treatment."

"A wish for privacy and respect does not mean I want special treatment, Professor."

"Is that all you wanted to discuss? I have other pressing matters to attend to." He turned back to his papers, clearly dismissing her. Hermione refused to move.

"In the one instance you came across Malfoy and I, I was not breaking any rules. Not only that, your plural use of the word 'excursion' means that you are aware it's happened more than once, although accidentally, and I'd like to know how you know that."

He looked up at her somewhat impatiently. "Is there something you'd like to hide?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "No."

"Do not fall under the assumption that all goings-on in this castle are secret," he said slowly. Hermione wasn't satisfied by that answer. Irritated, he looked up. "Sound travels easily in large, empty spaces. It would be wise of you to take care where you choose to have your...meetings."

Hermione's jaw clenched. What was he trying to say by insisting on this?

"They are accidental, not planned as you suggest, Professor."

"And yet they happen continuously." He narrowed his eyes at her. "Is there a reason why?"

"There is no reason other than the fact that he takes walks around the castle at night and keeps ending up outside my quarters. I think it's him you should talk to, Professor, not me."

"Then it would behoove you not to draw my ire by disobeying my orders and disrupting my class."

Hermione fought not to glare at him. "I'll keep that in mind, Sir."

"For the first offense I would assign you an extra half foot to tonight's assignment, but I highly doubt that will humble you. For the second I leave you with a warning: Next time it will be detention or worse."

Hermione supposed this thin veiled attempt was the closest thing she would get to an apology.

"Thank you, Professor."

He picked up his quill again. Hermione turned to leave the room.
"Has Mr. Malfoy been harassing you, Ms. Granger? Is that why he often ends up by your room?"

She froze. *You're one year too late for that question.*

"No, Sir."

He placed his quill in his inkpot and stared at her.

"Then may I ask what he was doing outside your door."

"I don't know. Mere coincidence, according to him, but it's not my business, Professor."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "Whatever he was doing, it was clear he was violating curfew. Yet you did not punish him."

"I-well you arrived shortly after, Professor."

Did he ever blink? Hermione's eyes felt painfully dry just to look at him.

"But you did nothing."

Hermione fought her blush. His stare indicated he thought he knew her secret. Hermione squared her shoulders.

*Smirk all you want, I don't have one.*

Hermione readjusted her bag strap on her shoulder. Why did she feel nervous?

"Will that be all, Sir?"

He looked away at last, and picked up his quill.

"You may leave."

Hermione ducked into the first alcove she could find once she was away from the dungeons. Her hands shook and she wasn't exactly sure why.

Harry and Ron would be waiting for her. What would she tell them? There was nothing to worry about; she was innocent. But would they believe her?

When she found herself in front of them in the Astronomy Tower, they looked expectant.

"You've been meeting with Malfoy?" Ron was the first to speak. "Tell me I heard wrong, Hermione."

"Has he threatened you again?" Harry crossed his arms. "Is this why you haven't told us?"

"No," she said quickly. "Nothing of the sort."

"Well?" Ron asked, raising his arms questioningly.

"Professor Snape phrased it that way to imply something worse," she said.

His brows knit together. "So you're not meeting with Malfoy after hours."

"No, of course not," she replied, and Ron relaxed.
"Then what's he talking about?" Harry asked.

"A few months ago I was up late and heard noise out in the corridor, so I went out to check and found Malfoy sneaking around. I questioned him a little and he admitted he'd been walking around at night because he couldn't sleep. Professor Snape found us talking and said he'd take over, and that was it."

"You believed him?"

"I would have known if he'd been lying," she told Ron sharply. "He didn't exactly look in the proper state for hatching up a cover story."

"What did Snape say when he found you?" Harry asked.

"He was suspicious and wanted to give me a detention though it was Malfoy who was out during curfew. I told him so and after Malfoy said it was the truth Snape said he would take care of it."

"But did Malfoy threaten you? Did he hurt you?" Harry asked intently.

"No. He said he hadn't even known that I lived there."

"What a load of bollocks," Ron said, rolling his eyes.

Hermione loosened her tie. "I believe him."

They stared at her.

"How?"

"I've had him under blackmail since the end of last year," she said. "I made sure he knew that if he bothered me again there would be consequences, and he had been following my terms up until that incident."

"He could still have been lying, Hermione," Harry said.

"I know," she said. "Believing him wasn't the first thing I did, obviously."

Ron looked upset. "Has it really happened more than once? You think he's following you again?"

"There's no point. And yes, it's happened at least twice. Both completely accidental, and he never made any threats."

"Then what did he do?"

Hermione frowned. "Nothing. He was just trying to get by and I caught him. The Slytherin common room is nearby, after all."

"Then why is he always up so late?" Harry asked. "I don't believe that he's walking around just to get himself to fall asleep."

"Take a look at his face and that'll convince you, mate," Ron said. "He looks as if he's never shut his eyes longer than two seconds."

Harry still looked suspicious.

"You've talked to him, then," he said slowly. "Has he said anything interesting? Anything odd at
Hermione faltered. He had, in fact. Several things.

'Thank you.'

'I wish I hadn't done that to you.'

'I'm sorry.'

And so much more. It made her head spin to remember them all at once.

But to share them required context, and she was not sure she wanted to divulge with them all the unsettlingly confusing things that had happened between herself and Malfoy so far. She knew she should, but could not bring herself to. What if she turned out wrong in the end, and Malfoy had played her successfully to achieve some mysterious mean? No, she would take precaution where it was needed, and would explain later once she was sure. For now, it was too early to tell, and she did not want to deal with the flood of questions (and possible hostility) that would meet her if she told them everything from the beginning.

"No," she said, and the curiosity in their stares faded. "We barely talk, but he's been civil."

"Well why didn't you tell us before?" Harry asked.

"You know if there was anything remotely incriminating that he'd said or done, I'd have told you two," she said, crossing her arms. "But he hasn't. He doesn't seem himself."

She stopped speaking quickly before she could utter anything else.

"I've seen it, too," Harry said. "He seems off."

"Maybe it's on purpose," Ron suggested, stretching. "Get everyone's focus off him so he can do what he wants in the background."

Hermione shifted on her feet. "Maybe."

"We should head down to dinner," Ron said after a pause.

"Are you coming, Hermione?" Harry looked at her expectantly.

"I'm not hungry," she said at once though her stomach was threatening to growl at any moment. "I've got to study, anyhow. I'll see you both tomorrow."

They parted ways and Hermione immediately set off for the library, fighting the headache that had grown from her conversation with Harry and Ron. Upon reaching it, however, she found herself wanting to do anything else but study. It was highly unusual, but she decided to humor the feeling, for once. It had been really late when she'd come across Malfoy one day ago, anyhow, and she'd got hardly any sleep since then, so perhaps all she needed was rest. A small nap was just what she needed. She would have one and then get back to work.

Stewing in her own thoughts, Hermione didn't pay much attention to her surroundings until she neared a corner, about to turn into it, and collided with someone who was about to do the same.

"Oh—" she looked up, ready to apologize when she met the eyes of the very person whom she'd found nearly sprawled on the floor only a day ago.
He was freshly washed and dressed; she could smell the various scents of soap and shampoo, the freshness of his cloak. The agitated, raw expression of his eyes that had haunted her all night into the late morning was gone, replaced by an alert curiosity as he looked at her. His hair had been trimmed. Excepting the stubborn hollows around his eyes and the slightly gaunt-sharpness of his cheekbones, he looked as if he had slipped his old skin back on. Still, there was something critically different, and it was all in the way he looked at her. Hermione found herself unable to look away, and struck with the awareness of it and his gaze, she floundered, trying to think of something to say because it seemed he was a lost as she was. Desperate, she uttered the first thing that came to mind.

"You look better."

There, that broke the spell. He blinked, and she felt her shoulders relax.

"Feeling it, too."

"Good," she replied, nodding. "Good."

They turned into the corridor and began to walk together. Without knowing it, both were considering walking faster to avoid the other, but did not want to do it for fear of showing that they were afraid of the confrontation. Instead, they walked as a pair stubbornly, awkwardly. As they advanced further on, passing other adjoining corridors, they both realized they were heading in the same direction, and would have to tolerate the other for a while longer. After realizing there was nothing else to do but grapple the situation head on, Draco finally emerged from his tense silence.

"Am I to expect a Howler in my post?"

She took a moment to respond.

"No."

Draco stopped walking, and she followed suit. There was no one around but them.

"Why not?"

"I think that's the last thing you need right now," she said earnestly.

A flash of anger passed through him.

"I don't want your pity," he snapped. "I broke your rules, Granger. For the third time, isn't it? What's keeping you from doing it?"

"I know you did," she said, pushing her hair away from her eyes. "It's just..."

"Well?"

"Look," she said, crossing her arms, "I don't know what it is you're going through, but you need help."

He looked at her, stunned.

"I don't need help." His voice echoed along the empty corridor. Help, help, help.

"What if I hadn't found you last night?" she asked quietly, her eyes challenging him. She took a step forward. "Half out of your mind, smelling of alcohol, I almost thought you'd been jinxed or that you'd knocked your head against something. You could have been expelled."
"What do you care if I get expelled? I thought you'd think it overdue from last year."

She pulled her collar away from her throat. "Things feel different now."

He stared at her. "I don't understand you, Granger."

"Nor I you," she replied coolly.

"It was a mistake," he admitted, "I shouldn't have gotten drunk. I didn't know-"

"-know what you were doing," she finished for him. "Yes, I've heard that from you before."

He paused.

"I was going to say I didn't know where I was," he said, ignoring the sting of truth. "I had a troll of a headache; I could barely see where I was going."

"Which is why I'm saying you need to see someone about it. Don't lie to me, whatever it was I saw was only the tip of the iceberg."

He glared at her. "I don't need help," he repeated. It was all he could think to say.

"Were those potions not what you needed?" she jabbed a finger into his chest. "If that isn't what you wanted then what do you want? Were you trying to provoke me into coming through with my threat?"

Her finger was still poking into his chest. The second she'd touched him his mind had been wiped of all thought.

"Well?" She asked. "Is that what you want?"

He didn't answer. She withdrew her hand.

"Then drop it," she said curtly. "I'm allowing this one because I thought you were really ill and I wanted to help. Next time I might just send the letters and not bother opening my door."

"Fine." He started walking. "Send the letters or don't. It doesn't matter anymore."

"How do you mean?" she asked, frowning, but he pretended that he hadn't heard her and kept going.

"Don't be afraid to ask for help, Malfoy," she said, catching up to him. Draco stopped and turned to face her. The sunlight filtering in through the windows caught in her hair, and it glowed that familiar red gold. Her look of frustration was arresting—he almost forgot what he meant to say.

"Why did you help me?"

She faltered, her brows lowering.

"I don't know."

Draco stared at her. "You must if you're so sure you're not going to call retribution."

She looked up. "Whatever's going on with you, it's none of my business. But I've seen similar things in people I care about. I can't look away when someone needs help."

"Even if it's me?"
She looked down at the floor as she formulated her response. Draco watched her, fighting the incredulosity he felt. If she still hated him, she would not have helped him. She would have shut the door in his face and left him there. She would not be struggling to reason with why she’d done it. The realization left him feeling more elated than he felt he deserved to be.

Finally, she looked up. There was so much conflict written all over her that he felt if he pulled a loose thread of her hair, of her cloak, it would take an age before she might untangle and unravel. He wondered if she saw the same in him.

"Whatever my feelings are regarding you, you looked like death. I couldn't let you suffer like that. It looked awful."

*It was,* he thought.

He wasn't sure how to reply. "Will you be wanting the potions back?"

"Keep them," she said. "I usually have a small stock for emergencies."

"Thank you," he told her for the third time in his life.

She nodded awkwardly. Draco flexed his hands.

"Pansy worries about you a lot," she said suddenly.

Draco's stomach twisted. "I know."

She gave him another strange look. She shifted, moving as if she wanted to place a hand on his arm but thought better of it in the last second.

"You're not alone, Malfoy. Remember that." She turned and left.
The Attack

After the awkward encounter with Granger in the corridor, he rushed off to the Slytherin quarters before he could run into anybody else. His plan was to try to sleep for an hour or two, and if that was unachievable then he would go to dinner, and if he could gather the courage, then visit the Room of Requirement and work on the cabinet some more.

Granger's potions really had helped, and for the first several hours of the day he'd felt truly rejuvenated, like he'd injected a Pepperup potion into his veins, or like he'd gotten a year's worth of sleep in one night. However, the results gradually wore off and he was left feeling rather worn, if not still better.

Draco had just finished taking off his shoes and set them by the foot of his bed when the door of his dormitory opened rather violently. He turned to face it, expecting to see Blaise or Theodore.

Pansy stood there instead, her face flushed and eyes bright, breathing heavily as if she'd just run all the way there, which he had no doubt she had.

She said nothing, still trying to catch her breath.

Draco looked at her curiously. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," she said, and straightened. "Get your shoes back on. We need to talk."

"I was hoping to sleep some," he said, looking over at his pillow rather wistfully.

"Sorry to disrupt the plan," she said, going over to the coatrack in the corner of the dormitory to collect his cloak. She tossed it to him. "This is urgent and I'd rather not do it here."

Draco pulled it on along with his shoes. "Where are we going?"

The snow in the courtyard was starting to melt. Draco felt it give underneath his feet and the watery mess that it became, and was glad he'd cast an Impervius on his shoes before coming outside.

"What did you want to talk about?" he asked.

She hesitated before speaking. "According to the gossips around the school, Snape said something very interesting during Potions class earlier today."

Draco frowned. "What, did Potter get in trouble again? You brought me all the way out here to tell me that?"

"Hermione got in trouble, not Harry," she said, and he paused mid-step.

"Her? What did she do?" He couldn't remember the last time she'd ever gotten in trouble with Snape.

"It was something stupid that he blew out of proportion," she said dismissively. "But she argued with him, and then he said something about you and her meeting at night."

Draco felt his stomach lurch.

"And what did she say?"

Pansy looked at him from the corner of her eye. "She threatened to report him."
Draco felt the urge to smile, but that was drowned out quickly by the realization that if Pansy knew, then the rest of the school probably did too.

What would his House say? Would they believe it? From what Pansy had told him, they were already giving her the cold shoulder for sitting at the Gryffindor table.

Another stupid problem to deal with. Draco shoved his hands into his pockets. He would tell them the truth. Nothing had happened. They would believe him, and he would have to be more careful from now on if he didn't want everyone knowing his business.

Not that there was really anything to guard, besides the obvious. Every time he looked her in the eye time seemed to stop, but that was something he could hide easily. No one could hear the way his heart stuttered whenever she came near, and that was a relief, because he had enough to worry about already. The fact that Pansy had caught onto it, however, was alarming.

Snape had come across them once. He had glimpsed into Draco's memories, too. Just how much had he seen? How much did he know?

And most confusing—why bring it up in front of a class? What business was it of his?

Nothing made any sense.

He'd seen Granger earlier and she hadn't said a word about this. She hadn't been angry or upset.

"So it's true?"

He blinked and scrubbed at his face. "Yeah."

She nodded, eyes slightly wide, not knowing what to say.

"It isn't what you think, Pansy."

She shrugged. "I don't even know what I was thinking. What is it, then?"

"She found me walking around the castle at night. We talked. That's it."

She looked dubious. "It doesn't seem it would be as simple as that."

He pulled his scarf tighter around his throat. "Nothing's changed, Pansy. She just gave me some potions to help me sleep and ran me off."

Pansy crossed her arms, her expression of disbelief. "How can you say nothing's changed when she helped you?"

Draco nearly slipped on a hidden patch of ice, but caught himself just in time to regain his balance.

"I was a pathetic mess, Pansy. She acted out of pity. If I hadn't looked like I was about to pass out she'd have cursed me all the way to Dumbledore's office."

A drop of water landed on his head, then another on his coat. Plip, plip. Draco looked at them, then at the sky. Would it rain?

"You didn't tell me you were ill," Pansy said after a moment.

"I'm not."
"Then what is it? You said you were about to pass out."

"A headache. A migraine." He pushed his hair away from his eyes. "Felt like I'd die from it."

"You should have gone to Pomfrey," she said, patting his arm. "What if you'd collapsed somewhere and hadn't been found until morning?"

Draco shook his head. Another raindrop hit him on the tip of his nose, forcing him to blink. "Pomfrey would ask too many questions."

She had felt the rain, too, and they both turned quickly to head back to the castle. The ground was such a muddy, icy mess that it was a rough trip and they were both irritated and out of breath when they reached the front steps. The doors to the entrance loomed before them. Neither moved to step inside, even when the rain began to fall more steadily.

"Is it ready?" she asked under her breath.

"No."

"Thank Merlin," she sighed, and he couldn't summon the energy to nod his agreement. "What will you do?"

"I don't know." His hair was wet through already, running down from his scalp to his eyes. Draco wiped it away. "I have to fix it."

She grabbed his hand. "What if we went to Dumbledore?"

"He'd throw me out of the castle."

"You don't know that."

"I'm a threat to the school," he said angrily. "I've sent two people to hospital already. Who will I hurt next?" he gave a dry laugh though his hands had begun to shake. "My Father wrote to me this morning. He says I should be disappointed in myself for not having done it sooner."

"Like he could do it so easily," Pansy said bitterly. "Locked up with the Dark Lord like that…"

"He's ashamed of me," Draco said, and it felt like a weight coming off his shoulders to admit it. "He always has been."

Pansy was watching him carefully, blinking away the rain that dripped from her fringe.

"He never really hid it," he said softly, "but I thought if I did what he wanted it would change his mind. I tried so hard, like the little brainwashed idiot I was. When I got older he didn't seem to care so long as I didn't stray." He grinned, turned to Pansy. "Look at me now."

_In love with a Mu—with Granger and constantly fighting the impulse to peel this Mark from my skin._

"He should be ashamed of himself, then," Pansy said. "He should focus on his own failures rather than berate you for yours."

Draco nodded, looking absently at the ground. He squeezed her hand once, and she squeezed it back. Together, they walked into the castle.

Nobody said anything. There were hardly any whispers when he walked by. Mostly, all he got were odd looks. He didn't know which one he preferred. He figured it would have been worse were
Granger in the vicinity.

It was only a rumor, he told himself. There was no evidence behind it. Who else but he and Granger knew exactly what Snape referred to? Still, there had been an insinuation, as Pansy had said, and people would make assumptions.

_You have to be careful_, he told himself. It would become a mantra for him in time. _Be careful._

The castle kept throwing them together. Or maybe he still didn't want to accept the fact that he gravitated towards her like she was the sun. But whatever there was between them could go no farther.

_You're conceited enough to assume that it could ever get farther than your fancy for her_, the voice whispered to him. _She'll never reciprocate._

_I know_, he thought.

"You have a habit of getting caught in rain, do you?"

Draco, who had been waiting to be addressed in the doorway, stepped inside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Snape watched him from his desk, his nose crinkling with disdain.

"Have you forgotten you are capable of magic, and thus keeping yourself dry? Do not track that into my classroom." Snape gave a sharp flick of his wand, and Draco was buffeted by a gust of heat that dried him off instantly.

"I want to know why you think you're fit to tell everyone what I get up to when it's none of your business," he said coldly, approaching the desk.

"Is it a secret?" Snape asked, lifting one brow. He sat rigid and proud at his desk, one hand over the other.

"No."

"Then if you have nothing to hide, why are you angry?"

"I'm not. I don't like everyone knowing my business. You're drawing attention to me when that's the last thing I need."

Snape leaned forward slightly. "You've spoken with her again."

Draco blinked, frowning. "No I—"

"You will have to try harder than that to lie to me, Draco," Snape said, his emotionless voice wringing a shudder from Draco's spine. "You've let yourself grow so weak that you don't even recognize when I'm in your mind. You spoke to her again this morning."

"Stop looking into my memories," Draco snarled.

"What did she say, Draco?" Snape asked calmly.

Draco didn't answer.

"I've already seen it, so it's no use thinking not answering will protect yourself."
"Then why bother asking?"

"I want to see your expression when you tell me the last thing she told you."

Draco's heart skipped a beat.

He knows. Or at least, suspects.

Taking care not to let too long a pause persist, he settled his face into a mask. It wasn't hard; he'd had ample practice.

"She told me I'm not alone."

Snape studied him closely. Draco braced himself for another invasion into his memories, but felt nothing. He held the stare, allowing himself to think of nothing. Even the most inconsequential thought could be used as a weapon. Snape had taught him that lesson years ago.

"What do you feel towards her?"

Draco frowned. "Nothing. Why would I feel anything for her?"

He'd said that perhaps a little too quickly, and they both knew it. Draco bit at the inside of his cheek.

Snape didn't break the stare for the next several agonizing seconds. Luckily, Draco had had practice in this too, and did not blink until Snape finally looked away.

"This is the only warning I will give you," he said, rising from his seat to turn his back and stare out the grimy window behind his desk. "Devote more effort to convincing yourself what you just told me. Either way, I am sure you will regret it, but you are stubborn, and if you choose to continue this path you will suffer."

Draco stared at the ground, his ears hot and cold at the same time. Without meaning to, the image of her: wary, illuminated, and intent with concern as she peered into his eyes, not caring that he was the enemy, not caring that they were both in their nightwear, not caring that he appeared insane.

"It isn't that way," he said, clearing his throat. "That isn't what's happening here."

"Don't lie to yourself, Draco," came Snape's voice, sharper than before. "Accept the truth, and then remove yourself from it. Fulfill your mission and keep yourself safe."

Draco thought furiously, his brows bent, eyes glued onto the floor.

Snape waited for an answer, or for him to leave. He did not turn back around to face him.

"I'm in danger either way," Draco said, his voice low. He turned and left.

The next day after class Hermione settled herself in the library in one of its upper floors, bent over a roll of parchment upon which she had written a rough draft of a paper for History of Magic that was due in a fortnight, and was currently adding more to it along the margins in red ink. By grace of it being Friday, the library was mostly empty and that was just the way she liked it, when there weren't other people whispering and making lots of noise to break through her concentration, which she desperately was trying to keep herself in to keep other thoughts out.

There was not much else sound other than her scribbling and occasional frustrated sighs. The sun had begun to set already; its golden beams reaching through the tall and narrow windows and
shifting around the library like the hands of a clock as time passed.

The library was designed so that the upper floors only took up a wide border around its perimeter, with staircases leading up to the next floor and then the next. This led to the main floor being almost completely visible from the upper floors.

Hermione hadn't realized until long after she'd begun her assignment that she was sitting nearly above the same area Malfoy had cornered her the year before. It was no different from the rest of the library but when she'd looked at it she could remember and see the exact spot she'd stood at when he'd told her the DA had been betrayed.

Again her mind shifted to the way the emotions in his gaze had immediately shifted when he'd discovered her the day she'd been spying on him. Hate to astonishment. A perfect picture of instant regret. Hermione had been replaying it in her head since the moment she'd left the room, still unable to believe it. Then his crouched, agonized figure just beyond her door, clutching at his head like it was about to burst. The way he'd thanked her for the potions after, his eyes raw and eerily distant as if he weren't there at all.

His remarkable recovery from the day after, when they'd collided in the corridor. Of course, a silly pack of potions couldn't heal everything, especially troubles of the mind, but he'd looked almost like himself again, and it was startling.

The images just kept coming. They just stacked on top of each other, one by one, all from the start when he'd first accosted her outside the Room of Requirement and forced to kiss his boot to just yesterday, when he'd stood before her and said 'thank you,' for the third time ever.

Hermione blinked hard and glared at her scroll, the tip of her quill digging in harder to the parchment until it pierced through and tore a small hole at the end of her sentence.

She dropped her quill at once and leaned all the way back into her seat with her arms crossed. Her right hand was cramped and aching, when she looked down at it the scars there stood out vividly amongst the red flesh of her flushed fist.

Perhaps there was some truth to the rumors of his family being held hostage by Voldemort after all. Hermione couldn't imagine what else could have him in such a state.

Perhaps he was a changeling of sorts. He had proved he was not under Polyjuice but he had to be some kind of imposter. Hermione sighed and ran her hands over her face. The memory of herself crying in front of him in the Room of Requirement came up again, and then the one of her breaking down in Umbridge's office, too, made her face burn with embarrassment.

She had to suppose it didn't matter anymore. She couldn't take the tears back so it was time lost to blush about it.

The redness had faded from her fist. Hermione flexed her hand to make the scars stand out again.

"The more you pause the more you'll feel it. Write faster."

She'd thought he was taunting her when he'd said it. He'd looked too happy to see her bloodied hand in the beginning, but by the end of the detention there'd been no trace of that smugness when it had ended.

Hermione rubbed at her cold arms.

He'd whispered something to her, too, during their final meeting with Umbridge. She'd been
struggling to get away, too furious and frightened to listen properly or even care.

For all I know he was calling me a Mudblood under his breath.

But how could she be sure? Malignant or benign, did it matter now? He'd apologized. He'd changed, but was it enough?

How much longer until I can't keep denying that he's genuine?

He had not hurt her even though she had spied on him. He had given her back her wand and had repeatedly asked if she was okay. He had not called her a Mudblood when the chance was open. He'd stood outside her door and said thank you.

And there was so much more.

It was all so surreal. Too surreal.

Hermione clasped a bit of her robe in her hands, twisting the fabric tight.

Can I forgive him? Can I even say the words to his face without fear?

There was still that mistrust. It nagged at her thoughts, and Hermione was half-inclined to listen to them.

'I understand completely. I've been horrible to you for years. That cannot be easy to put aside.'

He was right—but so far, despite her misgivings, he had proved that he had changed. She was not ready to fully forgive him, not in the least, but she could try to start.

I never thought this would happen.

Things were so much easier when they were stuck in black and white. This new Malfoy was a firm, cloudy grey and she didn't know whether she liked it or not.

"Here you are."

Hermione jumped as Pansy dropped herself into the seat beside her at her table. Harry and Ron were right behind her, waving their greeting. Pansy squeezed her shoulder and smiled.

"You know, I don't think I ever thanked you for those notes you copied down for me while I was sick last month, Hermione," she said, rummaging through her bag. "You saved my life—Flitwick had an exam the day I got back and I'd have failed it."

Hermione caught Ron's eye across the table and lifted one eyebrow, smiling. He made a face at her good-naturedly,

"You're welcome... Does anyone else smell smoke?" Hermione asked, looking 'round.

Ron sniffed the air. "No."

"That's odd, because your collar's all singed," Pansy said, pointing to it.

Ron looked at it. "Ah, shit, I forgot."

"What happened?" Hermione asked, her eyes wide. "We just had Potions before dinner and I don't remember you being on fire."
Ron's expression told her he had no clue, either, but Harry's pointedly looking away told her otherwise. Hermione zeroed in.

"Harry."

"Yeah?" he faced her, taking off his glasses to wipe them on his sleeve.

"What happened?"

"We may or may not have mishandled our potion while you were in the store room," he said, putting his glasses back on. "And somehow it ended up on our clothes."

Hermione looked closer. There was a sickle-sized burn hole on his chest just below his Gryffindor patch. Ron's sleeve was tattered and singed through to show his the sleeve of his white shirt.

Pansy laughed.

"Bit of a shame," Ron said, scratching at his nose to hide his smirk. "I think that was our best work together and then we go spill more than half onto ourselves and the floor."

"Mostly the floor, though," Harry said quickly to Hermione, whose eyes had widened in alarm.

"You could have been hurt! It could have started an actual fire!"

"Well, it did a fine job," Harry said, gesturing to himself and Ron. There was a smear of soot along his jaw. They erupted into snickers.

Hermione looked perplexed. "How did I miss all this?"

"You were talking to Neville, weren't you?" Ron asked through gasping breaths. "You had your back to us. You were probably the only one in the room who didn't see us jump onto our table. Slughorn was beside himself thinking Harry'd got hurt."

"Dean got some in his hair, too," Harry said. "And when it was over he told us usually it's Seamus who sets his hair on fire."

Her frown remained, but a reluctant smile formed on Hermione's face as she pictured the scene. Ron began to choke, which spurred on Harry's laughter, who put his head on the table to hide his face though his body still shook with mirth. They could hear him wheezing. Ron had tears streaming down his face.

"My goodness," Pansy said, an amused smile on her face.

"People are starting to notice," Hermione looked around uneasily. "Quiet down, for Merlin's sake."

Ron took a deep breath, wiping at his eyes. "Hermione, there's no one else around."

"You don't know that!"

"Were you able to turn in your potion?" Pansy asked.

"All that was left was ashes," Harry said, sitting back up, his face still flushed. Ron clapped him on the back and he hiccupped. "Slughorn gave us extra points for the demonstration."

Ron started to laugh again, pressing his fist over his mouth to staunch the sound. Pansy had joined in the hysterics. Hermione remained unamused.
"A normal warming potion would have to be really potent to start a fire, however small," she said. "They used to be mainly used in hospitals before we came up with warmth charms."

Ron groaned. Hermione pressed on.

"Harry, did you follow the instructions or the notes on your book?"

Harry's grin withered just a fraction. "The notes."

"Are we talking about this again?" Pansy twirled her quill in her fingers. "There's nothing wrong with going with something that's been proven to work, Hermione."

"You're right," Hermione said, "but if this potion started an actual fire rather than just provide a sense of warmth then you really could have been hurt. We still don't know who this 'Prince' is, remember? How can we trust them?"

The mood had shifted at their table quite suddenly.

"Whoever they are, if it weren't for this book I wouldn't have the marks I do now for that class," Harry said. "It's just notes, Hermione."

"Don't get upset just because you're not the best at Potions anymore," Ron said. "Hell, that book has helped me, too."

"I'm glad that cheating has helped you when studying couldn't," she said, miffed, "I'm only trying to be cautious."

"How is it cheating?" Ron asked. "It's just following instructions. We're still making the same potions."

"With an unfair advantage!" Hermione said, more angrily than she meant to. "Clearly this Prince person is some sort of potions genius, but have you really learned anything?"

"If it weren't for that book, I wouldn't be alive," Ron said heatedly. "Harry saved my life because of it. Would you rather I'd died just so Harry wasn't cheating?"

Hermione went red. "No, of course not! But Slughorn was there and he could have healed you immediately with or without that book."

"She makes a good case," Pansy said. "But I think we should all change topic. There's work to do, isn't there?" She set her book down onto the table with an air of finality, breaking the tense silence between the other three.

"I've got to find a book," Harry said, and left. Ron busied himself in one of his own textbooks, decidedly not looking at Hermione.

Hermione brought out a fresh roll of parchment and set herself to writing her second draft. She finished rather quickly. After she had rewritten it a third time and was satisfied but that faded quickly when she realized that Harry had not yet returned.

Neither Pansy nor Ron appeared to have noticed. Ron was hunched over his paper, writing an assignment, but seemed to be making little progress, for he crossed out every other word, and sometimes complete sentences. Pansy's eyes were glued to her book, chin in her hand and one hand holding her quill, as if formulating a line in her head and was preparing to write at any moment.
Was he mad at her? Hermione felt a little contrite for what she'd said, but felt she was still justified, though she would not bring that up again. Not now, at least.

"I'll be back," she said, pushing up from her chair.

Where had Harry gone off to? She went off to the nearest bookcases and searched there for some time until she finally found him by a window, the Map open in his hands.

He heard her approach and immediately made to put the Map away, but when he realized it was her he relaxed, though there was an edge to his eyes that made her approach with caution.

"Is something wrong?"

"No," he said, but folded the Map and closed it before she could see what he'd been looking at. Hermione could only guess he was searching for Malfoy again, and wondered if she should have told him where she had followed him to the other day, though felt that would bring up many questions and stories she was not sure she was ready to tell just yet.

"I'm sorry I called you a cheater," she said. "I'm really not jealous, you know."

"I know," he said, somewhat distractedly, putting the Map away inside his robes. "You're probably right, anyway."

_But that's not going to stop you_, Hermione thought. _You'll keep using that book._

"Listen," he said, "I've got to go."

"But I thought we were going to go over your History of Magic paper." Hermione paused. "Is it Dumbledore?"

Harry nodded and her shoulders slumped.

"Alright, then. Leave it here and I'll take a look."

Harry left quickly, and Hermione took some time to look at a few books and finally went back to their table.

"What took you?" Ron asked suspiciously. "Where's Harry?"

"You haven't seen him?"

"We thought he was coming back with you," Pansy said, shrugging. "Did you see him at all?"

"Yes..." Hermione sat back down, a sudden headache building behind her eyes. A feeling of dread crawled slowly up her spine. She crossed her arms.

Something nudged her leg under the table. Hermione started, her eyes flying up to meet Ron's. Pansy was distracted, rooting through her bag for a fresh piece of parchment.

"Dumbledore?" he whispered.

Hermione nodded.

"I've got grapes!" Pansy said, offering a small container to them. Ron took it immediately.

"Hand me Harry's bag, will you, Ron?" Hermione asked, rubbing her temples. "I promised I'd look
over his paper."

"I wouldn't mind some advice on mine," he said, passing it over the table. Hermione nodded and pulled a scroll from Harry's bag that was marked History of Magic.

An hour later the three of them emerged from the library, the corridor dark and full of other students streaming out of the library, talking excitedly amongst themselves as they headed down to the Great Hall for dinner.

"I'm famished," Ron groaned, stretching. His spine cracked loudly, making Pansy wince.

"Where's Harry?" she asked. "Did we ever learn where he went?"

"Oh," Hermione said. "He's with Dumbledore."

"Again?" Pansy looked surprised.

Hermione and Ron traded looks, expecting a question neither knew how to answer.

Pansy rubbed her stomach. "I hope there's lasagna again." She looked at them, and they hurried to catch up with her, as she'd advanced a little during their moment of fear.

"What do we do with Harry's bag?" Ron asked. It was currently slung over his shoulder along with his own, which was considerably lighter.

"Give it here," Hermione said, and when it was in her hand she tapped and shrunk it with her wand, then stored it inside her own.

When they had gotten to their table Hermione paused before sitting, and looked around, suddenly alert. Everyone else who was already there was grouped in clusters along their tables, whispering, their expressions urgent.

"What's wrong?" Pansy asked at once. She had noticed it too.

Hermione looked for Harry or Dumbledore. Neither were there. That should have reassured her, but it didn't. The feeling of dread she'd had in the library came over her again. Not knowing why, she looked to the Slytherin table. Malfoy was not there. The Slytherins that were assembled so far all appeared grave; some of them caught her eye and sent her hostile, suspicious looks.

Had they heard of what Snape had said? A drop of sweat trickled down the back of her neck. The way they were looking at her told her they believed it, and that they didn't like it at all. Hermione looked away, her cheeks pink.

Neville and Ginny rushed over to them.

"What's happened?" she asked, and they all sat down together with Pansy and Ron, who had abandoned his plate completely, his face tense.

"Is it true?" Ginny asked. "Did he really do it?"

"Who? What?" Ron asked.

"You haven't heard?"

Hermione looked around. Everyone seemed to be watching them, some looking accusatory, some downright hateful. Wherever else she looked there were expressions of fear and disappointment.
"No. What happened to Harry?" Hermione asked, feeling sick. There was no sense of relief upon realizing this had nothing to do with her after all. The Great Hall seemed to close in on her. "Is he back yet?"

"Back from what?" Neville looked confused. "He's with Professor Snape."

"Snape?" Ron asked, his eyebrows lowering. "Why?"

"He attacked Malfoy," Ginny said, her face pale. "Someone found them in the lavatory with blood all over them. Malfoy didn't look good."

Hermione's stomach lurched violently. "What?"

"Oh, fuck," Ron said softly.

"How are they?" Pansy asked, her voice trembling.

"We don't know," Neville said. "No one's been allowed to see them."

"Traitor!" someone shouted from the Slytherin table.

They all looked over, to where Blaise Zabini stood, glaring at Pansy, his fists clenched.

Pansy looked like she might cry. Hermione took her hand.

"Oi!" Ron stood up, looking at them angrily. "Shut up!"

Pansy pulled away from Hermione to grab at Neville.

"You said Harry's with Snape," she said, her voice wobbling. "Where's Draco?"

"H-he's in the Hospital Wing," Neville stammered. "I overheard McGonagall say they might have to send him to Mungo's."

There was a loud clatter of cutlery and scraping of the bench as Pansy pushed away from the table, and without saying a word she fled the Great Hall, leaving everyone else in silence.
The Aftermath

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry about the frankly terrible update schedule. I update more regularly on Ffnet and forget to update here so then i do it in chunks. It's a lot to read but i hope you're enjoying it.

It was raining when everyone awoke the next morning, with winds that howled and raindrops like icy daggers sinking into the slushy ice that spread out over the school grounds. Some of the castle's population found the sound of the rain hitting the windows calming, or even pleasant; others found it unbearable and did their best to drown it out, covering their ears with their pillows or thrusting their wands through the curtains of their four posters to cast a Silencio on the offenders.

It was the kind of morning where it was too cold to get out of bed, and with the added chill and humidity of the rain most of the students found themselves burrowing deeper into their blankets, unwilling to face the morning and not at all tempted by the thought of breakfast, no matter how good it might be that particular day.

Harry, Ron and Hermione were not among this group of students. Unwilling to admit this to his friends, Harry had been plagued by the memory of what he had done and was sick of lying in bed. He knew what would greet him when he would enter the Great Hall and dreaded it, but had enough experience in matters like that to be truly afraid of it by this point. Ron, finally decreed by Pomfrey to be able to eat a regular diet again, was reluctant to miss breakfast, and assured Harry that anyone fool enough to antagonize him over what had happened between him and Malfoy would be sorry.

Hermione, for her part, was most eager to see Pansy. What must she think of all this? Would she hate Harry now? They had to find her and explain, at least, because she didn't know if Harry would apologize. What if Malfoy was gravely injured? Would any action be brought against Harry? He had told them of his talks with a disappointed Dumbledore, and the way Snape had said almost nothing to him but for recommending expulsion.

They had come earlier than usual to breakfast to avoid the hostile or curious comments from most of the student body. There was only a smattering of students in the room so far, but already she felt on edge, seeing how Harry barely touched his food and Ron's white-knuckled grip on his knife and fork. As result of being in Harry's company for so many years, she'd grown sensitive to the sensation of people's stares, and could feel them now, and knew her friends could too. The bleak morning light lit up their grave faces as they tried to ignore the whispers of the students at the other tables.

"Potter finally cracked."

"He tried to kill another student!"

"He should have been expelled."

"What did Malfoy ever do to him?"

The worst part of it was that no one ever tried to be subtle about it. In the huge assembly room, the whispers were loud as if they'd been said directly into her ear though they'd come from the opposite
ends of the room.

It was no different outside of the Great Hall. On their way to classes, people would hiss "killer!" at Harry from the crowds of students that edged away from them in the corridors. Hermione suspected that once Malfoy regained consciousness it would all die down, but for the moment everyone seemed to have turned on Harry, again.

It had been three days since the attack. Three days full of malicious glares from one side and speculative, almost gleeful glances from the other, as if this was all some sort of joke, as if something serious had not really happened.

The timing for this could not have been worse. First Snape's comment about her and Malfoy, then Harry's attack. No one truly seemed to believe it, thankfully—she'd been careful not to let it affect her or to confirm any suspicions towards whether she and Malfoy were really...fraternizing. Ginny had laughed when she'd heard it and Hermione had laughed along, forgetting for a brief moment that it wasn't actually quite as unbelievable as it seemed, though not in the way that Snape had meant it to sound.

It still bothered her, the whole incident. She knew he was cruel, but had never known him to be a gossip, or to even spread it to a whole classroom, no less. It was highly unprofessional and she wondered why he'd even done it when he could have just given her a detention to punish her. The last time she'd had his class, he'd ignored her outright, not even bothering to call on her when she was the only person who had her hand in the air.

Perhaps it had something to do with the fact the warning he'd given Malfoy that time she'd eavesdropped on the stairs. But what did it all tie into? Why was Snape looking out for Malfoy?

_He's angry with his parents._ That was the most she'd gleaned from their conversation. That, and the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy were indeed in danger. _But how, and why?_

Someone walked past the table suddenly, bumping into her, and the movement jostled her from her thoughts. Hermione blinked and looked around.

Harry was staring blankly at his plate. A rush of pity made her want to comfort him, but at the same time there was a conflicting jagged edge inside her that felt glad. It was just as when she'd sent Umbridge marching to the Forbidden Forest on false pretenses, knowing what would really meet her there.

He hadn't listened to her. He had _lied_ to her, and this was what he got for it, though it unfortunately came at Malfoy's expense, too.

"Even if it was me?"

"You've got to eat, Harry," Hermione told him gently, pushing those thoughts away. "Don't listen to them."

"Let's just go," he said, standing, forcing her to hastily swallow the last of her pie and drag Ron from his soup.

They went to the Astronomy Tower, where no dirty or suspicious looks could bother them. It was still raining heavily—Hermione had come without her cloak, and instantly began to shiver, wrapping her arms around herself. They stood there for a minute, confined by the endless drill of rain. Harry was dragging both his hands through his hair, his expression one of utter frustration.

"You know I didn't mean to hurt him like that," he said after a moment.
"Of course, Harry," Hermione said. A freezing wind blew over them, laden with sharp drops of cold rain. Ron shielded his face from it, stooping low.

"He's foul, but no matter how much I hate him, I wouldn't actually kill him," Harry said, his green eyes fevered.

"Yeah, mate, we know you wouldn't," Ron said.

"He attacked me first, and I retaliated. Dumbledore knows that. It was the first spell that popped into my mind."

Another sharp wind. Hermione winced and braced herself against it, crossing her arms over her middle and hunching over. Ron moved to stand beside her to block the brunt of the wind. She didn't notice, too distracted and distraught to even conjure a cloak, or even her handy blue flame that she so often carried with her in cold weather.

"Harry—" the wind swallowed her voice. She tried again. "Harry, where did you learn that spell? I've never heard of it, and I'm certain it's never been taught to us here."

Harry's fixed on her, and through his frosted over glasses she could see his eyes, first irritated and then resigned.

"I got it from the book."

"Shit," Ron sighed.

"Where is it?" Hermione asked urgently. Her hair was wet and cold, dripping into her face. She pushed it away.

"I hid it."

She must have looked doubtful, because he added, "Don't worry, I won't be going after it," he said, almost angrily, but then caught himself and looked away. There were raindrops covering the lenses of his glasses, obscuring his eyes.

"Sorry."

Normally she would have been content with this apology, but resentment and frustration welled up inside her and began to spill over.

Sorry wasn't good enough. She'd given them multiple warnings, had advised them against using these unfamiliar spells. They had laughed at her (at least, Ron had). Though she'd accepted that she couldn't force them to do things they didn't want to, it still hurt, and she was tired of bottling it in.

"I told you," she said, shaking, forcing herself to speak more loudly over the rain. "I told you that book was no good."

"Now's not the time, Hermione," Ron snapped, gesturing to Harry. "Don't you think he knows that by now?"

"I'm sorry to have to be the only one of the three of us with the most sense," she said coldly. "You should have known better than to use a spell you've never seen before out of some strange book."

Harry's face went red. "I know."

"Are you done reminding us how much better than us you are?" Ron asked angrily. "You've done
nothing but nag at us about that book since start of term.”

That stung. Hermione faltered and blushed.

"Shut it, Ron," Harry said dully. "She's right."

"I'm sorry my precaution annoys you so much," Hermione said, her voice unsteady. "I just didn't want the both of you to end up in trouble. Believe me, I've learned my lesson, and I think you have, too. I won't bother you again."

She turned to leave, furious with the tears that had begun to collect in her eyes.

"Wait," Ron called after her, and she paused, a little relieved. "I'm sorry, Hermione—It's just that you've really been sort of unbearable about this whole thing…"

Harry shook his head and sighed. Hermione thought she heard him mutter, "You're making it worse," to Ron, but the wind had altered it. He could have said anything.

"If either of you had just listened to me we wouldn't be in this position in the first place. You could have killed him."

"We?" Ron asked. "You had nothing to do with it! You were the one against it! You were the one who was too concerned and jealous about that bloody book!"

They were all drenched through now. Hermione wished she had stayed in bed.

"I was, and for good reason!"

"Then why are you still here? You had nothing to do with it, so go on and keep feeling good about yourself somewhere else!"

"In case you haven't noticed, Ronald, Malfoy was seriously injured and Harry could be in trouble. Do you really think I feel good about this?"

"What do you care so much about Malfoy, anyway?" he asked accusingly. "Was Snape right? What are you hiding from us?"

"You'll believe him over me?" she fired back. "I'm concerned about Malfoy because if he decides to get his father involved it could mean serious trouble for Harry."

Both Ron and Harry went still, and she saw in their eyes that it was the first time they'd actually considered this outcome. She neglected to admit to herself that she herself had also just realized this.

"You saw what he did with Buckbeak," she said, less passionately. "Imagine how he'd go after you, Harry."

"I'd like to see the bloody git try," Ron said. "We could get him back just as bad! Besides, after what he did to you last year Harry almost did you a favor!"

Stunned, Hermione stared at him, her mouth slack.

"I don't want him to kill for me! I resolved it myself!"

"Alright, ENOUGH!" Harry shouted.

"Oh—" Hermione covered her mouth with her hands. Harry was staring at them angrily, his eyes
raw and tired.

"I didn't mean it like that," she said. "I'm sorry, Harry."

Harry ran both his hands through his hair, letting out a huge breath that turned to mist.

"You were right, Hermione," he said. "I should have listened to you."

Hermione nodded, blinking away rain from her eyes. Her ears felt a little plugged from the roar of the downpour.

"Ron," he added, "you know she's right. Don't antagonize her for it."

Ron nodded. He didn't look at Hermione, though, and she suspected that within the next couple of days she would be getting silent treatment, just as he'd done when he'd found out she'd taken Cormac to Slughorn's party.

That lasted only four days. How much time will this incident warrant?

How could he be so cruel? Yes, he could be a little petty and mean but this was almost too much. Of course she knew she'd been annoying them all this time with her suspicions about that damned Prince, but it was only because she didn't want them getting into trouble. She'd thought that after all they'd been through they at least would have valued her opinion more rather than brush her off. It hurt to think about.

Still shaking, she turned away to hide her tears.

"Has Malfoy woken yet?" she asked, ignoring Ron's outraged scoff.

"No." Harry said after a short pause.

"It's been three days," she said quietly, so that they barely heard her.

The rain showered down, ignorant of their distress.

"I know."

After they made their way down the stairs of the tower, Ron separated himself from the other two, claiming he was hungry and wanted to get food, but Hermione suspected he just didn't want to be around her and needed to cool down. She and Harry stood there after he left for a moment, neither knowing what to do.

Harry wiped the lenses of his glass with his robe. No matter how many times she'd showed him how to do it by magic he always kept to his habit of doing it the Muggle way. His robe was still wet, though, so it did little difference. He put them back on anyway.

"I'm sorry this happened."

"So am I," she said, pressing her fingertip to the thin frames and watching as the lenses cleared. His eyes were full of shame. She rubbed his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I lied to you. I was just so sure I'd catch him in the act, I didn't want to waste time."

She nodded, repressing the urge to ask exactly what Malfoy had been doing that had prompted Harry to run to where he was at such short notice.
"I'm going to bed," he muttered.

"I'll go with you to the common room."

He gave her a level stare. "I don't need a guard, Hermione."

"I forgot my books on my bed," she replied. "And I know you can handle yourself. I just think there's less chance of anyone trying to mess with you if you're not alone."

She'd succeeded in convincing him, but he was evidently not pleased. They turned into the corridor and began to walk in silence.

When they were halfway there, they came across Blaise Zabini, who was leaning against a wall, talking to Theodore Nott. The sound of their footsteps caught the Slytherin's attention, and they turned. Their expressions made Hermione itch to grab her wand.

Harry continued to walk past them, sensing their anger and wanting nothing to do with it. Hermione followed suit but kept a close eye on them as she passed.

"Having a swell day?" one of them called mockingly. Hermione didn't dare turn around, but self-consciousness got the better of her and she wiped at her eyes again, paranoid they'd seen the redness there. She looked down at the floor. They were still dripping from the rain. She'd forgotten about that too.

Harry walked on as if he hadn't heard them.

"You better watch yourself, Potter," Zabini called after Harry. "The Headmaster may love you so much he didn't bother punishing you, but there's plenty of people in this castle who believe a murderer ought to be punished properly."

Harry and Hermione stopped. Hermione's heart began to pound as Harry turned.

"In case you forgot, Zabini, Malfoy isn't dead," Harry said.

"Isn't that lucky?" Nott said, crossing his arms. "Don't try to defend yourself—we all know you wanted to kill him."

"Unless you want a detention you'll stop talking," Hermione said tightly.

"And what part did you play in this, Granger?" Zabini asked, hands in his pockets, head tipped to the side, coming closer. "We've heard interesting things about you recently. What business do you have with Draco?"

Hermione felt herself turn red.

"I have no business with him," she said carefully. "If you believe the gossip you're a fool."

He ignored her and looked back over to Harry as if she were nothing more than an insect.

"Keep your eyes open," he said, his lip curled, and then stepped back to rejoin Nott, who had his wand out, poised as if expecting a fight.

"I can report you for issuing threats," Hermione reminded them. "Go before I dock points."

Both the Slytherin's eyes landed on her again, and the contempt she saw there was no different from how Malfoy had looked at her once. It was a shocking contrast to how he'd looked at her the last time she'd seen him. Hermione shivered.
"Don't stick your wand where it doesn't belong, Mudblood," Nott said.  

Harry moved forward, and she caught him by his arm.  

"That's enough."

He paused reluctantly, and settled beside her. They both watched as Nott and Zabini turned and went back the other way, looking over their shoulders, their expressions taunting.

Luckily, news broke out over breakfast the next day that Malfoy had woken and was healing. Hermione had seen some tension bled from Harry's shoulders. Her own feeling of relief was greater than she thought it would be—she tried hard to ignore it and looked along the Slytherin table, searching for Pansy, who had been avoiding them since the night the news of the attack had broken out. She was not there.

_Malfoy's like a brother to her_, she thought, remembering their earlier conversations. _What if she thinks Harry actually tried to kill him? Will she hate us again?_

Hermione had sent a tentative note to her a day ago and received no response.

Once Hermione had almost gone down to the dungeons to find the Slytherin common room and demand that Pansy see her, but dared not for fear of starting more trouble. Miserable, she decided to wait and see if Pansy would talk to her again, though all her fears told her she wouldn't.

Just as she'd predicted, since their shouting at each other in the Astronomy Tower Ron had been completely ignoring her existence. Hermione was too distracted to feel too sorry over it—his words had cut her deeply and she was just as keen on not seeing or talking to him as he was to her. Harry had been given numerous punishments for what he'd done, and had to serve them between Snape and Dumbledore, though Hermione couldn't help but wonder whether it was just a cover for Harry to have more private lessons with the Headmaster.

Snape, at least, took the punishment very seriously, and Hermione rarely saw Harry outside of class because of it. He would stay late cleaning every inch of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and pickling unsavory potions ingredients for Snape's own private store, writing lines hundreds of times over to the point of utter exhaustion; he would appear late to breakfast, his hand stiff and cramped, the scars from Umbridge's quill inflamed and irritated from the harsh soaps Snape had made him use for cleaning.

There'd been another letter from Viktor that had come days ago and she hadn't even written a reply yet because though she had enough time to do it she couldn't quite find anything to write about, since it seemed that most matters of her own life had collectively decided to turn absolutely dreadful.

Viktor wanted to come visit her. Hermione would have liked that very much, but felt that it would simply be too much to deal with, even if it was over the summer. Harry was informing her and Ron of everything that he and Dumbledore talked about during their private conversations, and he had brought up the possibility of himself not returning for his last year at Hogwarts. He had not invited her or Ron to come with him, assuming that they would not want to put their lives and education on hold to help him defeat Voldemort. She knew beyond a doubt she would go with him at a second's notice. He would never be able to bring himself to ask, but he needed them, and Hermione would never forgive herself for abandoning him.

Viktor was capable, and they had known and corresponded long enough that she knew she could trust him, and though she considered him as close a friend as Pansy was to her, she felt he still
wanted something more than just friendship for the both of them.

In the time leading up to, during, and after the Yule Ball, he'd been the perfect gentleman. In person he was quiet and rather serious looking, but his letters were funny and concise and she always looked forward to receiving them. They'd shared a kiss or two before he'd left for Durmstrang, and though he'd invited her to visit him in Bulgaria, Hermione had never acted on the offer.

*Why choose now?* she wondered.

Then there was Ron. He had such a temperamental streak in his personality that most of the time she wasn't quite sure if he actually liked her or not. He had to, of course, else he would not willingly hang around and talk to her, but on the occasions that they fought or he got angry with her, he made her feel truly awful over it.

*Like now.*

Tears smarted at her eyes. Hermione scowled and stared off to the side, crossing her arms.

*It always goes like this, doesn't it?* A quiet voice asked her. *He hurts you and acts like he doesn't care. He never apologizes, either, he just comes back and acts like he did nothing wrong.*

*And you let him do it.*

*Why?*  

She didn't know. Maybe she did have feelings for him, to let him act the way he did and still love him, even as a friend, even as something more, possibly. It was all too convoluted to pick apart.

And he, with his increasing attentions and lingering stares, if he ever directly expressed his feelings, what would she say?

Hermione had doubted herself before when entertaining the possibility, but felt positive that Ron did have feelings for her. He was always touching her now, when he'd rarely done so before—putting his arm around her, on her back, sitting or standing closer to her than was necessary. Then there was that kiss on the cheek he'd given her in the Infirmary. Much more intimate than anything he'd ever done before. And the Christmas gift…

Her hand jumped up to her collar and reached underneath to grasp at the tiny golden heart.

*What could have prompted him to set foot inside a jewelry shop? He knew any book would have been just as good a gift. Her fingertip ran over the tiny letters engraved onto it: HG. It must have taken him ages to save up for it.*

She let it go, and the tiny pendant swung back down to collide with her collarbone in a flash of cold metal.

*If he came up to you now, apologized, and told you he loved you, would you accept him?*  

He was one of her closest friends. She'd grown to love him despite his shortcomings. Nor was she herself the model of everything good—she knew her own tendencies to be bossy and annoyingly mindful of rules and schoolwork. She was too prim and uptight, but had a hidden penchant for being cruel and ruthless, which Malfoy had pointed out once. One need only to look at what she had done to Rita Skeeter and Henrietta Hedgecombe to see it.

But despite all these faults, she knew that Ron was generous, he was loyal, he was brave and hot-
headed and impulsive and witty. But he wasn't what she wanted. Especially not with the way he was acting now, like an angry child.

With no one to talk to and a sense of insecurity following her wherever she went, Hermione spent much of this time alone in the library, surrounded by books who were much more patient and accepting than most of the people she knew in real life.

She was suddenly grateful that she lived apart from the rest of the Gryffindors, as she couldn't bear their whispers and side-eyed glances, even when she'd had nothing to do with any of it. What would she be doing in there now? Certainly not going down to the common room—Ron would be there probably, still sulky and occasionally bad-mouthing her to Seamus and Dean-Thomas when she was within earshot like he'd done after the Yule Ball in Fourth year. Though her room was on the farther side of the castle—and by the Slytherin quarters, no less—it was nice to have a place of her own where she couldn't be bothered by Padma's sleep-talking or Ginny's snoring, restless sleep.

Of course, no true peace could ever be had—she pictured Malfoy's shadowy form outside her door, like a shadow person lurking the school at night.

She couldn't help but wonder how he was faring. Sometimes, on her way to the library she would take the longer route just to walk by the Hospital Wing. She wanted to get a glimpse of Malfoy though she didn't like admitting it to herself. Perhaps she could see if he actually intended to take action against Harry.

The curse Harry had used...had the Prince invented it? Whomever could they be? An alumni of Hogwarts, perhaps, but all her searches had proved fruitless so far. Clearly they were skilled enough in magic to be able to create their own jinxes and the like—Harry and Ron had had too much fun with the Muffliato when they'd come across that one…

Harry wasn't dealing with the incident well. Over the years at Hogwarts countless whispers had followed him, and there would probably be more in the time coming, of that she was sure. But none of them had ever been this vicious. Some people seemed to think he had finally revealed himself as dangerous, a true threat. Others seemed betrayed—Hermione hoped Pansy was not one of them. A whole slew of ugly emotions filled the space wherever Harry went, and Hermione felt truly sorry for him, though she still felt a little angry that he had not listened to her until it was too late, and that above all he had lied to her.

Why didn't he tell me from the start? I could have kept him from going. What did he want to hide?

It hurt to think that he hadn't trusted her, or Ron for that matter. She thought of the way he'd been looking at the map when she'd come across him—what had Malfoy been doing that had Harry rush to confront him? Harry had found Malfoy in the boys' lavatory. She'd gone there herself to see the aftermath, and found the room in shambles; the stalls so badly damaged chunks of their walls were lying along the opposite end of the room. Flooded water from the broken sinks. A bitter Moaning Myrtle.

There were still traces of blood on the floor where the water had not reached. Along the broken stalls, she found a few spatters, and wondered at the violence of the spell Harry had used. Most of it had to be Malfoy's since Harry had only minor cuts and bruises from the ordeal. It was sobering to look down and see the aftermath of it all.

She was shocked the scene had not been cleaned properly, and took care of it swiftly. Perhaps the panic of the situation had made everyone rush. Had anyone even told Filch? He'd had set to it at once.
What had happened? Why had they attacked each other so viciously? She hadn't been able to look away from the blood—it was lucky Snape had found them just in time. One of the sinks that hadn't been broken was clogged with dried blood; it remained there in a foul-smelling mess. She had gagged to look at it, and cleared it away immediately.

Harry hadn't yet told them what had happened to lead to the attack, if there was anything at all. She'd begun to harbor the secret fear that Harry had attacked him without cause, and was too ashamed to admit it.

She had got Harry to tell her the name of the curse he had used and had looked it up immediately, finding absolutely no mention of it in any of the books she went through, and frustrated by that, she had Harry describe for her the context of the page he had found the note on and what the Prince had written about it.

'Useful for enemies.'

Hermione had kept her temper in check, but when he'd told her that she had very badly wanted to smack him.

He ignored Ginny and he ignored me, she thought, rubbing angrily at her nose. He ought to have learnt by now never to trust a strange book.

Hermione left the library once it became clear she was not going to finish any of her assignments, which was a shame because she'd had some really good ideas before starting.

As she walked back to the Gryffindor common room she took the long way again, her mood sour. She slowed to a crawl just outside the Hospital Wing. Through the partly opened doors she could see its sole inhabitant shielded by a screen, but his legs stuck out past it.

Pansy had probably been visiting him every day.

I should have looked for her here.

The lights inside were dim. He was probably sleeping.

It wouldn't hurt to take a peek and see how he's doing.

She would be quieter than a mouse—all it took was a look around the screen and then a mad, silent dash away. She would blame it on her morbid curiosity—she had to see the result of that curse. She had to know what it could do.

The second she stepped inside she almost turned right back round and walked out. His bed was the farthest from the door, and though it wasn't really that big a distance she felt it was as long as the length of the Great Hall.

What a fine joke it would be if he was let out today and I'm about to scare the life out of someone else.

But still she crept on, step by step, almost holding her breath until she realized how silly that was and forced herself to walk normally.

She approached the screen with care, not wanting to trip on it or move it in any way that would wake him. If it was him.

He was asleep, and bandaged heavily. Hermione approached the bed slowly, still unsure why she
was there.

Malfoy looked as peaceful as falling snow. Hermione thought hard and couldn't remember ever seeing him with such a soft, almost serene expression.

It was the strangest thing to see him in this manner, so unguarded. If he opened his eyes how fast would the barriers come up? Would he be angry to find her there if he awoke now? His lips were dry and cracked, the deep rings around his eyes stood out more vividly in the glare of the white bedding. She could see faint veins under the skin around his eyes, his lashes were darker than she remembered.

The bedcovers were around his middle. He wore no hospital gown. His chest was bare and covered with the bandages, but traces of dried blood could still be seen within the layers. The layers of bandages were thin enough that she could see the red gashes that had been carved across his chest and midsection.

Had the spell been any stronger it might have cut him in half. She thought of the puddle of blood—he must have been in agony.

Hermione felt her breath catch in her throat—had Harry really done this?

"Why are you here?"

Hermione jumped violently, almost stumbling backwards into the screen that guarded his bed from public view.

Blushing furiously, she righted herself. He was staring at her, though if he was angry she couldn't tell. Surprisingly, he hadn't laughed, although his mouth was set in a grimace, as if he had to hold it back due to pain. Perhaps he was too drugged to care.

His gaze was soft. Sleepy. Not in the raw, desperate way his eyes had been for the past several months (and who knew how much longer) but in the way of someone who had just had a deep, satisfying sleep.

It was a side of him she'd never seen before.

He was still watching her, though his eyes were closing, as if he were struggling to stay awake.

Realizing with a start that she'd just ogled him for a good couple of seconds and not said anything, she took the glass of water that was on his bedside table and offered it to him rather awkwardly. He stared at it for a second or two and then reached forward to grab it, wincing.

"I—I wanted to see if you were ok."

He snorted softly, sitting up carefully so that he could drink.

"I'm swell, Granger," he said in between large gulps of water. There was a healing cut on the edge of his jaw. "Thank Potter for the scars for me."

Hermione bit her lip. "Look, I don't know what happened—"

"Then kindly keep out of it."

It was a reasonable request but she felt she could not drop it. For the time being, she kept silent.

He drained the glass of water quickly and set it back down on the table. He looked at her again. His
eyes were like clouds. She wondered if he was really aware of what was happening. Maybe he wasn't so angry as she'd thought he'd be because he thought he was dreaming.

"Were you hoping that he'd finished the job?"

Hermione held her hands together at her front. "I was hoping I could learn the truth about what happened."

"We attacked each other. That's it."

"If I ask why, will you answer?"

"No."

She had expected as much. Hermione wet her lips.

"I'll go, I've bothered you enough."

Just before she could turn to leave he tried sitting up farther, and immediately, red began to spread underneath the white gauze on his chest.

"Oh, hell," he groaned. His head fell back and he lowered himself back onto the bed.

"I'll call Madame Pomfrey." Hermione turned to leave.

"No," he said, and she stopped. "She'll come soon enough anyway."

"That looks like it needs immediate attention," Hermione said uneasily, watching the red blossom out from underneath his hand.

He didn't even glance at it.

"How long have I been out, Granger? Pomfrey won't tell me. She says I woke up briefly yesterday but I don't remember it."

"You were unconscious for three days, and this is your fourth here. I don't know about yesterday."

He closed his eyes. "Fuck."

"Has Pansy come to see you?"

"I don't know. I think I spoke to her once." He gestured to the bedside table where an empty bottle of dreamless sleep potion lay. "I've been asleep mostly."

Hermione shifted on her feet. "Well you look rested, at least."

"I've got Potter to thank for it. Not that it matters, but I won't be able to play Quidditch for a very long time either." He gave a dry laugh.

"I'm positive he didn't mean to do...that," she said. She couldn't look away from the blood. "I don't even know where he could have learnt such a curse."

*Useful for enemies. Oh, Harry...*  

"I meant to do just as much harm, so it's of little matter," he said. "But I don't think there'd be anyone making excuses for me if it were Potter lying here."
"You don't know that. Really, I should call Pomfrey. You're losing a lot of blood, Malfoy."

He lifted his hand and looked at his wet, red palm. Hermione saw him pale. He opened his mouth, but whatever he meant to say was cut off by the sudden bustle of Madame Pomfrey herself, who burst past the screen, wand in tow.

"Already popped your stitches, did you?" she asked busily. "I ought to keep you asleep longer or they'll never heal."

Draco gave Hermione a look as if to say I told you so.

"Visiting hours are up, my dear," she said to Hermione. "I'm afraid you'll have to visit again tomorrow."

"Oh," Hermione said, standing, casting a dubious look at Malfoy. "I don't think—"

"You'll come, won't you?" he asked.

Hermione stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Erm—I suppose."

"Good," he said, settling back into his pillows, and then cracked a small smirk. "I'll be needing someone to bring me my assignments, after all."

"Oh, sod off," she said, just as the screen closed behind Madame Pomfrey.
"How are you feeling?"

Draco shifted on the bed, trying not to wince.

"Better." He chose not to mention a splitting headache and a fatigue so deep he was glad he was not standing.

Funny, that. All I do is sleep here and I'm still tired.

His muscles were sore and he felt restless, wanting nothing more than to stand and stretch, run or ride a broom or something that would wake him up quickly. He needed exercise.

Pansy rubbed at her forehead. "I'm so glad."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "You don't look it."

"I am, though," she said, looking up, forcing herself to smile. "It's just—it's been hell, this past week."

Draco frowned. "Are they still bothering you?"

"I've been hiding, mostly," she said. "I hate to do it but they look at me like I'm the one who did this to you. Blaise and Theodore make comments whenever they're near, and I ignore them but I don't care to have to listen to it."

"Have you told anyone?"

"No," she said. "What could they do about it? As long as they're not hexing me I'll be fine."

Draco wanted to press on but knew she wouldn't listen.

"And everyone else?" he asked.

"No one from our House really talks to me anymore," she said, shrugging. "I find I don't mind."

Draco nodded. He'd felt the same since the beginning of term. It was like everyone knew he was marked for failure—he doubted they actually did, since very few people knew about his mission, but he still couldn't help but feel everyone else had been told behind his back.

Why bother with someone who's sunk this low?

"How's Potter?" he asked. "Did he get a scar, too, or am I the only one with a souvenir?"

"Not a scratch, as far as I know," Pansy said a little bitterly, and that caught Draco's attention. "Snape's got him up to his chin in detentions."

Strangely, Draco didn't feel satisfied by this news.

"Good," he said. "The Gryffindors aren't giving you trouble, too, are they?"

"They're afraid of me again," she said. "I feel I'm not quite welcome at their table anymore."

"Nor at the Slytherin table, either, I'm sure," he said drily. "Whatever will we do?"
"Oh, they'll be glad to have you back, of course," Pansy said, her fingers worrying the sleeve of her robe. "You attacked Potter, you're practically their saint now."

Draco eyed her for a moment. She, eyes downcast, staring at the foot of his bed, didn't notice. She appeared brittle, tired, with reddened eyes and hunched shoulders.

"Have you spoken to any of them since it happened?"

"Sorry—" she looked back at him, blinking her thoughts away. "Since what happened?"

He pointed to his bandages, and her mouth settled in a grim line.

"No."

"Not even Granger?"

She sighed. "No."

He paused. "Why not?"

"I'm not sure. I was upset and scared out of my mind, thinking you'd actually been killed."

"Barring these bandages, I'm fine," he reminded her gently.

"I know that," she said, "but your wounds were so serious when they brought you here they wouldn't even let me see you. They said you were unconscious, that you'd lost a ridiculous amount of blood." She wiped at her eyes. "I was scared and angry. I felt like nothing had changed at all; I wanted to curse Potter for doing that to you."

Draco wanted to lean forward to hug her, but for fear of reopening his wounds and summoning the ever-vigilant Pomfrey, he reached as far as he could and placed his hand on her arm.

"I attacked first, you know. I was having a shit day and he was following me again and I snapped. He was fool enough to follow me into the loo so I cursed him." He paused, and forced the rest of the words out before he could gag on them. "I shouldn't have done it, and I'm paying for it now, but he's not completely at fault."

His own voice sounded alien to him, just by saying those words.

This is how fucked everything's gotten, that I'm actually defending Potter. Maybe he did kill me after all, and this is only a dream.

Pansy had noticed this too. She sat up a little, and frowned.

"Did you just say that or did I mishear you?"

"It's the truth. Don't drop them for something that was my fault."

Her eyes grew wider. "Did Pomfrey put you on something stronger before I came?"

"I'm serious," he said, though he'd cracked a small smile. He had to keep from laughing, or that would bring on pain.

"Why?"

"They're good to you, from what I've seen." He fought not to roll his eyes. "I shouldn't have been an
ass about it. Old habits, and all that."

"I didn't expect you to right away," she replied. "I just wanted you to know this was my decision, and that it wasn't a trick on their part."

He nodded.

Pansy glanced at the letter on his bedside table.

"Who's that from?"

He didn't bother to look at it.

"My father."

His stony expression led her to assume its contents held no well-wishes for Draco.

"He writes every day to tell me I've got to hurry," he said quietly. "And that I deserved worse than what I got."

Pansy scowled. "Well, that's terrible."

"He's right, actually," Draco said, smiling bitterly. "I started it. I knew Potter would fight back."

"Then why are you angry?"

"I don't know," he lied. "I just am."

His father had never been one for expressing much empathy. Draco supposed that was where much of his own problems originated. He knew his parents would have to be notified about his condition, and hadn't expected any sympathy considering his lack of correspondence, but the scathing letter he'd gotten that morning had been outright malicious, and had stoked his resentment and bitterness.

'I never once though I would want to thank anyone for gravely injuring my son, and yet I feel I owe Harry Potter, of all people, thanks for hopefully knocking some sense into you. I sincerely hope your humiliation will serve you a lesson I can't currently teach you. Your mother worries herself sick over the news. She begs to be allowed to visit you but I don't think you deserve our sympathy when you've replied to none of my letters in months.

Our friend says he hopes this injury won't deter you from your studies. I share that concern. He says he expects to see you in the Spring and no later than that, or he'll have to surprise you when you get home. If you refuse to listen to me, I suggest you take heed to his words, but you are in enough trouble as it is. Do not expect mercy when this is all over.'

Draco grabbed his wand and gave the letter a vicious tap. It was swallowed by flames, and within seconds it had been reduced to ash. Pansy frowned, and looked at him for further explanation, but Draco said nothing.

"How much longer until you're out of here?" she asked after a moment, still staring at the ashes.

"You look like you could use a long walk."

"Until these damn wounds stop opening every time I move," he said, glaring at the bandages.

"I thought you would have been fully healed by now."

"Most curses don't allow for quick and easy healing," he said, settling carefully back against his
pillows, looking highly disgruntled. Pansy eyed his bed a little jealously, envying him his warmed blankets and pillows.

All the corridors in the school were drafty and adorned with sharp icicles hanging off the window frames. Somehow the days seemed to get colder despite them nearing winter's end. Every morning she got up off her bed she spent every agonizing minute away from it dearly sorry.

_Note: This appears to be a continuation from a previous conversation._

_Maybe I ought to do that now._

She stood, brushed off her robes. "I'll go now. I think we both need some rest."

Draco picked at a scab on his hand. "When's the next Apparition lesson?"

Pansy stretched. "Monday, unless I heard wrong."

He concealed his disappointment well but Pansy could sense it anyway.

"I'm sure you'll catch up quickly once you're out," she said. "I'll help you if you like, but don't be surprised if you splinch yourself."

"I'd rather splinch than stay here another day. I'm sick to death of lying here," he said, scowling. "I'm not even allowed to stand without assistance or it'll add another day to my sentence."

Pansy placed her hands on her hips. "And how many days have you already added?"

His scowl deepened and he looked away. "Three."

Pansy couldn't help but laugh. "Well, you'd better act an utter angel from now on, or you'll be stuck here forever."

"If that happens, please put me out of my misery before I point my wand at myself."

Pansy pointed to the bedside table. "Have you been a good boy and kept up with your assignments? Is there anything for me to turn in for you?"

He glared at her and she snickered. "Take the papers and get out of my sight." Then his frown wavered and he cracked a small smile.

"You look so much more relaxed," she commented, picking up the small stack of parchment. "It's good to see."

A vague wave of irritation washed over Draco.

"It won't last long."

Her face fell. "Not if you do something about it." Then she left.

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Not far from the Infirmary, Pansy turned a corner and recognized Theodore Nott at the end of the corridor.

_I wonder what he's waiting for._

She eyed the space around them. There wasn't anyone else in sight. She could turn around and take a longer route to the Slytherin dorms. Or she could go to the library.
But he'd seen her already, and was approaching her casually, both hands in his pockets, a bend to his lip that suggested friendliness, but not quite.

Pansy steeled herself and walked forward as if nothing were amiss, as if the glint behind his eyes wasn't sending shivers down her back.

"Gone to twist the knife?" he asked.

Theodore, like Draco, had gray eyes, but darker and his thick brows that often gave him a sullen expression. When they'd first met Pansy had a hard time of it determining when he was truly angry and when he was just neutral. She'd come to learn that it all depended in his eyes, and that, more often than not, proved faulty. When he was cruel his eyes sometimes looked as delighted and innocent as a child who has just watched a puppy howl for the first time. When he was actually happy, or neutral, his eyes were flat and empty.

It wasn't unsettling if you knew him well—which she thankfully did.

"Bugger off."

He began to walk beside her. "You know, we've all been talking about it, and we can't figure out why you've taken such a liking to them. I thought it best to ask you directly."

"Thank goodness for that," Pansy said stiffly. "Otherwise, rumors would fly."

He grinned, as if he hadn't been the one propagating several rumors of his own over the past days. "Yes, exactly."

"There's nothing to say, really," Pansy said. "Am I not allowed to make friends outside my own House?"

He looked at her for a long while. "Why would you need more friends when you've got plenty where you are?"

The hairs along her arms prickled. Pansy caught sight of a girl's lavatory coming up on the right side of the corridor. She began to walk a little faster.

"I know for a fact you've been seeing a Ravenclaw since October," she said, dealing him her own steady stare. "How is that any different?"

"Well she hasn't gone attacking people from my House, that's a clear marker. And to state the obvious, she isn't Potter."

"Don't you think sometimes that we all take the 'mortal enemy' trope a little too seriously?" she asked, crossing her arms. "For Merlin's sake, he's a student, just like us."

"I wouldn't have given a shit if it were anyone else," he said, patting her shoulder. Pansy looked down at his hand with her eyebrow raised, but he didn't remove it. "I'm only looking out for you, you know. We all know how big of a liar Potter is. He'll do anything for attention or sympathy."

Pansy rolled her eyes and shrugged his hand off. "Thank you, Theo, I'm ever so grateful for your concern." She brought her voice down to its normal pitch. "I don't need you looking after me."

They had reached the bathroom. Pansy went straight for the door, but a hand caught her by the arm and she turned to face Theodore, whose friendly façade had morphed into something more ominous.
"What do you want?" she asked, irritated.

"Do you trust them?" he asked, his eyes suggesting to her that she had better not.

There was no choice but for her to lie. His grip was tight on her arm and she tried pulling away, but he didn't let go.

"No. Of course not." She tried to pull away again and failed, her heart pounding. She glared at him as best as she could, praying he couldn't see her fear. "Merlin, Theo, it's not like I go telling them all our secrets."

He waited a moment before speaking, never once blinking to break his stare.

"I hope you don't," he said, letting her go. "Or you'll find yourself in quite the uncomfortable position."

The second he was gone Pansy darted inside the lavatory, thankful it was empty, and splashed cold water over her face until the shakes had gone.

She longed to talk to Hermione or Ginny, but didn't dare. Would they even want to take her back after she'd been ignoring them? What did they think of this whole mess? Pansy wished she'd stayed with Draco. At least he understood. He was in the same boat.

The door swung open suddenly, and Millicent Bulstrode entered the lavatory. Pansy, who'd been relieved to be alone, jumped. Millicent took one look at her and snorted, her hands on her hips.

"If it isn't Potter's pet."

"Not now, Mil," Pansy said, drying her hands quickly. "I'm not in the mood."

She strode to the door.

"If Potter's taking commissions, tell him I've got someone I'd like taken out," Millicent called after her. "Only I want the job finished. Tell him, won't you?"

Her laughter followed Pansy out into the corridor.

Still a little shaken by the earlier events of the day, Pansy decided to go to the greenhouse and see if Neville was there. He'd started spending more time there since the year before and could usually be found caring after the plants for Professor Sprout while she was busy. Pansy liked to sit there sometimes and listen to him work. Luna Lovegood was a frequent visitor, too, but Pansy had just seen her heading upstairs to the Astronomy Tower with a borrowed telescope and a ream of parchment. Eager to be around as little people as possible, Pansy went straight outside, not caring that she had no cloak or scarf.

Though the day was cold, the doors to the greenhouse were open—a good sign. Sprout usually left them closed, as she didn't much like to be bothered while not in class. Pansy stepped inside, treading carefully around the vines and stray roots that had crepted past the doors to soak in more sun.

"Hello?" she called.

Neville's face peeked out at her from in between large, spiky leaves from an enormous plant on the far side of the greenhouse. "Oh, hi."

"Do you mind if I stay here a bit?"
He stepped out from behind the plant, wearing a hideously drab pair of gardening gloves that looked three sizes too big for him, and plain clothes that had smears of dirt and tonics and pus and the like, all things her own mother liked to call "unmentionables." His face had fine scratches here and there but none were bleeding, and though there was a trace of dirt along his cheek and his hair was mussed and dripping in sweat, he was glowing, and he looked content.

"You've stayed here before," he said, summoning a watering can and catching it firmly in his arms.
"You know you don't have to ask."

Pansy felt herself flush a little. "I know—I just thought what with what's been happening…"

"I like your company," he said a little shyly, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. Pansy belatedly remembered how humid it was inside the greenhouse, and was glad she'd forgotten her cloak after all. "We know you had nothing to do with it, of course—at least me and Ginny do."

"I do what?"

They turned to see Ginny enter the greenhouse, waving off a fly that buzzed around her face. She saw Pansy, and smiled gently.

"How are you? Everything alright?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

"And you, Neville?"

"Sweating like a pig, actually." He wiped at his forehead, adding another streak of dirt to it. Ginny laughed. "Need a hand?"

"Sure. I'm collecting pus again." He gestured to the mess of stains on his shirt.

"You know my brothers," she said, starting to tie her hair back. "I've dealt with worse."

Ginny went to pick up a smock. Not wanting to feel like the odd one out, Pansy followed suit.

"Is Malfoy alright?" Ginny asked, helping hold Pansy's hair out of the way as she pulled her smock on.

"Yes, he's getting better."

"Good," Ginny said. "He may be a git, but no one deserves to go out like that."

Pansy smiled. "Thanks."

"Fair warning," Neville's voice came from his corner. "These things scratch a lot."

Ginny closed her eyes and sighed. "I hate magical plants."

"You offered to help!" Neville said.

Pansy laughed.

"Shit! Ouch!"

"Are you alright, Ginny?" Pansy asked, setting down her knife and pus-collecting bowl, careful not
to spill any.

"It startled me," Ginny said, pressing on the shallow cut on her cheek with her finger. "Bloody bastard."

"They can hear you, you know," Neville chided. "I've got an ointment for that. Here, Accio!"

The small tin landed in Ginny's palm, and she opened it at once and began to apply it to the scratch.

"Good," Ginny said, though she'd cracked a smile. She wagged her finger at the plant. "I don't appreciate that, you know."

The plant shook itself as if it were laughing, and the rustling caused a small number of leaves to drop down on their heads.

"Alright, alright, you're forgiven."

"That's lovely," Pansy said. "I've never seen plants this responsive. Back home, my mum still argues with her garden but none of her plants ever seem to listen to her."

"It's all Sprout's doing," Neville said, tugging off his thick gloves. "I still don't know how she manages it, but it's genius. She's been trying to teach me but some of these species are mischievous; they trip me whenever I'm alone and tickle me so I drop things." He said this all without bitterness, as if he didn't mind it at all.

"Well, whether it's all that tickling or not, I've never seen you so happy," Pansy said, dropping her gloves onto the worktable.

Neville beamed, blushing. "I just like working here."

"I bet you do," Ginny said, swatting him on the arm with her gloves and dropping them down beside Pansy's. "You'll be a Professor here one day, mark my words. Either that or you'll go around the world looking for exotic species like Luna wants to do."

Neville laughed nervously. "Me, a Professor?"

"Why not?" Ginny asked. "I think you'd make a terrific one."

"I don't know…"

"Well, you've still got time to make up your mind," Pansy said, patting his arm. "At least you've found something you love to do."

"Don't you?" Neville asked. "Love something, I mean?"

Ginny and Pansy looked at each other.

"I love to eat," Ginny said, looking pensive. "Quidditch, too. Fancy coming to see me at the World Cup!"

They all laughed.

"I don't know what I like," Pansy said, shrugging when they looked at her. "But I do enjoy eating, too."

"Isn't it nearly lunchtime?" Neville looked down at his watch. It was badly cracked.
"Shall we head inside?" Ginny was already at the door.

"Put your gloves away properly, if you don't mind!" Neville called after her.

"Oh, alright."

The moment the entrance doors closed behind them, they spotted Hermione approaching the Great Hall. Pansy stumbled over her own foot, and accidentally let go of Ginny's arm.

"Are you alright?" Ginny asked.

"I'm fine," Pansy said, blushing. "I tripped over something."

Hermione had caught sight of them, and for a split second looked at Pansy and her face went blank; she appeared to deliberate for a moment, as if judging whether to greet them or not, but was saved the decision when Neville called out to her.

"Hullo, Hermione."

She walked toward them.

"Where's Harry and Ron?" Ginny asked.

"Harry's in detention still," Hermione replied. "Ron's in the common room somewhere."

"Alright," Ginny said, and went to the door, gesturing for everyone to head inside.

"Go on in," Pansy said when it was her turn. Ginny went inside and the door closed behind her.

She and Hermione faced each other.

"Let's walk for a bit," Hermione said. "We're blocking the door here."

They turned into the corridor and began to walk. Pansy's nervousness had returned. Would Hermione be angry with her? It had been several days since they'd last spoken.

"How are you?" Hermione asked.

"I'm fine," Pansy said. "Just stressed."

"About—"

"Yes."

"He's doing better, I hear."

"Yes. Pomfrey says he might be out by the end of the week."

Hermione nodded. "That's good to hear."

The conversation paused. They passed a number of empty classrooms. Both were struggling to find courage to speak.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said in a rush. "I should have spoken to you sooner—I feel terrible. I've been so angry at Harry, I can't believe he did that."
"I don't blame Harry," Pansy said. "I did at first, because I was angry, but I don't anymore. I know he didn't mean to do that to Draco, even if he hates him."

"That's the thing, isn't it?" Hermione asked, her eyes a little tearful. "We don't know for sure. At least, I don't. He lied to me about where he was going that night. I could have stopped it."

"It's too late to think that," Pansy said, putting her hand on Hermione's arm. "We can't control what they do—it's their own problem if they want to get into a stupid duel inside the school. I just hate how it got so ugly. I should apologize, too, I didn't want to talk to anybody after it happened, I was scared and angry and didn't know what to do."

Hermione stopped and touched her arm. "I understand… I'm glad Malfoy's better."

Pansy must have looked a little too surprised, because Hermione blushed and let out a small laugh. "I know how strange it sounds, but I am."

"I'm glad Harry wasn't expelled," Pansy said, hugging Hermione lightly. "I've grown rather fond of him, and would have hated reverting back to thinking him an enemy."

Hermione looked a little apprehensive suddenly. "Would you really?"

"Not at all," Pansy said confidently. "Let's get back to the Great Hall. I'm famished."

Hermione had excused herself from lunch early to go to the library. Ginny and Neville were back at the greenhouse, with Luna Lovegood joining their group. Harry and Ron hadn't shown up to lunch after all—Pansy suspected they'd gone to the kitchens instead. Despite Hermione's reassurances, she wondered if they were avoiding her just as she'd avoided them.

Visiting hours at the Infirmary would end in twenty minutes. Pansy supposed she could check up on Draco and see if there was anything he needed. There was a green apple and a dark chocolate bar in her pocket, ready to be slipped between hands before Pomfrey could swoop down on them.

Constant glances around herself determined she was alone. That was good, because she wasn't eager to see Theodore again. She couldn't stand his accusing stare every time he looked at her. Just as she reached the doors to the Infirmary she stopped, her ears pricking.

Hermione's voice was coming from inside. Silently, Pansy opened the door a crack and peered inside with one eye, immediately finding Hermione standing at the foot of Draco's bed. She was holding some books at her side.

"I was only kidding about the books," she heard Draco's disembodied voice say. "Pansy's been bringing all my assignments."

"I know. She told me earlier," Hermione was saying. "These are mine."

Pansy blinked. What in Merlin's name is going on?

"Just how many books do you carry at any given time?" she heard him ask, a teasing tone in his voice.

"As many as it takes to keep my marks up," she replied archly. "You should try it."

Pansy found herself unable to move. She couldn't look away, couldn't stop listening even while
knowing she had no part in this conversation, and that if either Draco or Hermione knew she'd 
eavesdropped in them they would not be pleased.

"I can hardly carry myself upright without bleeding out, but I'll keep that in mind." She could tell 
through his voice that Draco was grinning.

Now Hermione looked like she'd regretted what she'd said. "Sorry."

"Don't be," he replied. "My marks are the lowest they've ever been, probably."

Hermione was taken aback. "If you don't change that now, you'll fail!"

"It'll serve me right."

"Have you thought of asking the professors for help? A tutor? Anything?"

"No."

"For goodness sake, Malfoy, you've got to put in at least a *little* effort if you ever want to graduate."

"Why do you care so much?"

Hermione froze.

Heart pounding, Pansy closed the door without making a sound and crept back down the corridor 
quickly, guiltily, without knowing why.

*You could just go in, you know. They're your friends, aren't they?*

They were, but Pansy couldn't help but feel like she'd seen something she shouldn't have. Hermione 
had left early just so she could visit Draco in secret. Why? The fact that she hadn't sensed any 
hostility was also shocking. Were they friends now? Had she forgiven him? There was so much 
Hermione must not have been telling any of them.

*I'm glad Draco is better.*

She'd thought Hermione had just said that to make her feel better. She felt bad about not believing 
her now.

A pleased, slightly bewildered smile began to form on her face. Pansy made her way back to the 
common room, her mind still abuzz.
Repetition of History

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your support! Your kudos and comments mean a lot to me.

"Why do you care so much?"

It was an excellent question. Even days after she'd offered him a lame excuse, she couldn't stop asking it to herself and thinking back to that moment.

It made sense that she cared. As a prefect, she was supposed to care about the other students.

But this is Malfoy. He can't exactly be lumped in with everyone else, can he?

"I care because Pansy worries about you," she'd said, pretending her face hadn't gone red at his query. "And I know you're too smart to let yourself fail your classes."

"It's too late," he'd said, almost bored. "You said it yourself."

"I said it's almost too late," she had replied a little impatiently. "You're just going to lie there and let yourself fail? You don't want to graduate along with everyone else? Whatever you're going through, Malfoy, you need to get help, and you need it now, because I've had to deal with your insufferable arse for six years now and I know you're not the type who'll just let things happen to yourself without getting involved." She stopped to take a breath. He wasn't looking at her, but off to the side, a red flush crawling up his neck. She sighed. "Look, Malfoy…if something's wrong, you've got to fix it now or you'll be sorry."

Not for the first time, Hermione felt that she had crossed some sort of barrier between them. She'd resolved only moments before to not get personal, but it was too late. She could see the slight surprise on his face—he still wouldn't look at her and hadn't said anything for a moment, and Hermione had begun to fear she'd crushed the tentative peace they'd so far built between themselves.

He'd finally turned to face her again. "What do you propose I do, then?"

Hermione bit her lip. "I'll talk to Dumbledore and see if you can get a tutor. I'll ask Pansy to speak to your Professors and see what you can do to make up the work you've missed."

He seemed to fall back more deeply into his pillows. The rigid line of his shoulders slumped. "Just let me fail. I'm so tired, Granger."

Hermione paused. "What, did I wake you up when I walked in?"

"No," he'd said, dragging a hand through his unkempt hair. "I'm just exhausted. I'm through with everything. Dash it all. I don't care anymore."

Hermione looked at him carefully.

"Have you mentioned this to Madame Pomfrey?" she asked carefully.
"No, and I won't," he said. "I've got enough to focus on with these carvings on my chest."

She had stepped forward. "Malfoy, I think you should tell someone."

"I'm telling you."

She blinked. "Why me?"

He shook his head, as if he himself couldn't believe what he was saying. Hermione expected, for a second, that he would grin and confess the joke, but the frankness in his eyes was real.

"Because I know I can trust you."

She'd blinked again. "You trust…me."

"Somehow, yes." He shrugged.

"And... what do you want me to do with this information?" she'd asked, dropping into the chair beside his bed.

"Not tell anyone, preferably," he said, a curve to his lips. "I'll deal with this on my own."

"An effective method, from what I've seen," Hermione had remarked drily.

He coughed, poorly disguising his laugh. "I've decided to stop talking midnight walks since then."

For some reason, Hermione didn't feel too relieved by this. She wanted to suggest he get help again, but felt he would become impatient.

"Is there anything you need?"

He'd smirked. "A holiday would be nice."

She'd had to bite back a smile. "You're on one now, aren't you?"

He gave her a look. "Sponge baths in bed because I can hardly move doesn't spell holiday to me, Granger."

"You'll just have to wait until term is over," she had said.

"I'm not sure I can wait that long."

Still thinking he was joking, she had left shortly after, perplexed to find herself smiling as she exited the doors, and had gone to the library to force herself to think about something else.

Strangely, she'd woken late this particular morning and had missed breakfast so after washing and dressing she'd run down to the kitchens. There she met Dobby who happily gave her a packaged meal—she felt a little guilty taking it from him directly, remembering all the times she'd tried to pressure S.P.E.W. on him, but if he was happy in his current situation then she would not force him to change.

She parked herself in an empty classroom and ate in a content silence, glancing out the window at the rain that fell over the grounds. Once or twice a student passed by—she'd ducked down when she heard Filch's distinctive shuffle, but no one came across her. She'd seen distant figures flying around the Quidditch pitch and wondered if Harry and Ron were among them, and why they had not woken her.
It didn't matter much, however, as she had a task at hand that she would have had to delay if they'd tagged along. Hermione threw out the remnants of her meal and went into the nearest loo to wash off, and when she came back out she met Theodore Nott right outside the door.

She stopped in confusion, one hand on the door jamb.

"'Lo, Granger," he said, a lift to the corner of his mouth.

Hermione fought the impulse to back away. "You're blocking my way, Nott. Do you know where you are?"

He leaned in closer—an intimidation tactic she knew all too well. His hand came to rest on the doorjamb, just above hers. "That's because I'd like to talk to you, Granger, but you're not very easy to pin down. You get around the castle very quickly."

Hermione frowned, unsure if he intended there to be a double meaning behind his words. What could he mean by it?

"If you need to see me for whatever reason, this is hardly the proper place for it. Move away."

"What for, when you're right here?" he asked. "Did you want to schedule a meeting first?"

Hermione looked past him and into the corridor. There was no one else around. "How long were you following me?"

"Don't trouble yourself, it wasn't that long." He leaned back, looked her up and down slowly, his lip curled. "As if I'd waste more time on you."

Hermione's skin prickled. "Get out of my way."

"Listen to me," he said coldly. "I know you've been visiting Draco and I want to know why."

Hermione faltered and went pale. "H-how do you know?"

"Because I've seen you twice now." He came closer. "What, has Potter sent you in his place? Do you go to taunt him?"

Why does he care so much?

"It's none of your business." She tried to walk past him but he placed a hand on her stomach and pushed her back sharply so that she stumbled backwards into the lavatory and nearly fell.

He followed her inside, the door closing behind him. Alarm bells began to ring louder inside her head. Hermione stood quickly, drawing out her wand.

"Go on," he said, smiling, his eyes alight. "Curse me. I know you want to."

He held his wand at his side in a sure grip. He looked prepared for a duel.

"Let's see which one of us lands in hospital this time."

Hermione shivered. "None of this has anything to do with you."

"I told you and Potter the other day, didn't I?" he said. "All he got was a slap on the wrist. He deserves worse. If you think you can fuck with my House you've got another think coming. And I'm going to make sure you and your lot don't get to run the school anymore."
"Since when have we 'run the school'?” she asked incredulously.

"So you think, then, that the Professors were right to give him next to no punishment."

"I don't think you've realized that Harry's been in constant detentions since the day he and Malfoy attacked each other," she said angrily. "The Professors know he isn't innocent, but neither is Malfoy."

"Then tell me why you visit him,” Nott said. "Say you'll stop and I'll leave right now, but I won't leave without a response. I don't care if you report me."

**What am I supposed to say?** She couldn't think up a good excuse. She obviously couldn't tell Nott, of all people, the truth.

"I've been taking him his assignments," she said.

"Bullshit." He came closer, stopping when she raised her wand threateningly. "Why would a **Gryffindor** bring a Slytherin their books? You've got no access to our rooms so how could you accomplish that?"

*Well, shit.* Hermione's mouth was dry. She felt a ghostly pressure squeezing her neck. There was a leak somewhere in the room, the steady dripping sound seemed to grow louder with every passing second.

"I."

His face twisted into something more sinister. "Tell the truth, Granger. I'm losing patience."

Hermione had always had a bad feeling about Nott. There were whispers, sometimes, about his cruel tendencies. She'd never experienced it first-hand, aside from casual taunts and insults, but she was beginning to understand just why some people were so avoidant of him. She wondered if she should count herself lucky that she had been tormented by Malfoy over the years and not Nott, because there was an emptiness to his eyes that made her feel like hundreds of invisible needles were being dragged up and down her skin—hardly any contact, but the awareness of it leading to her unease. How differently would things have gone if it was Nott who was assigned to interrogate her last year, and not Malfoy? Or would things have stayed the same?

"I'm tutoring him," she said as convincingly as she could. "Dumbledore asked me to since he's been falling behind."

Something strange happened. At once the sense of danger dissipated. Nott looked skeptical and put his wand away—Hermione didn't trust him enough to do the same.

He raised one eyebrow. "The Headmaster appointed you as his tutor."

Still confused as to what had happened, Hermione took a moment to reply. "…Yes."

*Merlin, what have I got myself into?*

"That makes sense, I suppose." He looked her up and down again, his eyes narrowed. "Since when?"

"Since today." She ignored the sweat building on her scalp and scowled at him. "Happy?"

He grinned. "Oh, quite. I think now I'll be able to keep better an eye on you."
Hermione itched to hex him.

"That qualifies as wasting time on me, I think."

Nott shrugged one shoulder. "A necessary evil, if it means curbing your antics."

"I haven't got any antics planned," she said impatiently. "But you seem so sure that I do. If you care so much, why don't you go and tutor Malfoy yourself?"

"Don't you sass me, Mudblood."

"If you think you can hold me here in this lavatory and interrogate me without repercussion then you're an idiot," she said hotly. "You're trying to provoke me into attacking you, you think I can't see that?"

He gave her a contemptuous grin and took some steps forward. "caught on, have you?"

Edging away from him and to the door, Hermione put her wand back inside her pocket. "You're not as clever as you give yourself credit for."

He raised his wand. "Says the girl who just put her wand away."

*Oh, no.*

Hermione's hand dove back into her pocket but it was too late.

"Petrificus Totalus."

She froze before she could even reach her wand. Her hand was only a few infuriating inches away. Hermione struggled to move, but couldn't, watching warily as he approached. Old memories of the same exact thing happening but with another person were resurfacing. How could she have let her guard down? Hadn't she learned *anything*?

"I'm not going to hurt you, silly," he said, sounding offended. "Not unless you give me reason to. Look, I'll even let you talk, if that makes you feel better."

He waved his wand, and Hermione felt her face unfreeze.

"There, does that help?" he asked.

Hermione glared at him. "That's fifty points."

He frowned. "Oh, you're still a prefect, are you?" He squinted at her. "You're not wearing your badge."

"That doesn't take away the legitimacy," she snapped. "I'll take another fifty for everything that happened before this, and another fifty if you don't undo this hex and get out this instant."

"You think a few hundred points will scare me into obeying you?" he asked. He stepped closer, reached forward to grip her jaw.

*No, no, no.* This was too familiar. Hadn't she just begun to get over this?

"Let go," she tried to say, but his hand was welding her jaw shut so it came out muffled. Her heart pounded with dread.
One year. One year and one Slytherin dealt with and even though he'd apologized, here was another
to take his place, like nothing had changed at all.

"Go ahead and empty our hourglass," he said softly. She tried twisting her head away but his spell
kept her unable to move below her neck. "We don't care. We all know as long as Potter's in this
castle your damned House is going to win everything anyway. The Headmaster's made that clear
enough."

Though his eyes were darker she couldn't help but imagine that it was Malfoy holding her captive
again, that it was him who was looking at her with nothing but hate and contempt.

"A witch of your status shouldn't dare presume to be so above someone like me."

She screwed her eyes shut. This was one thing that would never change. There would always be
people who would see her as less than human because of her birth.

"Get your hand off my face," she said slowly.

Nott smiled. "There you go again. You really are insufferable."

Quickly, Hermione maneuvered to turn her head sharply to the side, and when his hand slipped it
landed on her mouth by accident. Hermione didn't hesitate. She bit him. He let out a hiss of pain and
stepped back, and with his concentration broken, the spell fell away. Hermione pulled out her wand
to hex him, but remembering his threat she edged around him instead and went towards the door,
wand aloft, never letting him out of her sight.

"Stay away from me or you'll be sorry."

His hand was dripping blood, but he ignored it and held it at his side, wand at the other, his glare
threatening to render her to ash.

"I'll be watching you, Mudblood. You'd better be damned sure you didn't lie to me, because I'm
going to find out for myself."

Unwilling to turn her back on him, Hermione back away slowly until her back met the door. He
didn't move as she left, but as she finally exited the lavatory she caught a blurred glimpse of his grin.

"Any news?" Malfoy said to her when she reached his bed. He sat back against his pillows, an open
book on his lap that might as well have been there for decoration because he looked like he'd woken
as he'd heard her come in.

Hermione looked back at the doors and waved her wand, drawing out the screens that had been
placed against the wall rather than around his bed. The Infirmary was brightly lit with rare sunlight
streaming in from the windows, and the doors leading in were closed, but Hermione would take no
risks. She sat down in the chair beside his bed, pressing her sleeve to her forehead to dry the
dampness there.

Malfoy was watching her, concerned etched into his expression. He closed the book and put it aside.

"Granger," he said, "are you alright?"

Hermione didn't reply for a moment, but pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a sigh that lasted
five seconds. Her heart was still pounding.
"Why is Nott acting like your bodyguard suddenly?"

He frowned. "What?"

"Nott has taken it upon himself, apparently, to take note who comes to see you. He knows I've been here more than once and tried to interrogate me as to why ten minutes ago."

He gave her a strange look. "That's…interesting, but I never asked him to do that."

Hermione nodded. "I know you didn't."

"That's nice to hear you say," he said, giving her a lopsided grin, but paused when she didn't smile back. His tone turned serious. "What did he do?"

"He demanded to know why I was visiting you," she said, rubbing at her neck. "He tried provoking me into attacking him. He immobilized me and grabbed my jaw and threatened me."

She didn't know why she was telling him about it. She should have gone to Harry and Ron instead, but Harry was off with Ginny probably and Ron was still ignoring her.

Even if I did tell them, it would mean I'd have to tell them that Malfoy and I are somehow talking to each other regularly without wanting to kill each other.

It would also require telling them that she wasn't quite afraid of him anymore, and most confusingly, that she actually didn't hate conversations with him.

Malfoy, for his part, looked angry. "Are you alright? Have you told anyone?"

"I'm fine. I just got back from it," she said.

"Well—why come here first?" he asked, sitting up carefully.

"I may have told a white lie to get him to go away," she said, picking at a loose string on her skirt.

Malfoy turned to pick up the glass beside his bed. A tray of food appeared in his lap.

"Judging by your behavior I'm guessing I won't like what you're about to say next."

"Most likely," she conceded.

Malfoy picked up a roll off the tray and tore it in half. "Well?"

"Well, I told him I'm tutoring you."

Malfoy's brows lowered. "Hm." He bit into one half of the roll and offered her the other. Hermione stared at it and took it slowly.

"Just before I ran into him I was on my way to Dumbledore's office," she said, holding the roll awkwardly between her hands. "I was going to talk to him about the tutor issue, but Nott got in the way and didn't believe me when I said I was bringing you your assignments. I figured I should tell you as soon as possible before he comes sniffing around to ask you."

"What if he asks the Headmaster?" Malfoy asked.

"Oh, right…" Hermione pushed back her hair from her face. A headache was beginning to build. "I'll have to talk to him too."
"Yes, Miss Granger?"

They both jumped. Malfoy clutched at his ribs and groaned. They heard Dumbledore's chuckle before he came around from behind the screens. Hermione paled.

"My apologies for startling you," he said, a merry twinkle in his eye. "I only came to see you, Draco, and how your recovery goes."

"In that case I'll leave," Hermione said, rushing to stand.

"There is no need to," Dumbledore said. "Please sit. I'm afraid though I am not a young wizard anymore my ears still work particularly well, and I overheard that you had to speak to me, unless you wish to do so in private."

"Well—" she looked at Malfoy, who though still grimacing in pain, was looking at her intently. He nodded and she turned back to Dumbledore.

"I—er decided, that I want to tutor Malfoy and help him get his grades up," she said, hating herself for not sounding convincing enough. "He's expressed a wish for help and I'd like to volunteer."

How tripe this must all sound, especially after what happened last year. It certainly wasn't believable to her. Would Dumbledore be surprised? What if he said no? She hadn't considered that.

Dumbledore smiled. "That is very generous of you. I'm sure Draco would be happy to have such an accomplished student help him out."

Hermione didn't dare look at Malfoy.

"Yes," she heard him croak. "Delighted. Thank you."

"I am afraid that I must make sure there are no issues between the two of you, however," Dumbledore said, scratching at his chin. "I am happy to see that you two seem to have put aside your differences, but I must hear it from each of you to make sure: you are both comfortable with this? Another tutor may be found if so, and another student."

"There is no issue, sir," Malfoy said. "I asked her for her help and she was nice enough not to send me flying off."

Hermione shot him a look.

*Don't make it any more unbelievable.*

"And you, Hermione?"

She did feel a little afraid. Afraid was the wrong word, actually. More like cautious. This could still all go terribly wrong. Malfoy might be fine with all this (shockingly), but there was still Theodore Nott to consider.

"I'm fine with it, sir," she said.

The Headmaster held her stare for a fraction longer than was necessary. Hermione held it without changing her expression, and he turned away to face Malfoy.

"I am glad to see you recovering quickly."

"...Thank you, sir." Hermione found it strange that Malfoy was staring at the wall and not the
"I trust, that if any problem arises you will speak to me." He peered at them from over the rims of his glasses. "My office is always open."

Hermione nodded. "Of course, sir."

Dumbledore looked to the far end of the Infirmary where Madame Pomfrey's office was located.

"Now that I'm here, I should ask Poppy if I may borrow a pair of her knitting needles. I seem to have misplaced mine." He turned back to the students. "Do forgive me for intruding." And he left.

Neither of them were willing to speak again until they saw Dumbledore enter Pomfrey's office and the door close behind him. Hermione let out a long exhale.

Malfoy looked at her. "What now?"

Hermione shook her head. "I haven't got a clue."

"You mentioned Nott said he's going to keep an eye on you?"

She scowled. "Yes. I lied to get away, and now Dumbledore believes it, too. I suppose the smartest thing to do is actually do it."

He crossed his arms. "And you're fine with that."

Hermione leaned over to peer around the screen at Pomfrey's door. "I suppose I don't have a choice."

"Yes, you do," he said, his voice firmer than before. "If you don't want to do this then don't. We can find another way to deal with this."

Hermione faltered, but held firm. "I don't need to be coddled, Malfoy. I said I was fine with it."

*And someone needs to keep an eye on you.*

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" he asked.

"No," she said softly.

"Are you sure? You told me he held you by the bloody jaw, Granger," he said, scowling.

"Well it only hurt a little," she snapped. "It's not like he choked me."

Malfoy flinched.

"Damn it." She put her head in her hands. "I'm sorry. The incident scared me more than it should have…it brought up old memories."

"Why did you come here?" he asked slowly.

Hermione "I had to tell you before Nott found out I lied."

"No," he said, "Why come here in the first place? You should tell someone. The Headmaster's in the other room, Granger. Tell him about Nott. End it before it turns out as bad as it did with me."

Hermione bit her lip. "If I do, Nott will know there's more to this. The same goes for Harry and Ron. They only know half of what happened last year. Telling them what happened today would mean I'd
have to tell them I've been here more than once."

He gave her a strange look. "Why the secrecy?"

*I don't know.*

"They wouldn't understand," she said. "I don't need them to know about this. They'd lose their minds, and I don't know how I'd even explain any of this."

"Why?"

Hermione shrugged. "Well, it sounds so unbelievable, doesn't it? Imagine anyone in your House other than Pansy finding out about this. What would their reaction be?"

Draco knew too well. He'd be ostracized. Not only for snogging a Mudblood, and a Gryffindor at that, but for wanting to make amends with her for everything he'd done. Pansy hadn't been careful. She was already going down that route.

And now they'd caught Nott's attention…

Why Nott was suddenly sniffing around them Draco had no clue. He'd never come to see him, so Draco found it odd that suddenly he was so interested in who came and went into the Infirmary.

And now he was going after Granger.

*And Pansy,* he reminded himself, but the thing was that Pansy knew Nott better, and being a Slytherin (and a Pureblood) herself, she had a little more leeway. Granger was neither of these things.

Nott probably thought he was doing him a favor. Why would he think otherwise? Draco had all this to himself. No one knew that he didn't hate her anymore. No one knew that he just wanted her to see that he was a different person, as tripe as that sounded. He told her he trusted her. That was true. But he harbored the secret hope that one day she could trust him, too.

"Terrible," he said simply.

She nodded. "I should have told them earlier, but I didn't. They have their own secrets, anyhow. They won't even like the tutoring bit, I'll tell you now."

"Naturally," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "How is this even going to work?"

"Well, I'll actually tutor you, for one," she said, crossing her arms. "There's no point in wasting a lie if you really need the help. I'll come twice a week during my free period, which is before dinner. If you need anything send me a note."

He nodded. He sat up gingerly, wincing, one hand pressed against his abdomen. Hermione waited for the bleeding to begin, but was surprised when the bandages stayed white underneath the thin shirt he wore.

"You're not bleeding," she said.

He gave a sardonic grin. "Not yet. But lately, there's been less and less."

"That's good."

"You didn't answer my question."
Hermione frowned. "Which one?"

"Why you visited me in the first place."

She fumbled with her hands in her lap. It had grown cold in the Infirmary as the sun had set. Her feet were stiff from it.

"I wanted to know that you were okay."

"You already told me that," he replied. "I didn't believe you."

"Seeing you on the floor that night," she said softly, "I couldn't get it out of my head. The way everyone was talking made it sound like you were dead or dying...I was with Harry before he went down to follow you. He told me he was going somewhere else. I could have prevented this if I'd known. I felt like I played a part in it."

"You came to say sorry?" he looked at her in disbelief. "On Potter's part or yours?"

She winced. "On both."

"Potter can apologize for himself, you know," he said, "though I highly doubt that'll happen."

"Don't be so sure," Hermione said, thinking back to that terrible argument in the Astronomy tower. "He feels awful over it."

"There's no reason for you to apologize anyway," he added. "You weren't in there throwing curses."

"I know," she said, "but it made me feel like I should have helped you more that night. Or maybe if I'd told Harry about you not being the same maybe he'd have gone about it differently."

"Either way, Granger, it's too late to keep yourself awake over this," he said, shaking his head. "It already happened, and you know this isn't your fault."

They heard a door close, and a merry hum as the Headmaster strolled out of Pomfrey's office, a couple of magazines and some long needes held under one arm. Once he had left the office Hermione stood.

"I should go. I've been here too long."

"Do you think Nott's out there now?" he asked, frowning.

"I've no idea, but I wouldn't put it past him."

"I'd talk to him," he offered, "but he's never come inside and I can't get out of bed."

"Don't trouble yourself," she said, waving her hand. "He was stupid enough to tell me he'll be following me. I know how to get around that."

She pulled out her wand and tapped herself on the head with it. Malfoy watched as she disappeared.

"Well done."

"Well," her disembodied voice came from the foot of his bed, "first I'll have to get past him to know it actually worked. Thank you, though."

He didn't realize she'd almost left the room until the front door began to open.
"Be careful," he said.

The door paused mid-swing, opened a little wider, and then fell shut gently.
"Where've you been?" Harry asked as Hermione sat down beside him on the couch. "I couldn't find you anywhere."

The common room was warmly lit with the glow of the afternoon sun and the fire roaring in the hearth. Despite that, a chill hung in the air. Hermione toed off her shoes and brought her feet up onto the couch, settling closer to Harry.

There was a group of students off in the corner, talking rather loudly against themselves and cheering every now and then. When she turned to see what the commotion was about she spotted Dean and Seamus arm wrestling and playing Exploding Snap simultaneously with their free arms. Their faces were singed and sooty, but they were grinning, locked in concentration, their biceps straining but their arms hardly moving.

She'd just come from a brief visit to Malfoy in which she'd dropped off some books for him. She and Pansy had met at lunch and Pansy had been in the happiest mood Hermione had seen her in a while. She had pressed the books on Hermione with a sly smile that had perplexed her. When Hermione had excused herself early, Pansy had beamed at her and told her she would see her later.

Hermione could only wonder what had her in such light spirits, and wished some of it might rub off on her.

"I didn't know you were looking for me," she said, setting her bag down beside herself. Harry offered her a pick from his Bertie Botts' packet and she hesitated before digging in and pulling out a small handful. "I was in the library."

He frowned. "That's the first place I looked."

Hermione paused. Oh, damn.

Harry took a daring handful from the small box and downed them in one go. His face twisted strangely.

"Fuck," he managed to say between the mouthful of candy, "that was a bad idea."

She watched, half-smiling as he chewed the lot rather quickly and swallowed. His eyes were tearing up behind his glasses—she wondered what flavors he'd gotten.

"So where were you?" he asked, coughing, thumping his fist against his chest.

"I was in the Restricted Section," she said quickly, sorting through the candies in her palm.

"Oh." He scribbled something out on the parchment he'd been writing on. "Ron was looking for you, too."

Hermione bit into one jellybean without checking it first. Green grape. Too sour. Her mouth puckered.

"Oh."

So he decided he wants to talk to me again.

"I think he wants to say he's sorry."
"Harry, when have you ever heard him say he's sorry to me?"

"Well I'm not always there, am I?"

"Look. Every time this happens he comes back after a fight and expects me to greet him warmly like he did nothing wrong." She sighed. "I'm tired of it."

"Maybe he's just uncomfortable saying it," Harry suggested, though by his expression she could tell he didn't believe it.

"That's no excuse, Harry, and you know it. If Ma—"

She clapped a hand over her mouth, thunderstruck. Harry stared at her.

"Er—are you alright?"

Hermione uncovered her mouth.

"Yes, of course," she said faintly. "I just…hiccupped."

"Was it that bad?" he asked, smiling, and Hermione smiled automatically in response, her heart still racing from the massive slip-up she'd almost committed.

'If Malfoy can say he's sorry, then so can Ron.'

A more daring part of her wanted to say it anyway, because it was true. The more she thought about it the more she couldn't believe it. She crammed another few jellybeans into her mouth before she stupidly uttered anything else. This time she was lucky. She'd gotten chocolate and carrots, and was that pork? An odd combination, but she didn't mind.

Malfoy had apologized to her before Ron could. When had everything turned so upside down?

Still in disbelief, she looked around the room to distract herself. Hermione spotted Cormac McLaggen sitting very closely beside a girl with dark brown hair who was leaning against him. She had seen them together more and more lately.

They hadn't spoken much since Slughorn's party. While she'd liked the kiss, she hadn't been too interested in Cormac, and when he'd tried catching her eye during lessons or meals in the weeks after, she had pretended she hadn't noticed. A few times he'd invited her to Hogsmeade or to study with her in the library, but she'd always used one excuse or another. She didn't know why she couldn't have just told him she wasn't interested, but she supposed by now he'd understood her and had moved on. Guiltily, she looked away.

"There you are, Hermione."

Ron dropped into the seat beside her. Hermione stiffened.

"Hey, mate," Ron said to Harry.

"Hey," Harry replied slowly, looking uncomfortable. "I've just remembered I was going to lend Ginny my broom polishing kit. I'll, er, be back…"

Hermione watched him go, frowning, ignoring Ron settling in closer to her.

"I wonder what's got him in a tizzy," he remarked. "Oh, look, he left his Charms homework behind. Have you started working on yours?"
"I have," she said, putting the rest of the beans into her pocket since there was no place to discard them properly. "And you can't look at it."

"What made you think I wanted to look at it?" he asked, looking mildly surprised.

"You always do, Ronald."

"Well, alright, I do," he conceded, and then peered at her a little nervously. "I'm feeling you're angry."

"I'm not," she said defensively, flipping a page of her book too sharply. "Why would I be?"

"If you're sure…"

He draped an arm around her. Hermione shrugged it off.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You said you weren't angry."

"I lied, alright?" she said. "I am angry. Please don't act like nothing happened the last time we talked to each other."

He dragged a hand over his face. "Why are you bringing that up again?"

Hermione scooted away angrily so she could face him better.

"You made me feel awful," she said, quietly so no one else would hear. "You said all those awful things and then you come back here acting like you didn't say a word of it. Why wouldn't I feel angry? You can't just pretend you didn't hurt me."

"Is that it? I'm sorry, 'Mione," he said, rolling his eyes. "I thought we'd gotten over that by now. It's been nearly two weeks, you know? You still want me to apologize?"

"That shouldn't diminish any of what happened," she said, crossing her arms. "I don't want you to apologize only because you think I want you to. I want you to apologize because you know you should."

"Oh, now I'm supposed to go by your rules, am I?"

"I'm not telling you what to do!" she hissed.

People were starting to stare. Hermione felt embarrassment prick at her ears and eyes.

Ron's face had gone red. "Then don't tell me how I should feel!"

Hermione scoffed. "I only said you should acknowledge that the things you say have consequences. It's your own problem if you don't realize it or willfully ignore it!"

They were both standing now. Hermione didn't remember getting up from her seat. It didn't matter. She didn't want to keep arguing.

"I'm sorry, alright?" he said, throwing his hands up. "Is that enough? I'm sorry I hurt your feelings."

He glared at her.

The common room had gone quiet.

"I don't want your apology if you don't mean it," Hermione said in a low voice. "Don't feel like you
still have to. I understand what you meant, but don't pretend you're innocent."

She turned around to collect her things and leave. She vaguely heard the start of awkward conversation around them as their peers pretended they had not witnessed their argument.

Ron grabbed her gently by the arm, and she pulled away.

"Don't."

"'Mione," he said, his tone pleading for her to stay.

"Don't call me that, either. You know I hate it."

She shouldered her bag and went to the exit. He followed her out. Her eyes were smarting and she hated herself for it.

The corridor was empty, columned by torchlight. Ron's voice was quiet.

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

She didn't want to look at him. "You still said those things. I think you really did."

He sighed again. "Look, I'm sorry, Hermione. I am."

"Okay," she said dully, not allowing herself to believe that he meant it, because experience had taught her that he might still resent her for it. "I'm going to bed."

She left him with the Fat Lady, who was pretending to be asleep but very obviously eavesdropping, and began the long walk to her own dormitory.

The following day she met Harry and Ron before heading to breakfast. They all went down together, and it struck Hermione how polite Ron was being. He was much quieter than normal, too, which struck her as odd but she passed it off, thinking he might be upset with her, or was still trying to prove how contrite he was, which she was still not sure she believed. It dampened her mood a little, but she supposed it was better than him being outright hostile, and she had too much on her mind to be really hurt over this. A half-hearted apology was better than nothing, at least. Harry had noticed the tension between them and didn't comment on it though he seemed rather uneasy about it.

She'd been unable to sleep the night before, weighing on whether or not she should tell them about the new developments between herself and Malfoy. They wouldn't believe her, she knew, and couldn't blame them for it. It was to be expected when they hadn't experienced what she had, or heard his apology in person. Telling them everything at once would be a bad idea. She'd resolved then to tell them only about the tutoring.

Hermione would have preferred not to tell them at all. The thing was, though, if Nott knew, soon the rest of the castle would. Or not. She didn't know what to expect from him. She didn't know his intentions, but she would be damned if she let him get to the punch before she did.

"You've got to do what?"

"Keep your voice down!" Hermione said, looking around nervously to see if anyone was walking by. She'd pulled them all into an alcove, deciding it was best to tell them the news there than in the crowded Great Hall where just about anyone could overhear. "Look, this wasn't my idea, alright?" She rubbed at her forehead, trying to come to terms with the fact that it was indeed her idea, and not
only that, but that she had also volunteered for it.

"But why?" Harry asked. "They couldn't find anyone else?

"Doesn't Dumbledore remember what Malfoy did to you last year?" Ron asked incredulously.

"Of course he does," Hermione said irritably."He made sure I was comfortable with it before saying
it was okay."

They stared at her in surprise. "You're saying you don't mind."

"I mean, I do have other things I need to be working on," she admitted. "And I'd be glad to tutor
anyone who isn't Malfoy…"

Harry and Ron looked ready to interject.

"But he needs the help," she said, knowing as she spoke that they thought she'd lost her mind. "And
he said he regrets the way he treated me."

"He could have been lying," Harry said, looking agitated. "Why would he even want help? Do you
think he could just be doing this to get back at you?"

She pictured him keeled over in the shadows; outside in the snow, face stricken and conflicted as she
wrapped his hands around her own throat.

"I've wondered that, too," she confessed softly. "I doubt that's the case."

"How?" Ron asked, looking frustrated.

"If he'd wanted to get back at me, I don't think he would have waited this long. We're coming up to
the end of the year and I don't think I've had a single harsh word from him."

Both Harry and Ron looked highly skeptical.

"I don't like this," Ron said doggedly. "At all."

"I don't either," she said. "But I don't think I'm in any danger here."

At least, not much.

"From now until he gets better we'll be in the Infirmary," she said to reassure them. "Madame
Pomfrey will always be nearby, and I'll defend myself if need be though I don't believe that will be
necessary. Once he's out, if he still needs tutoring I'll be meeting him in the library where there's
more people."

"You're still putting yourself in harm's way, Hermione," Harry said, frowning, his arms crossed over
his chest. "What if he's just been biding his time?"

"Look," she said. "I understand why you're concerned. If this had happened in the beginning of the
term I'd have said no flatly and left it at that."

She hesitated, not knowing if she was doing the right thing to reveal more than she'd meant to. She
could trust them, she knew beyond a doubt, but could they understand?

"But…" Harry said, looking at her questioningly.
"But I feel things have changed," she said, nervously glancing from one to the other. "He's apologized for the things he did last term."

Gods, she was going to have to tell them more than she'd meant to. She almost wished she'd never brought any of this up.

Ron scoffed.

"I thought he was full of it, too," she said, a wry smile on her lips. "But I'm inclined to believe him a little more now."

Harry looked curious. "Why?"

Hermione crossed her arms. "I followed him once, about a month ago. I overheard him and Snape having an argument and when they were done I followed Malfoy back to the Room of Requirement."

"What's he doing there?" Ron asked, alarmed.

"I don't know. I guess at one point he realized there was someone after him. I went into the room after him before the door could close, and he pinned me."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Harry asked. "Christ, Hermione. Did he hurt you?"

"He thought I was you," she said. "He knows you've been following him from time to time. I was under a Disillusionment spell so he didn't know it was me. He froze me and lifted the spell and when he saw it was me he let me go."

Ron's eyebrows raised.

"He apologized," she said. "He was upset and angry, understandably, but he never cursed or hexed me. He just gave me back my wand and let me go."

"He has to be acting," Ron said, shaking his head. "He's got some ulterior motive. I can't believe you trust him."

"I don't trust him," she said. "I only trust him enough that he isn't going to try to kill me again."

"And how can you be so sure?" Ron asked angrily. "For Merlin's sake, Hermione. What if you end up in Mungoe's or even a cemetery just because you fell for his lies?"

Hermione placed her hands on her hips. "He's had ample opportunity to get his revenge. I know this sounds absolutely backwards, but I don't think he's the same person anymore."

They were both quiet for a moment. Hermione's heart pounded. She didn't know why she was feeling so nervous.

"Did you get to see what he was using the Room for?" Harry asked.

"It looked like an ordinary room," she said. "Like he goes there to study or nap. I don't remember anything particularly odd about it."

"Why would he apologize?" Ron asked. "I don't believe he's suddenly grown a conscience."

"I don't know," Hermione said. "All I know is he seems like the opposite of what he used to be."
"You seem oddly sure about this," Ron looked at her suspiciously. "Has he Imperiused you? What's he done to you?"

He'd took a step forward, peering intently into her eyes. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"No, Ronald, honestly."

"What the hell could have brought that on?" Harry shook his head. "Did someone hit him over the head really, really hard?"

"From what I heard in his argument with Snape, his parents are in danger," she said. "And they seem to be relying on him for something. I suppose that's why he's been looking so worn down. He's under a load of stress, but I don't know what it could be."

"So his dad isn't in hiding, then," Ron said bitterly. "He's safe in Malfoy Manor."

"I don't know about that," Hermione said. "He could be anywhere for all we know. Voldemort could be punishing him for losing the Prophecy at the Ministry."

"What if Malfoy really is a Death Eater, Hermione?" Harry asked, his gaze serious. "Would you still believe he's really sorry?"

"I don't know," she said truthfully. "I've seen him in the Infirmary and Pomfrey had him in short sleeve—I didn't see any mark on him. Wouldn't she have been able to detect a concealing charm if he's using one?"

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but you sound like you're defending him," Harry said, looking at her strangely.

"No, that's exactly what she's doing, mate," Ron said.

Hermione faltered. "I'm not—I just think we need to be careful about this," she said. "I don't believe he's totally innocent but I think we should be cautious about throwing these accusations around."

"He might not have the mark," Ron insisted, "but he was practically born into that nest of snakes! There's no bloody way he isn't working for Voldemort."

"We believed Pansy," Hermione said after a long pause. "Why is Malfoy any different?"

Their stupefied stares made her blush. This was a nightmare. She regretted having said anything.

"Because she was never as bad as he is," Ron said loudly. "Merlin, Hermione, Malfoy wanted to kill you last year!"

"I know that, Ron" she said, giving him a nasty look. "I haven't forgotten. But I think I've seen enough to judge on my own. I know he's not going to hurt me."

They were both visibly unhappy. Ron was shaking his head.

"Nothing's going to happen to me," she repeated. "I'm only helping him with his homework, and at the first sign of trouble I'll walk away, and Dumbledore will know."

"Nothing bloody well better happen," Ron said. "If he tries anything I'll add another few scars to his collection."

Shocked, Hermione stared at him with her mouth open.
"Don't give me that look, Hermione," he said. "I think I'm allowed to still be angry over the fact that I nearly died because of him!" he hissed. "And you too! I never thought he'd be able to fool you!"

"We haven't been able to prove that Malfoy was behind the poison," Hermione pointed out.

"He was there moments before it happened."

"He's right, Hermione," Harry said. "He was there alone with Slughorn. He could have planted that poison there and modified his memory."

It was a very real possibility. Hermione found herself suddenly foolish for having defended Malfoy at all.

"I'll be careful," she said finally.

"Fine," Ron said, his eyes hard like stone. "But just because you trust him doesn't mean we will."

"I know that," she said. "I didn't expect you to. I'm only asking you to trust me that I know what I'm doing."

"We do trust you," Harry said even though Ron appeared to feel the opposite. He uncrossed his arms. "I'm just finding it hard to believe that git is as changed as you say he is. If he's really a Death Eater, what does that mean for him?"

This had not occurred to Hermione. She frowned, a pit opening in the bottom of her stomach.

"I don't know," she said quietly. "But he clearly needs help. I can't turn away from that despite what he's done."

"You're mad," Ron said tersely.

"If he ends up worse off because of whatever he's sick from, at least I can say I tried," she snapped. "I wasn't asking for your approval, anyhow."

"Come on," Harry said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Let's go eat."

"No, you go on," she told them. "I'm not hungry."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked.

"Yes. I'm going to get some sleep."

And rethink all the decisions I've made this year.

One they had left, Hermiond tapped herself on the arm with her wand, watched as it disappeared, then the rest of her following.

Her feet were taking her to the Hospital Wing. Visiting hours were over but she didn't care. She walked right on in, setting up the screens. Pomfrey was away or asleep, since the lights in her office were not on.

It didn't matter. She would be quick. She raised her wand to end her invisibility, and then cast a Muffliato at both doors.

Malfoy had heard her enter, and she had seen his face drawn and tense from the intrusion. When she was revealed before him he relaxed, but only slightly. It was dark out; the moonlight filtering into the
Infirmary from the tall windows illuminating everything in silver.

She hadn't realized she was angry until she saw the worry in his expression.

"What's wrong?" he asked immediately, seeing her distress. "Was it Nott? What's he done?"

The anger bled from her swiftly.

"You said you trusted me," she said, approaching the bed. He tried sitting up a little, wincing.

"I did." There were spots of red blooming underneath his tunic.

"If this is going to work then I need to know I can trust you too," she said, not knowing why she was shaking when the room was so warm.

He looked at her, something dawning in his eyes. It compelled her to press forward.

"Are you a Death Eater?"

He paled visibly so that he was almost as white as his sheets. He swallowed.

"Yes."

Hermione felt her stomach drop.

Well, Harry and Ron could be glad their theories were right. She didn't know and refused to acknowledge the fact that she hadn't wanted it to be true. She didn't even know why that was.

He was waiting for her to say something. She could see his bare arms, wondered what spell he'd used to conceal the mark.

She had such a strong impulse to walk away then. It would have made things easier, wouldn't it? Walk away and not look back.

But he had been honest when he didn't have to be. He had come to her for help several times, even when he was unaware of it. Why he chose her she didn't want to think of. He had been on the verge of something dark and helpless when she had found him, a mass of shadows and fierce light from her doorway. But she couldn't turn away—not when he was looking at her like he was afraid that she would leave him there, alone, and didn't care that she knew it.

_Gods help me_, she thought, still shaking. _What am I supposed to do?_

"Are you going to hurt me?" she asked. It was a stupid question, but if he was being honest then she would take advantage of it.

His answer came at once so that he stumbled over his own words.

"N-no—never."

"Was it you who was behind those attacks?"

His face went paler still. He tried to mask it but she detected the shift of his expression into one of pure shame.

"Yes."
She looked at his arm again, as if the confessions had wiped the masking spell away and the Mark would be there, a final piece of evidence. But there was nothing to be seen—except as she looked closer, she noticed the skin on the inside of his forearm was scratched raw, and smeared with blood.

She approached the bed, heart pounding, and noticed his eyes—raw again, bloodshot, a little fearful of her.

She reached forward and took his arm. He stiffened, but did nothing as she pulled it to herself to inspect it. Raised, torn bits of skin were wet with blood.

*Why would he do this to himself?*

He was forcing himself to look at her. What did he expect? Her instincts screamed at her to run. He was an enemy. Apologies didn't matter when he bore the skull and serpent. Even if she couldn't see it, she knew he had not lied to her. She supposed she couldn't blame him for lying since she had never asked if he were a Death Eater until now.

In what way would it have been brought up? Would he have eventually confessed, or would she have discovered too late, at the end of his or one of his comrade's wands?

Her voice was not as sure as she wanted it to sound. "Do you still want to be a Death Eater?"

He shifted his arm so he was able to hold her wrist—not painfully, but enough to give her pause. It felt like a supplication. She fought the urge to pull away. If he was trusting her enough to admit to all this then she could judge his change of character better.

But she didn't want to hear this. With every admission from his lips their lives would change further and further. What if she Obliviated him and left? She could pretend this conversation had never happened, and with this information she, Harry, and Ron could act accordingly and inform the Order. She would shove empathy aside and do what was right.

He had poisoned Ron. He had sent Katie Bell to Mungoe's. Ron was right--when would it be her turn?

’*No. Never,’ he'd said.*

How could he be so sure? Never was a bold, foolish promise.

He had convinced her that he was no longer a threat, that he didn't hate her anymore. Didn't the Mark make that all null?

*But--*

She looked at his arm again, remembered his reluctant hands around her throat. He had let himself waste away for much of the semester. There'd been a haunted look in his eyes since the first day. He kept to himself and when given the chance, had never harmed her.

What was the right thing to do?

His head was bent low. She got the feeling that if she'd brought jailors with her he would not have protested to being restrained.

"Do you?" she repeated. The silence hung so heavy around them she could hear the winds blowing
from outside.

"No," came his whisper.

It had taken all his strength just to utter the one 'no'. He closed his mouth tightly, to prevent the rest of his words from tumbling out.

*Help me, help me, help me.*
Revelations

She was too warm, and that was what finally woke her up.

Hermione rolled onto her side, a huge and dissatisfied yawn pouring from her mouth. Her hair was in need of a wash. She sat up, blinking blearily at the flood of sunlight that was coming in from her windows.

No wonder she was sweating. She was still in her uniform from the day before and she'd been sleeping in the glare of the sun for who knew how long? At least her face had been shielded from most of it by her pillow, which was on the arm rest. Not wanting to stand just yet, Hermione slouched as she sat, leaned back into the couch, and covered her eyes with her palms.

She was glad it was Saturday, because it was clearly late afternoon and were it not the weekend she'd have slept through all her classes. After coming back from the Infirmary she'd been so agitated and oddly exhausted that she'd dropped down here rather than her own bed.

Her skirt was all wrinkled. She had loosened her tie before falling asleep but had not taken it off, and looked down at it, too aware of how it looked like a noose. She pulled it off hurriedly, and yanked off her cardigan immediately after.

She was feeling a little feverish. Was it because of the sun? Hermione felt around for her wand, and found it deep between two cushions. She pointed it at the curtains and they closed at once, leaving only a sliver of light that cut through the sudden darkness of the room; a thin rectangle of light that cut the room and herself in half. She could feel the heat from that stripe of light on her face; she let herself slide further down on the couch to avoid it.

The room was now dark, no fire lit at the hearth. She wasn't hungry and at this time she would normally be in the library working on her assignments. It was part of her routine and she always did it gladly and without trouble, except for now. She knew her schoolbag would be waiting for her by the door and she could just change into some comfortable Muggle clothes and go to the library anyway but she wasn't so keen on that currently.

Her thoughts were back in the Infirmary and its sole occupant.

Hermione rubbed at her temples, frowning.

Malfoy. Death Eater.

It didn't feel right. She felt mad just thinking it, but it was true. Besides, he'd confirmed it himself. If he had admitted to being a Death Eater the year before she'd have believed it wholeheartedly. But now, the Malfoy she'd seen lying in that cot with his mangled arm didn't convey Death Eater to her. Not that she was fooled by his looks, but upon knowing that he was not quite the same person, she was able to sustain that belief without ridiculing herself too much over it.

She thought back to his hand holding her wrist, as if pleading with her to stay. The whispered 'no.'

*If I tell Ron and Harry, they'll tell me he's trying to trick me. I think we've gotten past that point already.*

Malfoy was too broken to be playing games, that was clear. She was surprised at herself for not being more doubtful, but where was there left to go? He had apologized again and again. He could have hurt her several times when they were alone. He had told her the truth.
And will you trust him?

After she'd asked him if he still wanted to be a Death Eater and he'd said no, they had said nothing to each other for a long time. She had been reeling with shock, and only the Gods knew what had been running through his thoughts all that time.

She had a thousand and one questions to ask him, but had asked none of them, fearing that Madame Pomfrey would come back and find them. They would have to wait until they could truly talk in private. She wanted to know why he'd committed the attacks, and why he'd targeted Katie and Ron specifically. She wanted to know if he was under orders from Voldemort. Most likely he was, but she held the slim hope that he wasn't.

A strange disappointment weighed over her. Hermione hated to acknowledge it. It was not only in him but also herself for not wanting to believe that he had truly changed for the better.

You really wanted to believe that he wasn't the same. Where does this put you now?

She winced. I don't know.

A loud and hurried knocking at her door made her jump. She stood instantly, wishing she'd at least gotten up to brush her teeth.

"Who is it?" she called.

"It's me," came Ron's voice.

When she opened the door she could see his silhouette in the corridor, just where Malfoy had stood waiting when she gave him all those potions.

"Alright?" he asked. "Blimey, it's dark."

"Oh—" she went to fetch her wand and uncover the window. "I forgot. Come in."

"I still think it's silly you chose to live on the other side of the castle," he said. "Me and Harry came by this morning to see if you wanted to go eat breakfast but you weren't answering. Figured you'd gone already but we didn't see you there either."

"Sorry," she said. "I…I couldn't sleep last night. I only just woke up."

He grinned, his eyes widening in surprise. "You overslept? What was it, too much studying?"

"Something like that."

"Of course." He glanced downwards and took in her appearance. "You haven't even changed? Are you sure you're alright?"

She yawned. "I'm fine, Ron. I was too tired to change."

"Well," he put his hands in his pockets, "Harry and Ginny wanted to go play Quidditch and I'm heading there too, but I wanted to see if you wanted to come."

A distraction would have been nice, but Hermione felt too drained to go outside. "I'd like to, but I've got too many things I've put off that need my attention now."

Ron seemed slightly crestfallen. "That's fine." He reached up to rub the back of his neck. "Pansy was looking for you, you know. We all thought we'd see you at breakfast. Or lunch."
"I'll be at dinner," she said. "First I want to tidy up and get some assignments done."

"Shall we come get you?"

"No, I'll make my way down myself."

After he'd gone Hermione set for a shower at once, and after that spent an hour working on an assignment for Herbology when there came another knock on her door.

This time, when she opened it she found Pansy there.

"And where've you been?" Pansy asked, hugging her then stepping inside. "You're always the first one out of bed every morning and waiting for us at breakfast. Imagine our collective shock when we found ourselves there first and not a trace of you to be seen anywhere. We thought the world had ended."

Hermione laughed. "It wasn't that shocking, I'm sure."

"Perhaps not," Pansy said, joining her at the couch. "But we missed you all the same. Ron said you might be sick; I came by to see if you needed anything."

"Thanks, I'm all set," Hermione replied, placing her open book and parchment onto the coffee table. "But I did need to talk to you about something."

Pansy settled herself more comfortably in her seat. "Fire away."

"I went to see Malfoy last night," she said, and Pansy smiled quickly.

"Really?" she asked, her grin a little too wide. "What happened?"

Hermione's hands fiddled with a shirttail. "He admitted to being a Death Eater."

Pansy's smile faded immediately. Her complexion lost its happy flush. "Oh."

Hermione took note of all this carefully. "He said he's the one behind the attacks."

She could tell by Pansy's reaction that she had suspected this all along, but was still devastated.

"You knew?" Hermione asked her softly.

Pansy nodded. "Not about the attacks. I made him tell me about everything else. He doesn't want me to get involved."

Frowning, Hermione asked her why.

Pansy looked at her sympathetically. "I don't think that's for me to say."

"Is he in danger?" Hermione asked. "Is that why he seemed so remorseful when he told me?"

"Are you going to tell anyone?" Pansy asked, her face stricken.

"No," Hermione replied, watching as her friend calmed visibly. "I won't."

"I know I have no right to ask that of you," Pansy said, "but thank you."

"I can't promise that I'll never tell anyone," Hermione told her. "What if he keeps hurting people?"
"Why is he doing it in the first place?"

Pansy looked uneasy. "You should talk to him. I don't want to betray his confidence any more than I already have. I think it'll be best if you learn from him directly."

It seemed all she had done lately was talk to Malfoy.

Hermione folded her hands in her lap. "You're right—I was there late last night. I would have stayed for hours to get all the answers but Pomfrey came back and I had to run before she caught me."

"Look at you, rule-breaker," Pansy said, smiling despite her reddened eyes. "Who'd have thought?"

"It's not the first time, either," Hermione said dully.

"You'll have to tell me that story sometime," Pansy replied, drying her eyes with her handkerchief. "Harry and Ron have been filling me in on all your adventures from year one."

Hermione smiled faintly, shaking her head.

"They sound outrageous, don't they."

"And to think it's been escalating since the troll in the loo. I know you lot don't go looking for that trouble most of the time, but don't you ever get tired of dealing with it?"

Hermione grimaced. "I've sort of come to expect it, actually. It puts me on edge when things are too calm."

"But don't you ever want to just ignore it?"

Hermione paused.

“Yes."

Pansy didn't reply.

"It feels like too much, sometimes," she admitted. "Especially after fourth year."

"Did you see him die?" her friend asked softly.

She could still see Cedric Diggory's corpse lying on the grass, surrounded by grieving onlookers. The complete horror that had crashed through the stands like a wave as the news of the tragedy had spread. It was a memory that was burned onto her mind. For Harry, having been through that ordeal personally, it had to be worse.

"No. But Harry did. I know it weighs on him."

"I don't know how it hasn't driven you mad already. I don't know that I could take that kind of WOR."

Hermione shook her head. "I feel half mad right now. I don't know what to do."

"About Draco?"

Hermione was embarrassed that her eyes had grown wet.

"About anything."
It was a feeling she hated, and rarely felt. She usually knew her own goals and had plans to get to what she wanted. She set to one path and never digressed.

She'd never felt so *lost*.

There was all the fascinating, horrifying information about Voldemort that Harry was passing on to her and Ron from his 'lessons' with Voldemort: his origin, his horcruxes, his doings at Hogwarts as a student.

There was the pressure of school and all the assignments that were stacking one atop the other, threatening to crush her flat.

There was Harry's decision to not come back for his final year of education.

Finally, then there was the enigma of Malfoy, and the confessions he had made, and the confessions that she knew still lied within him.

She didn't know what to do next. She wished she had her time turner so that she could go back to the night before and keep herself from going into the Infirmary.

She still regretted giving hers back at the end of third year. She had been tempted to find a way to keep it, knowing how handy it might be.

She shook her head, distantly aware of Pansy saying something in the background. It was better to have given it up. For all her precaution, things still had a tendency to turn out badly.

*There's no going back.*

"And where are you headed?"

Hermione glared at Nott, who stood blocking the corridor. The stack of books she carried were heavy in her arms.

"Take a wild guess."

He took a book from her stack. "You're looking rather worn down today, Granger. Feeling ill?"

Hermione sighed, forcing herself to draw out the exhale before she lost her temper. "Let me pass, Nott. I don't have time for your questions."

He raised his brows at her. "You'll make time, then, won't you. I'm sure Draco's not looking forward to having you at his bedside for an hour. I'm doing him a favor."

So he'd appointed himself as Malfoy's unofficial protector? She wanted to laugh.

"If you want to be doing anyone favors, you could get out of my way."

"Sorry," he said mockingly, "am I inconveniencing you?"

Her arms were starting to ache. "You're more than an inconvenience, Nott, but if you want to learn just what else you can be you can linger here for a second longer and I'm sure my wand and I can give you a good number."

He laughed. "You've got quite the mouth on you, Mudblood. No wonder Draco liked to strangle you."
Hermione blanched. She felt as if the collar of her shirt had constricted around her throat. Heat overtook her face.

"I'll be tempted to do the same if you don't remember to check that insolence," he continued, his eyes glinting. "So you'd better behave, Mudblood, or what he did to you will seem like a daydream."

"The only insolence here is your pompous attitude," she hissed. "You're no better than anyone else."

He grinned widely and with a flick of his wrist, flung her book back at her, aiming for her head. Having hidden her wand in her sleeve, Hermione halted it and summoned it to herself more slowly, adding it to her other books.

He watched her without expression.

"Is that all?" Hermione started to walk past him, still clutching her wand.

"It isn't good for you to keep yourself in denial for so long," he said as she passed him. "Stick that nose in the air all you like; we both know you don't belong here."

Hermione ignored him and didn't put her wand away until she was safely past the doors of the Infirmary. As usual, she put a Muffliato on the entrance doors, and one on Pomfrey's office.

Malfoy must have been waiting for her. He was sitting up, a book in his lap. He regarded her carefully as she approached.

"Where's Pomfrey?"

He looked just as exhausted as she felt. "She said she had to go talk to Snape."

The windows were wide open. A strong wind threatened to blow the curtains around the room, but they were held down tight by some invisible restraint. The merry birdcalls from below rang into the Infirmary. The sun was high in the sky but obscured by a thick spread of clouds. The atmosphere hinted at an incoming heavy downpour; the chill made her want to wrap her arms around herself but she didn't want to appear too vulnerable before him.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, setting the books down by his feet

He gave her a wary, slightly confused look. "Better."

She nodded, busying herself with pulling another book out from her bag.

"And you?"

She hesitated. "Tired. But still breathing."

He watched her for a moment as she began to pull out a bit of parchment from her bag along with a quill.

"You don't have to do—"

"Don't make me change my mind," she said suddenly, still not looking at him. "I shouldn't be here. I'm not sure why I am anyway. But for some reason I believe you when you say you don't want to hurt me anymore."

"I meant it," he said softly.
She looked at him for a brief couple of seconds before replying.

"You probably do," she said. "But don't make promises that are out of your control."

"I think I'm in control of myself more than I ever was," he said seriously.

"That's not what I meant." She looked him square in the eye. "If Voldemort asked you to kill me, you'd have to, wouldn't you?"

He cringed at her use of his master's name.

"I don't need an answer," she continued. "I suppose that's why you did what you did to Katie and Ron, even if you say you didn't want to."

At this, Draco wanted to tell her that he'd never specifically targeted Weasley or Bell. He'd opened his mouth and was on the verge of doing this when he realized that doing so would prompt her to ask who exactly he'd meant the attacks for.

If she knew the whole of it then she would report him. It was a miracle she hadn't already, but he wouldn't tempt her to. Not when his mother and father depended on him with their lives. He wondered if he had made a mistake telling her what he did; if he himself had only driven another nail into his coffin.

"Now you're keeping secrets from her, the voice said. And you want her to trust you."

Draco ignored it. He had to, or it would be his ruin. He didn't like it, but he had told her enough the night before to warrant keeping this to himself.

"She'll find out anyway, the voice said smugly. And all will be as it was. Back to hate."

She'd interpreted his silence as remorse. She wasn't wrong.

"Can you promise me you won't do it again?"

He would have made that promise in one second if he could have.

"I don't know that I can."

Her eyes dropped to fix on his arm. "Why?"

"I can't resist an order, Granger."

"Your Mark has something to do with that, I assume." She crossed her arms. "What will happen if you do?"

He shook his head. "I'd be punished."

"Don't you think you've punished everyone enough?" she asked accusingly. "People have suffered because of what you've done."

And they'll continue to, and there's nothing I can do but obey.

Rage twisted inside him. He thought he might be sick.

"Listen to me, Granger," he hissed through grit teeth, leaning forward, one hand on his abdomen. "I didn't want to do any of this. I didn't want to hurt anybody, not even your precious Weasley. But I
"Why?" she asked, frowning. "Does the Mark control you?" She looked utterly revolted at the notion.

He broke their eye contact, falling back towards where his cot met the wall.

"No," he said dully. "But he's got my parents."

So it's true, she thought. The rumors were right.

No wonder he was so fearful. One wrong move could mean death for either Lucius or Narcissa, or both. Or the whole family altogether.

Would Voldemort actually do that? Ice scraped up her spine. She'd never heard any positive things about either of his parents. They were proud, arrogant and cruel people, and until one year ago, their son had been a mirror of them. She had met Lucius Malfoy only once, and remembered how small he'd made her feel despite her forcing herself to talk back to him to show she was not afraid.

Does he love them? She wondered. Even if he's changed, does he love them?

Family was family, after all. She supposed if she were in his place, she could not let her own parents be killed out of her own failures.

But would you kill to spare them?

She was afraid of her answer.

He wasn't looking at her. Likely he'd regretted having confessed anything to her at all since the night before, but it was too late now.

But what could I do?

"What do you want?" she asked, once the silence was too much to bear. She was still tired, and she was nursing an irritating headache that had not ceased since she had come across Nott in the corridor.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"I want to get out," he said, his voice settling in the bottom of her belly like lead. "I want my parents out of danger."

Hermione sat down and with her elbows perched on her thighs, bent forward to rub at her temples.

"How do you expect to accomplish that?"

He slid down into his cot until he was lying down, and rested his hands on his stomach. He let out a long sigh.

"Haven't got a damned clue."

She looked up. Her gaze was frank, curious, and he couldn't help but stare back.

"Why do you want to leave?"

He hesitated. "I don't want to talk about this now."

Hermione leaned forward. "I need to know, Malfoy. I've got so many questions."
"Another time, when there isn't someone at the door." He was peering around the screen closest to his bed, which had a gap between itself and the wall that allowed for such a discreet view.

"What?" she turned, hearing the sound of the door opening.


"Is the Mudblood still here?" came Nott's grinning voice.

She caught Malfoy's flinch at Nott's use of the slur, but there was no time to dwell on it. Nott's footsteps were coming closer and closer. Hermione grabbed the nearest book and opened it, pushing some parchment at Malfoy. Even if it was blank, at least they could look like they had been studying.

Malfoy grabbed her wrist—she froze, looked up at him. His eyes were urgent.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I'm going to have to be an arse."

She understood at once.

"That should come easy."

His lips curved into a smile and he let her go, and she'd just flipped to the right page on her textbook and fixed a scowl on her face, heart pounding, as Nott rounded the barrier of the screens and appeared on Malfoy's other side.

Immediately his unsettling eyes locked onto Hermione's.

"What is it, Nott? Did you want that detention after all?" she asked.

He smiled. "I came to give you my condolences, Draco," he said. "Granger told me about the tutoring. I don't envy you one bit."

Hermione looked at Draco, and almost gasped.

His eyes were cold as though the events of the past several months had never taken place. The haughty, aloof Draco Malfoy was back, and all of his disdainful, familiar stare was focused on her.

"I envy the dead. I'd rather be buried and rotting than have to sit through another minute of this."

A flash of hurt cut through her, and just as quickly, she shook it off.

"If you want to fail so badly, that's your own doing," she said coolly. "After you've been buried I'll have your final marks engraved on your tombstone so anyone who goes to visit you can see why you were never at the top, or had hope of reaching it."

There was a twitch in his eye. Was it a glimpse of amusement or had she gone too far? Either way, his expression had hardly moved.

Nott leaned against the wall. "Mouthy, isn't she?"

"Do you mind, Nott?" Hermione asked, glaring at him. "I've only got enough patience for one of you, and seeing as he can't walk without spilling his insides, you're going to have to leave."

"I'll leave when I want to leave," he said smugly. "If you think you can't teach properly under the circumstances then I'm sure you could talk to Draco any other time you wish."
Hermione let her book drop into her lap. "I was here before you. You'll have to wait until I've
finished so you two can have your little heart-to-heart."

"You take yourself too seriously, Granger," Malfoy said, shoving the parchment off his lap. "I didn't
take notes anyhow so it's not like Theo interrupted anything."

Hermione's hands clenched into fists. "I could be doing something else right now, but I was made to
come here every other bloody day just so you can catch up because you couldn't be arsed to do it
months ago."

Malfoy was unmoved.

"Cry me a river, Granger," he drawled. "I didn't want this either. In fact, why don't we call it a day?
Better yet—I release you of your duties. That should make you happy."

Nott laughed loudly.

Hermione didn't move from her seat. She could feel her face turn red and her nostrils flared as she
took another breath to calm herself. "I am not your servant."

"Is that so?" Nott asked, raising one eyebrow. "That's all you're good for, isn't it?"

"Say one more word, Nott, and you're getting a detention."

"That's enough," Malfoy said, but Nott ignored him.

"You know you don't intimidate me, Mudblood. Give me the time and place."

"I'll let you know," she said dismissively, and turned to look at Malfoy, who had only just
remembered to drop the look of amusement in his eye. She pretended not to have noticed it, and he
resumed glaring at her after a second.

"Why are you still here?" he asked her rudely. "For Merlin's sake, Granger, you know this is a lost
cause."

"I want to see if you're as hopeless as they say," she said simply, running her fingers along the edge
of her book. "But I'm open to being surprised."

"If you were a servant at my house I'd have you whipped for that," Nott said casually, and her blood
ran cold. "Or I'd have your tongue cut out and hung on my wall."

"You'll lose yours before that will ever happen," she said, standing from her seat.

"The angrier you make her, Nott, the worse it'll be for me," Malfoy said, sounding bored. "For
Merlin's sake, keep your bloody tongue."

"Fine, then," Nott looked away from Hermione. "How goes the healing?"

"Better," Malfoy said. "According to Pomfrey I'll be out sooner than she thought."

"Excellent," Nott said. "As comfortable as this arrangement looks I'm sure you'd prefer your privacy
back."

"You've no idea," Malfoy said darkly. "Here I haven't got a door to shut in someone's face if I don't
feel like company." He gave Hermione a pointed look.
Hermione laughed. "You say that as if I go all the way to your miserable dungeons to bother you on a regular basis."

"What with your insistence on reading at my bedside, here, it wouldn't surprise me terribly if you came knocking."

"I can confidently say that's not going to happen," she said, and glanced at the clock. "Time's up for today. I'll be here early tomorrow to pick up your assignments."

"You said nothing about me having assignments for tomorrow, Granger," he said stiffly.

She smiled her coldest smile at him. "I may or may not have mentioned that in passing. I don't recall."

Nott scoffed. "Of course you don't."

"What is the point of you tutoring me if you can't do it correctly?" Malfoy said angrily.

Hermione stood and gathered her things. "If you won't put forth any effort I won't waste mine."

He said nothing more, but watched her without expression as she left. Nott gave her a sarcastic smile as she passed him.

Once she had enough distance between herself and the Infirmary and was sure Nott wasn't following her, she allowed herself to relax.

That had felt too real.

It had been too easy to slip back into their former roles. She had sensed it was the same way for Malfoy—the ease in his old manner and insults, the frosty glares. There had been no fumbling on either of their parts to go back to how they'd once spoken to each other. It had been almost instantaneous.

And all because of Nott.

Considering the fact that no one knew about their…tolerating each other, she held no doubt this pretend-play would happen more than once, especially if Nott was going to become a regular presence as he had hinted to before.

She was late to dinner, and Harry, Ron and Ginny were assembled and eating. They greeted her warmly. Hermione sat down, caught Pansy's eye from the Slytherin table, and smiled. Pansy smiled back, and turned back to her conversation with Blaise Zabini.

"Still studying?" Ron asked through a mouthful of cheesecake.

Hermione nodded as she filled up her plate. "How was the match?"

"Excellent," Ginny said, beaming. "Ron and I played against Harry and Dean Thomas."

"Who won?"

"Guess who," Ron shot Harry a bitter grin.

"We won the next two, though," Ginny said, nudging Ron with her elbow. "So don't get too high up on your horse, Potter."
"I had no horse in the first place," he said, grinning. "That check on McLaggen was still illegal, though."

"He wasn't hurt," Ginny said unabashedly. "I made sure he didn't fall off his broom."

"Yeah, by sticking his hands to his broomstick," Ron said, sniggering.

"It worked, though."

"We'll leave it at a draw," Harry said, and Hermione caught his lingering glance at Ginny as he smiled. Sensing her stare, he looked up, caught her eye and went red. No one else noticed. Hermione tried to contain her enormous smile, and looked away.

Ginny had opened the latest issue of *The Quibbler* and was scanning its pages, frowning.

"Anything interesting?" Ron asked her.

"More disappearances," she said grimly. "More Muggleborns are being taken to be questioned at the Ministry...a dragon sighting in the sky above London, fancy that...a couple of bodies were found buried by Beauxbatons, blimey..." she went through the rest of the pages quickly. "Looks like Greyback's been busy. There's been five werewolf attacks reported around Hogsmeade in the past two weeks."

"Five?" Ron looked outraged. "Merlin."

"Two on infants, and three on adults," Ginny was still reading the snippet. "One of them was a twenty-year old visiting family. She was assaulted and died from her injuries."

Hermione felt bile crawling up her throat. She and Ginny exchanged grim glances.

Ron stared at his plate. "I wish there was something we could do."

"You'd think they'd have told us something about the attacks," Hermione said, frowning at the staff table, which was currently empty. "There's no way they'll be allowing future visits."

"That might explain why Sprout got so antsy when we were talking a walk beyond the Quidditch pitch," Harry said. "She nearly herded us back to the front steps."

Ginny glanced at her watch. "I've got to go," she said. "I've got a detention with McGonagall for hexing Nott yesterday."

"What for?" Hermione asked, resisting the urge to thank her, because if she did, Harry and Ron would want to know what beef she had with him, and she was not eager to discuss that just yet.

"I overheard him talking about you to Greengrass."

"Which one?" Harry asked.

"The older one. Daphne."

"I'll take a stab in the dark and say that he called me a Mudblood," Hermione said wryly.

"Original, isn't he?" Ginny said. "Well, he got a detention with Binns, so looks like I got him double with just one jinx."

"But you've got a detention, too," Ron pointed out.
"It's frowned upon to jinx other students, even if it was with noble intentions," Ginny said. "McGonagall did say she'd just have me do lines, anyhow. I think I'll write, 'I would do it again,' and see what she thinks."

They laughed, and Ginny took her leave.

Hermione set her fork down and took a drink of water. "I need to get back to work."

"Hang on," Ron said as she stood. "You said you've been studying all day. Don't you think you should take a break?"

"I've got so much to do," she said. "I'm still behind on everything."

She spied Nott watching her from across the hall at the end of the Slytherin table, and wondered suddenly if he would try to follow her, like Malfoy had done.

Ron had sensed her sudden nervousness.

"Let me walk you to your room," he said, standing.

Hermione, in the act of standing from her bench, didn't notice Harry standing up too to join them, and Ron's swatting his shoulder, motioning for him to stay put. Bewildered, Harry sat back down quickly, as Hermione turned to say good night.

"I'll see you in the morning, Harry."

"Sleep well," he said, smiling.

When they had reached her room Hermione invited him inside, as she had promised she would lend him her Transfiguration textbook, as he had lost his and needed to copy out some notes.

"Have you started tutoring Malfoy yet?" he asked as she went to her stack of books that she'd left on the table.

"I started today," she lied, dismantling the stack.

"How'd it go?"

"Terrible, but it was nothing out of the ordinary."

"I know you said you can deal with it," he said, coming closer, "but I don't know why you're willing to take the chance that he won't hurt you."

Having located the book, Hermione straightened, holding it in her arms.

"He'd be an idiot to try hurt me again when there's so much at stake for him," she replied. "I know you and Harry don't quite see it, but I don't feel like I'm in danger when I'm around him."

She paused, shocked at her own words. Either she'd really gone mad, or being around him so frequently had numbed her instincts. The most troubling part of it was that it was true despite his confession the night before.

She held the book out. Ron took it, but stepped closer.

"I nearly died because of him," he said, his expression grave. "And he almost murdered you too
before that."

"I told you, he apologized for that," she said, frowning.

"If I'd died, I'd never be able to tell you how I feel," he said, and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"What?" Hermione had to look up to meet his eye, he was so close. "Ron, what are you talking about?"

He stepped closer, and brought their mouths together. Hermione stiffened, her face flooding with heat, resisting the urge to push him away.

It wasn't the worst kiss she'd ever gotten but she couldn't help but compare it to one she'd received while pushed up against a tree.

No.

Ron was not Malfoy. She had known and been close to Ron for years, but had never considered him as potentially anything beyond that. It was Harry she'd crushed on for a while, but that feeling had faded by fourth year, luckily. She couldn't imagine how it would have felt to still harbor romantic feelings towards Harry and know that it was Ginny he preferred.

Ron's breath fanned over her face. His lips were dry and chapped. Hermione considered kissing him back, to see what it would be like, but was instantly turned off to the idea.

It felt wrong. Like she might be kissing her older brother. She shivered, even as Ron's lips pressed harder against hers.

She pulled away, stepping backwards to put space between them.

She looked up at him in surprise. "Ron…"

He rubbed at the back of his neck. "I had to let you know."

"You might have told me before you kissed me," she said, crossing her arms. "I-I had no idea."

Liar.

"For how long?" she asked, trying to silence her thoughts.

"Since fourth year." He blushed. "When I saw you with Krum it hit me."

Hermione reached up to hold her pendant, frowning, her eyes wide. "That's why you were so mean to me that day?"

"Yeah, sorry."

Hermione looked down at her necklace. "I wondered why you gave me this."

"Ginny told me you'd like it," he said, blushing harder. "She said you'd prefer something simple."

"I do like it," she said, and realized upon saying it that Ron had misunderstood her meaning, and thought she was meant something else.

"Do you…feel the same?" he asked. He was clearly nervous and couldn't look at her for longer than two seconds. There was a hope in his eyes that crushed her with its weight.
"I don't know," she said. She couldn't bring herself to hurt his feelings. Not when he looked at her that way. "It's just—it feels odd."

"I know," he said, letting out a short, breathless laugh. "But I've been wanting to do that for ages."

They fell silent, looking at each other, he, hoping he could kiss her again, and she, hoping he would leave.

"Sorry—" he finally seemed to realize the awkward air around them. "I'll go."

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said softly, following him to the door.

He paused there, turned to face her. His face was solemn.

"I've changed things, haven't I?"

Hermione nodded, wanting to say that things had already been changing, but said nothing.

"Where do we go from here?"

"I don't know," she said, wishing that she had an answer.

He left, and she began to prepare to go to bed, his words replaying in her head. That night, she dreamt of cold, barren-treed forests and cold lips against her throat, bound hands and moonlight.
The next day Hermione came across Pansy as they were both heading to the Great Hall for breakfast. "Oh!" Pansy's hand jumped into her pocket. "I've got something for you."

She handed Hermione a folded bit of parchment. "It's from Draco."

Hermione took it, wondering if she should open it in front of Pansy. "Don't worry," Pansy said, patting her shoulder. "I'll go on in."

She entered the room, and though it was still early enough that the number of students coming down for breakfast was very low and there was no chance of anyone reading over her shoulder, Hermione walked a little ways off until she could duck into an alcove.

The note had been sealed with a standard protection charm. She tapped it with her wand, and unfolded it, unsure of what to expect.

Malfoy's elegant scrawl filled the scrap of paper. Normally a fast reader, Hermione dragged her gaze slowly across the lines to make sure she missed nothing.

Granger—

I'm sorry for the things I said yesterday. I know it was only pretend but I know I made you angry and wanted to make sure you knew it was all only pretend. Nott kept talking about you after you left and none of it was good. Do what you can to protect yourself from him. I was an utter monster in the way I treated you in the past, but he's worse, and I'm telling you that myself. I don't know what he wants or why he's hanging around here so much suddenly but it means we're going to have to keep this play going. I'll be released from here soon, and when that happens you can ask me all the questions you want. It's too risky here.

Malfoy.

After she had read it five times, Hermione folded it back into a smaller square and put it inside her pocket, deep enough where it wouldn't have a chance of falling out.

Why was Nott targeting her? She couldn't remember ever having done anything to him that would warrant this kind of response. Then again, the same had happened with Malfoy when they were younger. She'd never done anything to provoke his harassment, it had only escalated year after year until Umbridge came along, where it had exploded into near murder.

She narrowed her eyes, thinking back to her first confrontation with Nott, when she'd been walking with Harry after the argument up on the Astronomy Tower. Nott had said he wanted Harry to pay for what he'd done to Malfoy.

Then why is he coming after me if I had nothing to do with it?

She couldn't think of a reason why. Perhaps he just thought her an easier target? But then he could choose to go after Ron, too, except Nott had never mentioned him at all.

It doesn't make sense, she thought, walking into the Great Hall. Despite her wanting to find the answer desperately, her stomach was growling quite loudly and Pansy would likely grow suspicious...
if she took too long.

*What might she already think?*

Ginny and Pansy were sitting together, poring over *The Quibbler*. A shared plate of eggs, potatoes and sausages lay between them.

"Morning," Hermione said, sitting opposite them.

"Morning."

Hermione reached for the bacon. "What's in the news?"

"A mass grave was discovered yesterday," Pansy said gravely. "About twenty bodies. It's awful. There were some Muggles, but most of them were Muggleborns or Squibs."

Hermione paused in the middle of serving herself an omelet. "Oh, no."

"The *Prophet* reported on it too, saying it was all done by Muggles," Pansy added, gesturing to the copy of it that had been pushed off to the side. "Except they didn't mention that all the corpses had the Dark Mark cut onto their bodies."

Hermione's stomach lurch in horror. She covered her mouth.

Pansy and Ginny suddenly looked as if they'd regretted saying anything at all. The newspaper was quickly gathered up and stuffed into Ginny's bag.

"Eat," she said firmly. "We can read this later."

Pansy pushed a goblet of pumpkin juice toward her. Hermione accepted it and took a drink. Her fingers shook.

"We've got another Apparition lesson today," Pansy said to change the subject. "There's only three left and no one's got it down just yet."

"Is it still making you sick?" Ginny asked her.

"I'm getting used to it," Pansy replied, stabbing her fork into a sausage. "But at this point I still think I'd rather fly everywhere for the rest of my life."

"That's no way to go," Ginny protested. "Brooms get awfully uncomfortable after an hour of doing anything on them. My arse is nearly always numb after a Quidditch game."

They continued into their discussion, and Hermione ate her breakfast quietly, still thinking of the news they had told her. There'd been no photograph included in the article they'd been reading but it was easy enough to imagine a pile of mutilated bodies, even if she didn't want to.

At the same time, she was conscious of the note in her pocket, and the warning inside. It was jarring to know that Malfoy cared enough not only to apologize for what he'd said to her when they'd both been pretending to still hate each other, but to also warn her about Nott.

She kept telling herself she was simply overreacting, but that was a poor argument when the words were still there, inked onto the parchment.

'*Do what you can to protect yourself from him.'*
Things still could go terribly wrong. It was a daily worry for her. Especially with the added threat that was Theodore Nott. Somehow, though, Malfoy continued to shift and morph into something that baffled her beyond any subject she'd ever studied. Despite the terrifying confusion, however, she was convinced at this point that he was not trying to deceive her, and thus felt less conflicted about what she was going to do next.

She tried to ignore the voice at the back of her head that insisted she would come to regret it. The image of his self-mutilated arm still had not left her mind, and even though his skin had been blank she could imagine the grotesque mark there, and then, even more horrifying, sliced into her own corpse.

Try as she might, she couldn't shake the image away.

[One Day Later]

"Drink that up, boy, it's not there for decoration."

Draco grimaced.

"If you think it tastes so terrible you ought to try some of the other potions I've had to administer over the years," Madame Pomfrey said, pointing her wand to his bed. Draco blinked and felt that his pillow had been exchanged for a fresh one. "I've got quite a number of stories."

"I don't doubt that," Draco said, reaching for the bottle carefully. Seeing his hesitation, Pomfrey sent it to him by magic so he didn't have to move too much.

"Go on and drink, it won't bite." she said, coming closer and waiting for him to take the potion. Draco sighed, held his breath and downed it in one go, feeling the thick, cold substance crawl down his throat and fought back a shudder.

"There, now." she vanished the bottle, and summoned a glass of water and handed it to him.

When he'd finished and set it back down she gestured for him to lower his blanket. He did so, a little begrudgingly.

"Raise your shirt, if you please."

He followed the order a little begrudgingly, shivering from the cold.

Madame Pomfrey gave a sharp flick of her wand and his bandages split down the middle, from underneath his clavicle to just above his pelvis. Draco counted himself extremely lucky Potter's curse had not reached beyond that point.

*I've got that going for me, at least.*

"No blood, that's good," she said, more to herself than to him. She peered down her nose at the wounds, one eyebrow raised critically. "The scabs are still fresh. You think they're itchy now, think again. I'll give you a salve to relieve that."

"Will it scar?"

"Wounds that deep, I'm afraid they will. This one, particularly." She pointed to one slash that stretched from his left pectoral to his right hip, curving just the right amount to avoid slashing his belly button. "It was the deepest one. You were lucky it didn't carve into your rib." She gave him a
sharp glance. "I'm sure you'd rather keep your life than live with a few unsightly scars."

Draco frowned. "Obviously."

She nodded. "Good. I might have something you can apply to these wounds if you'd rather not have scars, but after dealing with this curse you were hit with, I doubt it will make much difference." She shook her head. "I have never seen such a curse before, certainly not in this school either. Cuts and scrapes, dragon pox here and there, the odd case of spattergroit. This was a curse meant to bleed out the victim. Had you been found a moment later, I can't say for certain if you would have lived. Even when they brought you here those slashes were difficult to close." She trailed off, and hit by the gravity of her words, Draco waited uncertainly for her to continue.

She turned to look at him, her aged, pale face severe in its seriousness, but behind her eyes there was a comforting sort of reassurance.

"Merlin knows there's wretched magic out there, and people too. In this castle, we can only do so much to protect you from it before you've graduated. Of course," she said, frowning, "it finds its way inside regardless. One can't stop it completely. We can only hope that we've prepared you enough when the time comes." Another flick of her wand, and his torn bandages were banished to the bin. "But for now, I trust you've learned your lesson about starting fights."

Draco looked down at his chest at the criss-cross of slashes across his torso. Even as he breathed, he was aware of the scabs stretching a little uncomfortably on his skin. His fingers twitched, eager to pick them off.

"I have."

*Next time I'll just let Potter attack first and let him take the blame.*

"Try to stand on your own," Pomfrey said. "Tell me how it feels."

Moving slowly, Draco shifted his legs off the bed, and felt nothing more than a noticeable soreness in his abdomen. He reported it dutifully.

"To be expected," she said, nodding. "I suspected it would be worse, but you've kept to your bed and that's let it heal faster. I highly discourage exercising strenuously until after the scabs have gone, or you will make them raw again, and take longer to heal. Continue."

Draco braced his hands on the bed and pushed off, acutely aware of every muscle and joint as they shifted along with the movement. Once off the bed, he straightened, and looked at her.

She pushed up her spectacles to peer at him more closely. "No pain? Discomfort?"

"Hardly," he answered, relieved. The first time he'd tried getting up without Pomfrey's approval he'd fallen to the floor, bleeding again, his torso feeling like it'd been run through by twenty large knives. "It feels strange."

She crossed her arms and tapped her wand against her elbow.

"Twist at the side," she ordered. "Slowly."

He did so.

"Now the other way."
He obeyed.

"Anything?"

He shook his head. "Just soreness."

Her eyes narrowed. "How sore?"

Draco ruminated for a second.

"Like after a very long game of Quidditch."

She said nothing, but he caught the brief twist of her mouth into a smile.

"You will be wanting to freshen up," she said, pointing to the bathroom.

"Yes, thanks." He'd had more than enough of the awkward sponge baths by himself surrounded by three flimsy screens surrounding his bed, highly paranoid of someone walking in.

"Too-hot water will dry out the scabs and make them itch worse," she said, looking at him sternly. "Keep that in mind."

When he finally emerged from the bathroom she was changing his bedding. She directed the used sheets to the large hamper in the corner of the room and waved her wand, and the clean, folded sheets that lay on the chair beside his bed rose and settled themselves rather gracefully onto his bed, looking as neat as ever.

"Thank you."

"There is no need to thank me for performing my duties," she said. "But you are welcome."

She clapped her hands. The pillows on his bed fluffed up by themselves like a balloon being blown up. She nodded, satisfied, and turned to face him.

"No pain?"

"None."

Another flick of her wand and his hair was dried completely. Draco ran a hand through it, smoothing it down.

"You must be desperate to get back to your classes."

Draco rubbed at his neck. "Well, yes." Even if he wasn't going to bother trying to keep up, he was frantic to stop lying around in bed all day. He needed movement.

She crossed her arms again, twitched her nose, and her spectacles slid back up. "Do you believe you can handle it?"

"Yes," he said. "I don't want to miss any more."

And I'm sick of lying here all day.

She had summoned a clipboard and a quill and was scribbling onto it. For a moment, Draco's stomach plunged, thinking back to Umbridge and her own clipboard.
"You'll still have to take that potion, mind."

Draco felt his stomach constrict. "I will."

She looked up from her clipboard. "We will see how things have progressed by tomorrow. I will send for that anti-itching salve; I seem to be out of stock. Rest as much as you can, and if your wounds continue to heal at this rate I might release you tomorrow."

She patted his bed as indication for him to lie down again.

"No more bandages?" he asked.

"Not unless you resume bleeding," she said. "Unless you would rather have them back, if you are worried?"

"No, no," Draco said, and she walked off back into her office, and shut the door.

Not willing to lie down again so soon, Draco paced aimlessly around the large room, looking out the windows. The immense clouds along the sky allowed no sunlight through, but Draco's mood was high enough that the presence of sunlight could not have altered it in any way.

As he walked he was more aware of the muscles of his abdomen shifting, and the friction of his clothes against the scabs. It relieved the itch, strangely. The soreness grew a little tiresome; he wondered if there was a limit to how far he could walk before it really grew painful, and wasn't willing to test it, but the prospect of finally leaving the Infirmary after nearly a fortnight would have compelled him to lie through a handful of broken ribs just to get out.

Pansy would be delighted to hear the news. She visited him almost every morning, and sometimes after lunch with a bit of treacle or pudding in her pocket that he devoured when Pomfrey was holed up in her office. Since he'd been admitted she had him eat nothing but healthy foods, remarking disapprovingly on his ill appearance, and though he did feel much better because of it, he still craved something not as wholesome as what she handed him on his meal trays.

Theodore Nott had been to see him twice since his last visit, and to get him away from the subject of Granger, they'd talked in depth about the Apparition lessons. He had not managed it yet, but did mention rather sourly the day before that Granger had been the first—and so far, the only one—to achieve it. Draco was glad, but was also sorely impatient to get back into the fray and learn how to Apparate before the lessons ended and he would have to wait until the next year to learn how, unless one of the Professors took pity on him and allowed the instructor to keep on to teach him.

Granger's tutoring sessions were underway. She usually entered the Infirmary exactly at four and led him through the various lessons he'd missed. Pansy passed his assignments to her, who would bring them to him and then spend the next hour and a half helping him through it, not that he really needed it. The Professors decided they themselves would teach him the spellwork when he was better—he realized later on that it was because they didn't trust him to be practicing spells around Granger. It saved him from doing more work, but it also smarted at his pride that they thought he would be stupid enough to hex Granger when he was still in danger of being punished for the duel with Potter.

Draco found it hard to be grateful for Granger's effort when he knew it would all be for nothing, regardless of the outcome of his mission. Still, company was company when one was as miserable as he was, and the fact that it was her made it more bearable, which was something he'd never thought he'd say.

After his confession he'd expected her to curse him, to never speak to him again. She was
Muggleborn, after all, and Muggleborns and Death Eaters never mixed well. She was right—if the Dark Lord ordered him to kill her or anyone else he had to obey, and he was terrified enough of the mission he still had to complete.

But she had stayed.

He didn't know how long they’d remained in that loaded silence that had filled the Infirmary to capacity after he had told her he didn't want to be a Death Eater anymore. Suddenly extremely exhausted after the confession, he had begun to fall asleep, unable to help himself. Still aware of her holding his arm, soothed by the touch, he remembered the distant sound of her voice. She had asked him something but he hardly remembered what that question was—it might have been anything.

The tutoring was nice, even if it meant he was bent over a book during the whole time as Granger led his lessons. It all went by very slowly, but she seemed to be growing more comfortable around him, little by little, which was pleasing.

They were still careful around each other. Luckily, the task of tutoring meant that they could not stray far into other conversation as she was very strict about managing time, and this ran little risk of them getting into arguments. He was tired of the dull pain in his abdomen and the itchy scarring and the hideous-tasting potions. Pomfrey was a good source for conversation, but much of the time she was in her office stealing sips of sherry and doing Merlin knew what else, and then the other half of the time she was off talking to Sprout or Slughorn and even Snape, making orders for whatever stock of potions she needed. Students had started showing up with mild colds and wracking coughs, and in one case, a bed of flowers having grown from their scalp and obscuring their hair from a prank gone wrong. The second year had had to stay for two nights until Pomfrey remedied the spell, and though Draco had tried to talk to him, he found the Hufflepuff was rather afraid of him.

Once he would have been pleased to discover it. Now he felt frustrated. It could have been for many reasons—he supposed he'd kept poor care of himself over the course of the term—he'd all but become a hermit. Or it could have been the remnants of his unsavory behavior from years prior. Maybe the Hufflepuff believed that he would attack him like he'd attacked Potter. Whichever one it was, it left a bad taste in his mouth.

Now he was so close to finally getting out, all he could think of was the cabinet, and her.

He had received no more letters from his father since the last threatening one, but the silence was just as effective as his father's harsh words. There wasn't much time left, and if he wanted his family and himself to live, he had to follow through. The moment he was let go he would go back to the cabinet and not sleep until he finished it.

There was still her.

She thought she was doing a good deed. Technically, she was. His marks had suffered long enough, and though he held no hope of getting them back to top shape, he knew he could still scrape by, thanks to her.

It didn’t matter.

In a month's time, or however long until the day he fulfilled his task, he would either be successful and disappear into the Dark Lord's ranks, never to finish his education, or he would die.

It wouldn't matter how many make-up assignments he turned in, or how many chapters he had to read, the sacrifices she'd made to help him.
If there was a way to tell her without sounding like an arse or a liar, he would have done it. Sooner or later she would find out that he had deceived her, albeit unwillingly. She had made the decision and he had played along because if he'd said no she would have become suspicious, and he would be hard pressed to explain that he would be dead soon so she was better off saving her time.

He dreaded that day. They had grown somewhat friendly, if not still a little awkward. He had come this far that she was not totally repulsed by his presence, and that was refreshing. The thought that it would all be reversed soon made his stomach twist. He would either kill Dumbledore or fail in the attempt, and she would look at him with hate again. He would grow his horns and talons and tail back, and every truth he had told her over the course of the past several months would be perceived as a lie. She would look back on his behavior as an act, a parody, to get her to trust him and twist the knife in.

He didn't want to do it. If his parent's lives were not at stake, he would have told them all to fuck right off. But they'd given him no choice.

He was still looking out the window when he heard her enter. First there was the confident trail of footsteps leading up to and through the Infirmary doors, and then when she'd undoubtedly seen him standing they stuttered off and stopped completely.

Draco turned to greet her. The room seemed brighter.

"You're up," she said, visibly surprised.

"Did you want to catch me while I was still asleep?" he asked, smiling.

"You know what I meant," she said, flushing.

"You're lucky I do." He nodded at the little office at the far end of the room. "There's not much else to do when you're confined to one room for so long. That being said, Pomfrey says I might be out by tomorrow."

"No wonder you're so happy," she said, arching one brow.

"I heard you've beat us all again and Apparated."

She smiled nervously. "I thought I'd never get it, to be honest. It takes some getting used to, though."

"Any more splinchings?"

"Not as far as I know, though there was a close call with Goyle and his eyebrows."

"That's a shame. I'd have liked to see that." Draco walked back to his bed. He gestured to the chair. "You can sit, you know. Your bag looks heavy."

She set it down gently on the floor, but Draco still felt its impact from where he stood. "No," she said, looking at the floor, as if trying to make up her mind on something. "Actually, I'm leaving in a moment, I just came to tell you something."

"What would that be?" he asked, feeling his mood sink just the tiniest bit. "Is it about what happened when Nott was here?"

"No, no." She looked back up, her expression more resolute. "I'm calling the blackmail off."

Draco blinked. "Oh."
"Yes," she said a little awkwardly. "You don't have to worry about that anymore."

"Is that all?" he asked, so surprised he almost sat up.

She took a step back, preparing to leave. "I suppose I'll see you tomorrow in class."

Where had all the warmth gone? Why was she closing herself off again? Draco's head spun. Or had he imagined the friendliness from only moments prior?

"Hold on, Granger," he called after her. She had collected her bag already but approached the bed again, her jaw set. "Why?"

She looked quickly around the room. "We shouldn't talk about this here."

"We already are," he said, doggedly. "Is Nott outside?"

"No. I saw McGonagall pull him aside after class to talk to him about his marks on his assignment from last week."

"Then we're only in danger of being overheard by one person, and I'm sure she's got her phonograph on in there again like she usually does. Pomfrey's terribly fond of Beethoven."

Granger looked at him skeptically, but in the end took out her wand and pointed it at Pomfrey's door.

"Muffliato."

Nothing happened.

Draco looked at her curiously. "What did you do?"

"I made sure she can't hear us." She said, putting her wand back into her pocket, then turned back to him.

"So that's what you've been doing all this time," he said. "I wondered."

"I'd rather not be overheard, and I know you don't want that either," she said simply. "Now about the blackmail. You kept to the terms. I think it's unnecessary now."

He crossed his arms. "Unnecessary how?"

She paused, and then finally sat down.

"I'm not ready to forgive you just yet," she said, "but I'm willing to try."

Draco stared at her. She turned faintly pink and tucked her hair behind her ear. He didn't think he'd ever seen her so uncomfortable.

"Why?" he demanded.

"You're not the same," she said softly, her hand coming to her throat to pull her collar loose. Draco's eyes followed her hand and his jaw clenched.

"You mean I'm not as hateful as I used to be."

"Well, there's that." She paused. "I think you can understand I'm still a little hesitant to trust you completely, but I believe you when you say you don't want to be a part of that anymore."
He frowned, looked at her carefully.

"You're really doing this."

Her hand had closed around the tiny pendant she wore around her neck. "I can hardly believe it myself."

He shook his head. "I still don't understand why."

"At the time I made the threat, I did it to protect myself, as you know," she said. "All the conditions I came up with were to prevent you harming me again."

"And you think I don't want to hurt you anymore?" He hadn't taken his eyes away from her in some time.

She stared right back. "You haven't given me reason to."

"And if I wake up tomorrow and decide I've changed my mind and start hating you again?"

She cracked a small, humorless smile. "Then I'll have some letters to send."

Draco looked away at last, his heart pounding. What was happening? Were they actually working out a truce? Every word she had said and continued to say blew him away.

"I really hated you then."

"You did," she said quietly. "I was genuinely afraid of you for some time." There was still some of it in the confession. He understood it couldn't be easy for her. He held a secret fear that no matter how friendly they became that hesitation, suspicion and fear would always remain there, all because of what he had done. Draco felt a pang of regret, just under his heart.

He sat down on the side of his bed, unable to look her in the eye. "You didn't deserve what I did to you."

He felt he was saying too much, but couldn't stop. He had nearly died in that lavatory, after all, and even if someone had found them and managed to save his life, Draco knew without a doubt that he would not be that lucky in the near future when the time came to finish his task. If she gave him a chance, he was going to take it.

She paused, and let go of her pendant. It disappeared beneath her collar. She looked at him like he was a new specimen she'd never encountered before; her eyes full of trepidation and curiosity. Draco felt his ears grow hot.

"Thank you for saying that," she said.

"I was full of anger, most of it meant for myself but I targeted you because you couldn't fight back. I'm ashamed of what I did. I'm sorry."

"Malfoy—"

"I've never hated anyone as much as I hated you," he said, cutting her off, because if he let her say what she was going to say then he would lose his courage and be stuck waiting for the next opportunity to say this, if there ever was one. "You were everything you shouldn't be. You made me question what I believed in all my life...you frightened me."

As she'd been breathing, her breath caught in her throat quite violently, and she coughed.
"I frightened you?"

"You were nothing I'd ever encountered before," he said. "I grew up within strict limits and beliefs—imagine. suddenly, when you come into the picture and tear down everything I know."

She was continually at a loss for words. She stared at the ground, then at him, her eyes filled with astonishment.

"I thought you were just a bully. Pulling pigtails, throwing rocks. I never thought it ran deeper. Now I suppose the kiss makes a little more sense."

He flushed, and couldn't meet her eyes. "You didn't deserve that either."

"No, I didn't," she agreed, looking a little fierce in the wake of the memory. But then her face softened again. "After the anger died down I realized how conflicted you must have been within yourself. I didn't know that was only a small part of it."

He passed a palm over his face, feeling drained. She remained standing awkwardly at the foot of his bed. It had begun to rain outside, and the Infirmary was abuzz with the thrum of rain from outside the windows.

"Send the letters," he told her suddenly. "Do it."

She looked uncomfortable again, tugging her tie loose from around her neck. "I destroyed them."

"Then yell at me now," he said. "Howl. Scream. Curse me. I won't fight it."

She gave a small, nervous laugh. "What for?"

"I deserve it."

Her eyes went solemn.

"I think you've punished yourself enough. Is this and that, she pointed at his arm, "what you've been carrying with you all this time? Is that why you've gone so strange?"

He couldn't find his voice to lie. What point was there in lying? She'd already seen him at his lowest. Even without any response, she understood him clearly.

"I think we're even now. I'll admit I wasn't exactly in the right frame of mind that day we talked in the courtyard..." she blushed with embarrassment at the memory. "I didn't want to let myself acknowledge it but that isn't fair to you. You're not who you used to be."

"I think all this would be easier if I was," he said, and she laughed; a warm, pleasant sound in the midst of the chill in the room.

"If only," she said. "But I'm glad you're not, or I probably wouldn't be here."

Draco's smile faded. "Don't say that."

"It's the truth, isn't it?"

"Well I don't want you dead anymore, alright?" he said a little heatedly, then settled back down. The wounds were starting to itch again. His whole midsection burned. "I don't deserve your kindness, but thank you."
She nodded, and finally sat down, an invisible weight gone from her demeanor.

"If this is all some sort of trick, you'd better tell me now," she said, giving him a grim smile. "I don't like wasting my time, and I'd rather not feel like an enormous fool in the future."

"I like a good joke myself, Granger, but I don't like wasting my time either for a petty laugh."

"Can I ask what brought this about?" she asked. "You can't imagine how many times I've thought about this—I can't wrap my head around it."

*It was you,* he wanted to say. *I spent most of my life convinced you weren't equal to me. You proved me wrong.*

"It was made very clear to me last year how pathetic I was," he said. "I didn't want to keep on that way. I…realized you weren't as awful as I'd made you out to be. If I'd been so wrong about you, what else was I wrong about?"

He'd already learned the answer to that. Many, many things.

Hermione knew there was more to it, and had to bite her tongue to keep herself from pressing on. Somehow they were both relaxed, talking to each other as if good acquaintances—she was too wary to use the word *friends.* Every word he spoke—she could still see a trace of shame in his expression when he looked at her—how could she remain unconvinced?

Harry and Ron's warnings echoed in her head. They were right to be suspicious, but they didn't know the whole story. Perhaps if she'd explained it sooner they would not have such a problem with this. But she sensed there would always be hostility where Malfoy was concerned.

A year ago he'd have never tolerated her presence here. Now…

*You'll come, won't you?*

"I was such a prick to you," he said slowly. His eyes were glued to hers, and she couldn't look away. Hermione found herself rooted to where she sat, afraid to move, afraid to breathe. The remorse in his eyes made her think of Harry though she didn't know why and it was terrifying to realize it, to see again and again that he was changed, that he was *human,* after so many years of seeing him as otherwise.

He was still speaking, and she struggled to reel herself back to the present and listen. His right hand gripped his left forearm, just where she guessed the Mark would be. He held on tightly, as if that could wipe it from his skin.

"If I could take back all the things I said, the things I did..."

"You can't," she said, feeling oddly disconnected from herself at the surrealness of the situation. "Not unless you had a Time-Turner, and those are terribly difficult to come by. Besides, if you did, we wouldn't be here now. Would you rather have that?"

"No, I wouldn't." He could see from her expression that she'd expected him to say yes. A part of him had expected it, too. Draco stood from the cot and held out his hand. "Thank you. For giving me another chance."

The words he didn't say hung between them.

*I don't deserve it.*
She hesitated, stepped forward cautiously, and took his hand. It was warm. Their eyes met. Hermione was caught again by the look in his eyes. Unexpectedly, she was thinking of the kiss again, and with some difficulty, pushed the memory away. She didn't know why the memory was haunting her more frequently. It was still an unpleasant experience as far as she was concerned, but that had been a year ago and now all she got from the memory, rather than disgust, was a morbid sort of curiosity.

She cleared her throat. "Thank you for proving me wrong."

They shook hands. Draco let her go, feeling an odd sort of buoyancy inside himself that made him want to grin as if a sunburst had bloomed inside his body but he kept it back for fear of appearing mad.

"I expect we'll see each other in class tomorrow," he said.

She nodded, a strand of hair falling into her face. She tucked it away. He felt a sudden sense of shyness around her demeanor and wondered what had caused it. His eyes caught on her mouth—he forced himself to look away.

"Yes, I expect so, unless Pomfrey keeps you another day."

Draco frowned. "Merlin, I'd hope not."

She slung her bag across her body, shifting her hair from one shoulder to rest heavily atop the other. The stirring of the air caused the scent of her shampoo to carry over to him, branded itself in his memory.

"I'd be on my best behavior, were I you."

"Oh, I have been," he said, glancing back toward her office. "I'd rather not mess about with the person who saved my life."

She looked at him strangely, then remembered herself, and nodded.

"Well, goodbye."

Draco sat back down on his cot. "Goodbye."

He watched her leave, listening to her footsteps regain their confidence once she was farther away from the Infirmary, and once they'd completely faded, he allowed himself a huge grin.
"You wanted to see me."

Draco hovered by the door. Snape sat at his desk, bent over a large book and a length of parchment, which he was writing on rapidly.

Snape didn't bother to look up.

"Enter."

An unexpected wave of nervousness washed over Draco as he approached the desk. By now he had to have heard about the tutoring with Granger. Hardly anyone else knew except for the staff, and word *must* have spread between themselves.

*Merlin knows they're all a load of gossips.*

Snape must not be happy. Had he summoned him in only to chastise him again? Draco couldn't think of another reason why he'd want him in his office when he was clearly busy. Or would he warn him against talking to Granger again? Draco resisted the urge to reach into his pocket for a galleon he could flip.

Snape gestured at something at the edge of his desk, still not looking away from the papers.

"Take this."

It was a potion bottle—Draco looked at it and felt his mouth dry.

When was the last time he'd found one of those mysterious potions in his things? He couldn't remember. He hadn't even noticed they'd stopped appearing.

"*You* sent me the potions?"

The moment Snape's eyes landed on him he realized he should have kept silent.

*Of course* it hadn't been him.

"What potions." The urgency in Snape's flat voice gave rise to another prickle of nervousness.

There was no other option but to tell the truth. For all he knew, Snape could already have gone into his mind and found the answer there.

"Someone's been leaving potions in my things."

Snape paused, and put his quill down at last. He fixed Draco with an intense stare.

"What kind of potions."

"It wasn't poison," Draco said quickly. "They were just sleeping potions."

"And how did you discover that?"

*Fuck.*

"I drank one."
It was useless to admit that it had been by accident, that he'd confused it for one of his own. Snape would not care.

"If your mother knew how careless you've become, she would send for you at once."

"Don't bring my mother into this," Draco snapped. "I only made that mistake once and I'm still here."

"The fact that you still drank it proves you are not being watchful enough," Snape shot back coldly. "If someone had made an attempt on your life with those potions they would have succeeded with hardly any effort."

Draco clenched his jaw.

Snape was unchanged by his victory.

"The next time you receive one, bring it to me," he said, and stood. He tapped his wand on his desk, and it was cleared of everything except for the bottle.

"That," he said, pointing to it, "is for your scars. They will never fade, but it will alleviate the effects of the curse."

Draco frowned. "What effects?"

"The Sectumsempra is a curse meant to bleed out one's enemies," Snape said, and Draco nodded, remembering Pomfrey's explanation. "Little is known about it aside from what we have learnt from your case. The gashes it creates in the recipient are nothing out of the ordinary, but the reason you took so long to recover is that the spell makes it difficult for the wounds to heal. Without the proper care or timing in caring for the wounds, they will refuse to close, and whomever is unlucky or stupid enough not to tend to it immediately will likely die of infection or blood loss."

Draco stood still, his thoughts halted by the sickening knowledge of the fate that might have met him.

"How do you know that?" he asked slowly, frowning. "Pomfrey didn't know that."

Snape drew his head high, his stare haughty. "I created it."

"You?"

"Wipe that incredulous look off your face," Snape said. "Remember who you're speaking to."

After the initial shock had fled, Draco realized he should not have been surprised at all by the confession. His own father had told him stories of Snape's knack for inventing spells, and though he'd never relayed more information than that, Draco wondered if he should be upset with himself for not having put it together earlier.

Not that he'd really had much reason to suspect, but he had wondered how in Merlin's name Potter had known such a dark curse.

"I've got you to thank for this," Draco said, pointing to his chest. "How did Potter even know about it?"

"That remains to be seen." Snape gave another flick of his wand, and the potion bottle flew over to Draco, who caught it angrily. "You were lucky I was the first to find the both of you. Had it been anyone else you might have died."

*Maybe I would have preferred that.*
"If it were not for my intervention, Potter surely would have seen your Mark."

Draco scowled. "He already suspects anyway."

Snape sneered. "And what do you think his reaction would be had he seen it? He would have demanded your expulsion. You would have been taken to the Ministry, and had no hope of seeing your parents again except when your trial took place."

Properly angry, Draco held up the bottle. "Am I free to leave now you've given me this, or did you want to yell some more?"

By the rigidity of his posture, Draco suspected Snape was about to lose his patience.

"Continue to behave like a child, Draco, and you will fail your mission and force the Dark Lord's hand in killing your family."

"Stop treating me like one, then," Draco spat. "I heard your message the first time. You don't have to keep calling for me like I'm some sort of dog. I don't need telling twice."

"If you cared enough to listen, I would not have to repeat myself."

"I don't need you looking after me."

Snape planted his palms on the surface of his desk and leaned forward, his cold eyes deflecting Draco's hostile glare. "I was not aware of the extent of your self-destructive habits. Your Father will be interested to hear of it."

Draco balked. "I am not self-destructive."

Even as he said it, he knew it was true. So did Snape, apparently. The corners of his lips stretched upwards the tiniest fraction, resulting in a cold, mocking smile. It was the only sort of smile Snape ever bothered to give, and he did rarely at that. It was always highly unpleasant. Draco suppressed a shiver.

"Then why do you continue to involve yourself with that Muggleborn when you know what danger you place yourself in by doing it?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you," Draco said, seething now. He was itching to break something, or to go on his broom and race until the skin threatened to peel from his face. "Stop trying to tell me what I can and can't do."

"If you don't take your task seriously, someone must," Snape said coldly. "Remember that your Mother begged me to take the Vow to protect you. If you will not listen to me, at least think of her. I know you were raised better than to leave them to the Dark Lord's mercy."

"Says who I'm not taking it seriously?" Draco asked hotly. "It's all I think about!"

"Then finish it."

Draco faltered. Snape clasped his hands behind his back and began to come closer. He looked down at Draco from over his hooked nose. In the harsh candlelight, the imperfections of his skin stood clearly against the light's unflattering glare.

"The Dark Lord will not forgive you if you continue to waste time. Finish what you must, and then strike as soon as you get the chance."
The wardrobe. It had been weeks since he'd last gone to see it. Apprehension tensed his shoulders. He had to go to it at once, and fix it before time ran out.

The thought made him want to scream. But there had been no word from his parents for several days now, and he had not realized it until that very second.

Guilt burned at him. Anything might have happened. For all he knew they might be dead already. His stomach twisted.

No.

"I will," he said dully.

As he strode from Snape's office he set directly for the stairs, intent on going to the Room of Requirement.

Snape was right. He could avoid his task no longer. It was time to stop acting like a child and face the consequences of what he'd signed himself up for.

That's it, then. You're going to do what they tell you.

Draco tugged at his tie as he walked. The uncomfortable itch from his scars demanded attention.

I have no other choice.

He turned a corner, walking faster and faster. Images of what might be happening to his parents that very moment flashed through his head, one after the other. The Dark Lord wouldn't have dared kill them just yet, or would he?

So you'll just become a murderer? the voice asked.

I already am one.

His hands had gone cold and fumbled his tie, accidentally tightening the knot around his neck rather than loosening it. He looked down, scowling at the tie, and grabbed it with both hands, suddenly impatient to get it off at once.

He was turning another corner, too preoccupied with his tie to look where he was going when he collided into someone. He heard a startled gasp and caught a flash of dark hair as it obscured his vision. Aware of his loss of balance, he could only let go of his tie as he began to fall backwards, but just as quickly, someone caught him by the front of his robes and kept him upright.

"Don't you ever look where you're going?"

He looked up to see an amused expression on Granger's face, and he felt the tension drain from him.

"Reflexes like that, you ought to try out for Quidditch, Granger," he said, slightly out of breath, his heart still pounding.

"I prefer to keep my feet on the ground, thanks," she said, and with some effort, helped him stand upright.

"Thank you," he said quietly, finally yanking off his tie and shoving it in his pocket.

She let go of his robes, peering at him curiously.
"I was just on my way to find you. So you're finally out. How do you feel?"

Draco pushed his hair from his eyes. "Like I never want to lie down again."

She smiled. "Don't think that's going to get you out of tutoring."

Draco nodded. "Where will we meet now? The library?"

Granger bit her lip before speaking. "No. Too many people will see us there and it's too quiet. They'll be able to hear everything we say."

"Does that matter?" Draco asked. "You could always cast that Muffliato of yours, if that's what you're worried about."

She frowned. "It's not mine. I could use it, but I'd rather not take any risks. People will still talk, and this is better kept private."

At his look of confusion, she tapped the side of her head. "I've got questions, remember?"

"Right." He broke eye-contact briefly to glance about the corridor. It was empty.

"So that leaves us no choice but to use my room," she said. "Although the Room of Requirement might do…"

"No," he said suddenly. "Not there."

She looked at him in surprise. "Why not?"

He flushed. "Too many bad memories."

"Oh." She frowned again. "On your part or mine?"

"Both, I imagine," he replied. "But I'd rather not go back there if it's the same to you."

She sighed. "You're right. I'm not keen on going there again either. I'll have to be my room, then."

"What, are we doing this now?" he asked, as she turned and began to walk in the direction she'd come from.

"Better now than never," she said, motioning for him to follow. "Unless you're busy?"

Draco hesitated.

"Do hurry," she hissed. "Decide!"

When he reached her she'd taken out her wand, and was peering around the corridor.

"You or me?" she asked. "We've been lucky enough that no one's seen us yet but imagine if someone saw me leading you to my room. I'd like to avoid that fallout."

"Me," he said. "What if Nott's hanging around?"

"Around here?" she looked slightly uneasy, as if she hadn't considered that before, but then shook her head. "I can deal with him, but I doubt he'd waste his time waiting around my room. Hold still."
She reached up and tapped him on the head with her wand.

Draco felt like a gentle, cool wave of water rolled down his body, starting from the crown of his head. He shuddered at the feeling although it was pleasant, and watched Granger's eyes follow the spell traveling down his body as the rest of him vanished.

When she was sure she had done it right, she nodded and put away her wand.

"We haven't got that far to go," she said. "Stay close and don't make a sound."

Draco looked down at himself. He could see right through himself to the floor beneath him, the space behind him. There was the barest outline of his figure; if he moved too quickly it was noticeable. He would have to be careful.

"Right."

She turned and started down the corridor. Taking care to keep close but not walk too quickly, Draco tagged behind her.

"This feel utterly strange," she was saying, either to herself or to him, he couldn't tell, but he caught the shake of her head.

"Likewise," he said, and she jumped. An unexpected laugh burst forth from him.

"You know I'm right here!"

"I know, I know!" she said, fidgeting with her sleeve as she walked. "It's just odd, is all. Not just you being invisible, but the fact that it's you, of all people…"

Draco quieted. Was she thinking back to when he'd stalked her around the castle? His stomach sank.

"Look," he said, "let's try something else if this is bothering you."

She looked to her side, where she assumed he was judging from the source of his voice.

"That isn't what I meant," she said firmly. "It's just that I'm used to it being Harry who's invisible, not you."

They turned a corner after climbing a flight of stairs, and saw a number of first years who'd just come out of class. Hermione cast a slightly worried but mindful glance back at Draco, and plunged ahead.

The student's chatter was a welcome sound after walking so long in silence. Draco had to maneuver himself as if he were in the middle of a heated Quidditch match to avoid getting hit by all the limbs and bodies that were not aware of his presence. Once or twice he accidentally brushed against an overflowing school bag or was hit by an elbow, but remained largely unnoticed in the crowd.

Professor Binns floated out the door of his classroom.

"Hello, Gretchen," he said to Hermione as she passed.

"Hello, Professor," Draco heard her reply, sounding totally unbothered, as if it was something that happened every day.

When they had successfully got through he heard her give a sigh of relief, and suppressed his own.

"Nearly there," she said over her shoulder, and then came into a halt as she spied people coming
towards them from the end of the corridor.

Draco heard her swear.

"Stay close, and don't say anything," she warned through a smile, waving at Weasley, Potter, Weasley Two, and Pansy as they approached.

Draco eyed them warily and stood against the opposite wall, just close enough to hear what they had to say.

"There you are!" Ginny was the first to reach Granger, and embraced her tightly. "We were just hammering on your door and since you didn't answer we figured we should go check the library."

Pansy hugged her next, then Potter and Weasley.

"I was just coming back from it," Granger said, smiling. She looked radiant in their company.

"Say you'll come with us for a walk outside," Pansy said. "A little rain does a soul good, especially when it's been surrounded by that dry library air."

"I'd rather stick with the dry air than face that humidity," Granger replied.

"We might even have a match after we visit Hagrid," Potter said, hoisting his broom over her shoulder. "We could use some commentating, if you're up for it."

"I can't," Granger said, looking apologetic. Weasley stood very close to her, his hand on her shoulder, and it bothered Draco more than he wanted to admit. "I've got to catch up on some assignments and I need to write my mum and dad."

"That can wait, can't it?" Weasley asked. Draco could see his hand rubbing at her shoulder, and frowned.

"I haven't written to them in ages," Granger replied.

"You just got a letter from them two days ago!"

"And I don't want to keep them waiting for a reply," she said calmly.

"You'll be at dinner, at least?" Weasley asked. "I know you're busier than the Night Bus after New Year, but you've got to make some time for your mates, you know."

"Count on it," she said. "But you all know you're welcome to join me in the library any time."

There was a collectively disinterested murmur from the group, and she frowned.

"As little as a half-hour of studying every day could do wonders for some of you, you know!"

"A half-hour?"

Draco grinned. No wonder none of them were ever top in class. Not even Pansy, who fancied herself the more studious of the two of them.

"A half-hour of exercise is just as beneficial," Potter said, grinning. Draco's scars began to itch again. He rubbed at them over his robes resentfully.

Granger scowled at him. It was oddly endearing.
"We'll save a place for you if you're late to dinner again," Ginny said. "But you should make an effort not to be, because I've got it from Dobby that we're going to have chocolate mousse, and I happen to know that's your favorite."

Draco started. His eyes went wide.

_Dobby?_

"I'll be there," Granger said, and they took their leave except for Weasley, who lingered behind. Granger looked at him a little nervously.

"What is it, Ron?" she asked. "Did you need help with an assignment?"

Weasley shook his head. "I felt like we should talk about what happened—"

"Now's not the time," Granger interrupted, turning bright red. "I really am busy."

Weasley looked slightly hurt. "Well I figured it was best to talk about it here. I know you wouldn't want everyone knowing about our kiss just yet."

Granger's face was engulfed in flame. Draco wanted to look away, and couldn't. His curiosity was too great to ignore.

So the two of them had kissed? Had she liked it? Did she like _him_? He'd been wrong about her wanting Potter, then.

But Granger and Weasley? He'd couldn't imagine the two of them together. They were as much opposites as he himself was compared to her.

Not that it was his place to judge, or even pretend that he wasn't jealous. Her choices were completely hers, and he had no business feeling as irritated as he did when she'd made it clear that she did _not_ want him the way he wanted her.

"I can't talk about this now," she was saying. "I'm sorry, Ron, I feel selfish saying this, but I need to think about what I want."

"Okay," Weasley said, and Draco had to give him credit because he'd expected the redhead to be angry. "Just let me know when you want to talk, Hermione."

"I will."

He kissed her on the cheek and left, and Granger, still with her back to Draco, went to her door and whispered her password.

She placed her palm on the door and hesitated.

"Are you still there?" she called quietly.

"Do you still want me to be here?" Draco asked.

She pushed the door open. "Yes. Now come in."

She entered the room, holding the door open, and once he'd crossed the threshold he looked down and realized he could see himself again.

"All dorms and private quarters are enchanted not to let magically concealed people remain
invisible," she explained as she closed the door behind herself. "Unless you've got an Invisibility Cloak."

Her face was still red and she didn't meet his eye.

"I hear those are incredibly rare," he said.

"They are." She advanced into the room. "Sit, please."

Draco took a discrete glance around as he did. There was a door that led to what he assumed must be her bedroom since what he was currently in could only be a sitting room. It was small, furnished and decorated modestly. A desk and chair took up one side, and a couch and window took up the other. A coat rack stood beside the door with some cloaks hanging off its arms and a fireplace took up most of the wall opposite it. The room was clean and well-kept. Her schoolbag was beside the door, lying there patiently like a well-trained dog waiting for its master to arrive from work.

His hands rested nervously on his knees, itching to worry at the fabric of his trousers, to twist at the fingers on each hand until his knuckles popped.

"So, you and Weasley?" he asked.

She still had her back to him, busying herself with pouring some tea into two teacups that had appeared when they had entered the room. She sent one over to him by magic and he took it, grateful to have something to do with his hands.

"That's none of your business," she said, and he fell quiet again. From where he sat he could see that her ears were red.

He sat on the couch, and she summoned the chair from her desk and placed it in front of him. Then she walked off to the coat rack and took off her robe, revealing a Muggle outfit underneath. He studied it curiously before she turned back around and he averted his eyes. She slipped off her trainers and left them by the door, finally coming back to sit in front of him. Her hair was loose, and it fell around her shoulders and framed her face. She wore ugly knit socks with lightning bolts on them.

"Dobby made them," she said, catching his stare.

Draco's eyes flashed upwards. He set his tea down. "When you say Dobby…"

"The one and same," she said, nodding. "He works here now. He has since fourth year."

Draco's brows raised. "I had no clue… I thought I saw him once," he struggled to remember the specific incident. "In the kitchens. I think he ran away so he wouldn't see me."

"Maybe you should visit him," she suggested. "He doesn't know you're different."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "If he's been hiding from me all this time why should I go hunt him down?"

"You could apologize to him," she offered. "That might change his mind."

"I don't want to scare him," Draco admitted. "I wasn't as cruel as my Father, but I was still an arse to him."

"Then you can show him you're not like that anymore," she said.
Draco still seemed reluctant. She decided not to press the matter further.

After a pause Granger took her wand from her pocket and set it on the ground beside her chair. "If we're going to trust each other, we need to start small," she said, and once he understood he followed suit. "I'm not sure I can trust myself if I get angry. It's best that we're both unarmed."

"I think I'd deserve it anyhow, if you decided to curse me," he said. "I've not been a saint."

"I want to hear it for myself," she answered. "I'll regret it, but I want to hear what you have to say."

They both paused. He swallowed a little nervously. She held her hands in her lap, clasping them tightly, as if keeping herself from fidgeting. Neither had touched their tea.

"Ask me," he said, after some tense seconds had passed by without a word from either of them. "I'm as nervous as you are. Let's get this over with, and then you can decide what to do. I won't fight it."

She opened her mouth to reply, but then closed it. She frowned, and met his eye. "May I see your Mark?"

He hesitated, and then rolled up his sleeve. Now that Snape's concealment charm had worn off, the mark stood out vividly against his skin. It was jarring to see after the two weeks of pretending that it was not there anymore. The skull grinned up at them both, the snake between its jaws writhing grotesquely as a makeshift tongue. It made his stomach lurch just to see it. He held out his arm to her. She caught herself about to flinch, then leaned forward to study it, her expression one of morbid curiosity and revulsion. He could feel her breath on his skin.

Slowly, she brought her hand up, her eyes on him all the while to gauge his reaction. It was clear she meant to touch it, and was waiting for permission. Draco didn't move. She continued, and touched her fingertips gently to the Mark, as if afraid it would burn her.

Draco let out a breath. He'd been afraid that somehow, the Mark would be able to tell that a non-Pureblood was touching it.

"Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes," he said, preoccupied by the slight graze of her fingertips against his skin. She traced it gently, watching as the snake's tongue flickered in and out of its mouth. "Mostly when he's angry."

"Can it do anything?"

"Some of the other Death Eaters can summon the Dark Lord if they touch it," he said. "My parents can, and so can my Aunt."

"Did they tattoo it on?" she asked. She still had not taken her eyes from it. "I've never seen a magical tattoo this close—or are those done through some sort of spell work?"

Just by looking at her, he could almost hear her thoughts. Likely she was planning to research it later.

"It was done like any other tattoo," he said. "And once it was done I took a vow and that bound me to it."

She retracted her hand at last, and Draco, realizing that he had grown considerably sleepy from the oddly relaxing sensation of her inspection of his tattoo, coughed, embarrassed. She didn't seem to notice.
"Why did you choose to become a Death Eater?" she asked quietly.

Draco smiled bitterly.

"It was expected of me. All Pureblood wizards are expected to join when they become of age. I'd always meant to do it growing up, anyway, but I did it early because I wanted to prove myself. And," he looked away, "I wanted to prove to myself I wasn't weak for being attracted to you."

It was the first time he had acknowledged it without mentioning the kiss. She turned red and so did he.

"Is there a process?"

Thankful that she had said nothing about his confession, Draco rushed to reply.

"The Dark Lord has to approve the request. He approves just about everyone, but he does it for formality. A date is set and the initiation is planned."

Neither of them had realized the sun had slipped well beyond the horizon. Fire flared to life in the hearth with a roar, and they both jumped, turning to look at it.

She reached to her throat to grasp her pendant, but remembering that she was not wearing it, sheepishly put her hand down.

"What happens during the initiations?"

Draco sighed. "Torture of Muggles. Killings. Worse things than that. I got lucky. All I had to do was torture and kill a prisoner."

"That's lucky to you?" she tried to keep the disgust from her expression and failed. Draco's temper flared.

"If by lucky you mean I didn't have to rape or mutilate anyone, then yes," he said sharply, and she flinched, her face turning ashen. "There are worse things than you realize going on where the Dark Lord is concerned. Yes, I'm still a monster for going through with it—but even I have lines I won't cross."

Her mouth was open slightly as she stared at him. Draco saw fear flicker there, and sighed. He scrubbed his hands over his face, felt himself slump backwards into the couch.

"I'm sorry. I should have phrased that differently. It wasn't my intention to seem insensitive."

She nodded, her hands coming up to scrape her hair away from her face. She released it and it tumbled down her shoulders. Her shoulders dropped and she sighed.

"Me, too. I jumped to conclusions."

"I'd rather not have done it at all but I was stupid and I was desperate. I thought it was what I wanted."

Her dark eyes looked almost sympathetic.

"When did you realize it wasn't?"

Draco looked away. "The moment I killed that man."
She went pale. Hearing him say it, that specific sequence of words…it made her shiver.


She looked at him, searching, and he looked back, his haunted, shameful eyes downcast, turned to the fire.

"You said you want to get out," she said slowly, "shouldn't you tell Dumbledore this? He's the right person to go to, don't you think?"

"I can't go to him," he said dully. "The Dark Lord's got people watching him at all times. Don't ask me how, because I don't know. But if I went to him, he'd know, and he'd kill my parents."

"Could he know through the Mark?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know." He looked down at it, his expression unreadable. "I'm sure he can't spy on us through these. If he did, he'd know about this, and he'd have retaliated in some form or another by now."

"If you can feel his emotions through it, there's got to be some other kind of connection," she said, and he froze. "Perhaps he's not always listening, but only sporadically?"

The look of horror on Malfoy's face made her insides twist. He looked like he wanted to cut off his own arm. She stood from her seat and grabbed her wand off the floor, approached him quickly.

"I don't know if this will work," she said, and pointed her wand at the Mark. "But it's something, at least. Muffliato."

They both stared down at the Mark. Nothing seemed to have changed, but Malfoy, for his part, appeared a little relieved.

"Thank you."

"There's no way of telling if it'll actually help," she said as she sat back down. "Are you alright?"

He passed a hand over his face. "I'm fine."

"We can continue some other time," she said, looking concerned. "I've kept you here long enough."

"No," he said firmly. "I've got nothing else to do."

_The cabinet can wait another hour or two._

"Fine." She cleared her throat. "Tell me more about what made you change your mind."

It took him a moment to respond, and when he did, he turned his head away, as if he couldn't face her reaction to his words.

"When you broke down in Umbridge's office because of me...that played part, too."

Because he had faced away from her he couldn't see the shift of emotions in her face. First came the anger, fleeting and sharp at the recall of the memory, at what he had reduced her to. Second came the confusion and embarrassment, that her reaction had made such a lasting impression on him. Third came something new and unidentifiable dawning over her expression that if he had looked back just in time to see it, would have shocked him just as much as it shocked her to feel it.
She was hardly aware of it herself until the last second, and grateful that he was not looking at her, she quickly forced herself to adopt a neutral expression, as if his response had not affected her at all.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because you are the strongest person I know, and to see that I hurt you that much made me realize my intentions weren't what I'd thought they were, and that you were right about me all along. I realized I didn't want that to continue.

She looked dubious. "You...cared about what I thought of you?"

"I was starting to."

Her brows lowered, and she looked at him in disbelief. "And you do still."

He didn't answer. The fire flickered quietly.

"You must, or you wouldn't be here telling me all this. You'd have gone to someone else. You'd have left me alone after your first apology. You wouldn't have kept ending up at my door. You wouldn't have asked for my help."

"You're right." He looked up at the ceiling, sighing, wondering if he had really been that transparent the whole time. Had she known all along? Her expression told him that wasn't the case. "You're always right."

She'd wrapped her arms around herself. "Why? Why do you care?"

He was red again, as red as the fire that burned beside them.

"Don't ask me that, Granger. Don't make me answer that. You know what my answer will be."

She turned to the fire abruptly, looking a little unsettled.

"Oh."

"I wanted it to go away," he said raggedly. "I thought becoming a Death Eater would set me to rights again. I was wrong."

"You're not expecting a response from me on that, are you?" she asked, blushing.

"Gods, no," he said truthfully. "You made your feelings on that absolutely clear on that when I kissed you. I'm not looking to pursue that. I know it bothers you. I know it's wrong. After what I did to you, especially."

"I...appreciate that," she said after a moment. "I didn't realize there was more behind that kiss."

"I wish there wasn't," he muttered.

"I thought it was just a last, crazed attempt to try to gain power," she said. "I thought you'd lost your mind."

"I must have, to think that it was an acceptable thing to do," he said. "Luckily, you showed me just what you thought about that."

She cleared her throat again. "Yes, well... It would have helped if you'd realized that earlier," she said, and he let out a soft, bitter laugh.
"I wish I had, too."

"I don't think that was the whole reason you changed your mind, was it?" she asked.

"No. During your detention, I saw your blood. It was no different from mine. I compared them after you'd gone. That was a big part of the reason why. All that time I spent belittling you because I thought I was better than you because of my blood." He nearly spat the last word out.

Her eyebrows raised.

"And over the summer?" she whispered.

"The Dark Lord came to stay with us," he said, and her eyes widened. "I thought it was as good a time as any to join. My Father was disgraced, my mother distraught, and I, the fool, willing to show I was worthy." He shook his head.

She appeared afraid to ask her next question. "What happened at your initiation?"

"The Dark Lord ordered me to kill a Death Eater who'd accidentally given valuable information to one of Dumbledore's people in disguise."

His head was beginning to pound.

"I tortured him until he went blind," he said, staring at the ceiling. "He begged for his life the whole time. We set fire to his home. After the torture I killed him."

He couldn't bring himself to look at her. Surely her expression would be one of hatred, or disgust. Or fear.

You're telling her too much, a voice whispered to him. Stop now. You are not redeemable. There is nothing she can do to help you.

"And then he branded you," she said, her voice no louder than the whispers of the fire. "What happened after?"

He ordered me to kill the Headmaster in order to redeem my family. He smiled as he said it, because he knew then and he knows now I can't do it. I don't want to do it.

He shook his head. "Nothing. I came back here though I didn't want to."

"Why not?"

He was starting to feel drowsy again. The heat from the fire permeated his skin and warmed him to his toes, and the reassurance of company and of her voice was enough to pull at his eyelids and slow his thoughts.

Hermione, seeing that he was falling asleep, debated if she should stop the interview to let him leave and get rest. She almost did, but decided not to. With his guard down and him being so tired, she might be able to get answers out of him that she might not get were he fully alert.

"Why did you attack Katie and Ron?" she asked softly, to continue to lull him into sleep, to keep his guard down.

"I didn't want to," he said, his head drooping backwards before he caught himself, and leaned forward again. "I didn't mean to hurt either of them."
She shook her head. "Then why do it?"

"I have to," he mumbled, his eyes half closed. It was taking him longer to answer in between questions. His breathing was becoming slower. "I—" he was choked off by a huge yawn. He sank further into the couch. "I don't want to, but I have to."

Hermione's blood ran cold.

"What does that mean?" she asked urgently. "Malfoy, what do you mean? Is Voldemort making you attack students?"

It was too late. He was asleep. His mouth was slightly open, his hair falling across his face. His shirt was unbuttoned from the top, and she could see the start of a vivid scar trail from his collarbone and disappear behind his shirt. She wanted to get a better look at it, but was afraid to get closer.

Hermione stood slowly, unsure of what to do.

"Malfoy."

He didn't respond or wake.

"Malfoy."

Nothing.

_You can't just let him stay here, _she told herself. _What if he doesn't wake up until morning? What if he tries something?_

She looked at him, his head fallen backwards, his arms at his sides, the Mark still peeping at her from his left arm.

_There's a Death Eater on my couch, in my room, _she thought, her head spinning. _And his name is Draco Malfoy._

If Harry and Ron had seen, they'd have rioted.

_But what will you do?_

What he had said earlier, about…_caring _about her and not wanting to hurt anyone…could she really believe him after he admitted he wasn't sure about the extent of the Mark's abilities? Could Voldemort be controlling him through it?

_If that were the case, he'd have killed me ages ago. Or he'd have attempted to hurt Harry rather than random students._

_Kick him out, _the voice said firmly. _He shouldn't be here. It doesn't matter that he doesn't want to hurt anyone. He still did it. He said he wouldn't hurt you again but he hurt the others._

How long did it take for a Malfoy to go back on his promise?

_Do you really want to find out?_

She was startled from her thoughts when she heard movement coming from the couch. Malfoy was shifting, waking. His eyes opened. She watched as they focused. He blinked, and then sat up quickly, taking in one deep breath.
"Fuck," he murmured, pressing a palm to his head. "Sorry." He looked up at her, a sleep-dazed expression in his eyes that caught her off guard. "Were we still going?"

"No," she said, watching as he rose and ran a hand through his hair, pushing it from his face. "If we go any longer we'll be here until morning. I've still got loads of questions, but I think we're done for today."

He looked a little relieved. "Good." He seemed not to remember their exchange before he'd fallen asleep. He rubbed at the back of his neck. She couldn't remember him ever displaying insecurity. "I didn't mean to make things so awkward."

"I think things are bound to stay that way for some time, until we get used to each other," she said, trying to smile. "I suppose we should just get used to it."

He rolled his sleeve back down to cover his Mark, and buttoned it at his wrist.

"Do you think we can actually change anything?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied honestly. "I suppose we can only try."

He nodded, and pulled his robe on. Hermione didn't remember when he'd taken it off. He bent down and picked both their wands off the ground.

He advanced towards her, and Hermione fought the urge to step back. He was only a few inches taller than her; she'd always been aware of that. Years of him trying to use that as an intimidation tactic had forced her to never allow herself to be unsettled by it, but this time, when he stood before her (at a respectable distance), she was made aware of the difference in a new manner. Was it in the way he looked at her? Or was it simply because now when he came near she was not tense and expecting hostility?

He reached out to give her her wand, and Hermione, still trying to realize just why it felt so different, didn't notice. She was absolutely certain that it was not fear, but a strange nervousness still had made her pause. She looked down and saw her wand, and took it, flushing.

His face was partly illuminated by the fire so that one half was red, and the other concealed in shadow. One eye was brightly lit, the other in darkness, and it would have been a little frightening except for that fact that she wasn't.

"Goodnight," she whispered.

"Goodnight, Granger." He turned and left quietly.

Hermione stood there for a moment longer after he'd left, trying to gather her thoughts. The fire blazed in the fireplace, undisturbed by her restless state of mind.

She spied an unfamiliar item lying in a lump on the ground, and went to pick it up, thinking he might have dropped a handkerchief.

It was his Slytherin tie.

Hermione held it in her hands, her back almost burning from the heat of the fire behind her. It was both comfortable and painful. He couldn't be that far away yet, he'd only just left. If she went after him she could give it back.

Instead, she rolled it up and hid it in her trunk.
I'm a busy, busy bee this semester and hardly have time to write. I try to chip away at chapters in my downtime but lately I haven't had any motivation at all for writing. I'll continue to update as often as I can—I just need to create a backlog of chapters first. Please be patient with me! I can't tell you guys enough how much I appreciate your kudos and comments on this story, and your patience overall.

"Headmaster."

Albus looked up from his desk. "Yes, Flora?"

The moving woman in the framed painting wore plain black robes and a grim expression. A veil covered half her face, revealing only a thin, sallow mouth. She currently occupied Phineas Nigellus Black's portrait, which placed on the wall beside the Headmaster's desk. Albus counted himself lucky that the eavesdropping Phineas was not currently present. Flora's usual painting depicted a witch's funeral in front of a misty, dreary backdrop. It was conveniently located on the same corridor that also housed the current Gryffindor Prefect's quarters. At least, one of them.

"I have news on the two," she said, brushing pearlescently-painted raindrops off her bodice.

"Ah, yes, of course." Albus stood and walked over to the painting. Fawkes, who had been quietly dozing on his perch, opened one eye, gave a small sigh, and closed it again.

Albus reached out to stroke the phoenix's feathers as he passed by. "I expected you earlier."

"My apologies," she said. "I stayed for the whole thing to make sure I had as much information as I could get."

Albus nodded and spread his hands.

"I'm eager to hear it."

Flora pulled back her veil over her hat, revealing aged, dark blue eyes and fine, sparse brows.

"I found them in the corridor, and she made him invisible. They were worried about being seen together." Her expression darkened. "She took him into her quarters."

"Interesting," Albus murmured, clapping his hands behind her back.

Flora gave him a stern look. "You smile, knowing that your students are breaking rules? They could have been doing highly inappropriate things together!"

"That does happen inside this castle regardless of rules or warning," Albus said. "I myself was not a model student in my time here, you know."

Flora's mouth tightened. "Very well."
"I am sure that was not their reason for being in that room," he said to reassure her. "And even if it were I am powerless to stop them. Nor would I want to entangle myself in that sort of matter. I trust all my students to be educated enough to know what they are doing. Aside from that, I prefer not to know the activities my students involve themselves in if they are not academic or athletic and as long as it does not pose serious danger to others. Now, what else did they say?"

"They ran into Potter and other students," Flora replied, impatiently shoving her veil to the side of her head when it had slipped back over her face. "He hid and she spoke to them until they went away. Then they went into the room."

"And?" Albus prompted.

"He asked her if she still wanted him to be there. She said she did. I remember that clearly." Flora frowned. "There are no paintings in that girl's room. I was unable to hear anything else."

"We allowed her to decorate the room as she wished," Albus said, smiling bemusedly. "I wonder if she did that deliberately or if she does not care for art."

"Now you think you gave her too much freedom?" Flora asked disdainfully.

"I never said anything of the sort," Albus said. "She has earned the liberties we have given her."

"She is an adolescent," Flora said. "And they can never be trusted, no matter how well-behaved they may be."

"How long were they in the room?" Albus asked to change topic.

"Several hours. I followed him out of the room but he seemed no different."

Albus stroked absently at his beard. "Thank you, Flora. You are most helpful."

"Shall I continue to watch them?"

"I would greatly appreciate it," Albus said, inclining his head.

"Will you ever speak to him?" Flora asked, frowning. "Neither of them will be happy to know they are being followed. If the boy is in such great danger, would it not be best to reach out to him?"

"I'm afraid I'm rather inhibited in that aspect," Albus said with a small smile, raising his withered, blackened arm.

She gave him a hard stare. "Don't."

Albus chuckled and covered his arm.

"He cannot know I am aware of his plan. If he were to find out, I fear he will become irrational and shun any further attempts. I must trust that he can allow himself to be helped by another party."

Flora looked skeptical. "The Prefect girl?"

"I think it will end up being a combination of several people. Pansy Parkinson is his closest friend—I believe she is one of them. Hermione Granger, however, has a better chance."

"Why do you think?" Flora asked.

"I may be wrong, but I think he wants to prove himself to her," Albus said. "It is not an easy task to
shed an image one has made for themself after so long. If he wants help and for others to believe him, he must prove this growth is not illegitimate. He will tread carefully all the while holding the secret of what he must do."

"But why does he say nothing?" Flora reached into her pocket and pulled out a black silk handkerchief. She blew her nose loudly.

"He has made good progress with Hermione Granger," Albus replied. "They are beginning to trust each other. He does not want to set them back, or he risks losing time. They are already pressuring him to complete his task as soon as possible."

"And what is this task?" Flora asked. "What is he going to do, and why will you not stop him?"

"If I stop him, he will die, as well as his family."

Flora thought for a moment. Albus waited patiently.

"You are taking a great risk with this boy," she said softly. "Does he deserve such a chance?"

"It is difficult to be completely certain. However, he has shown an awareness and growth that has impressed me," Albus said, his eyes distant. "I never imagined it from him. I have known too many people who have strayed down the wrong path despite intervention or offers of aid. I confess I had lost hope that the Malfoys would ever be redeemable long ago but it seems I am proven wrong every day that passes. Draco was raised under just the right circumstances to become something terrible, to follow his father's steps. He has been raised to think a certain way since infancy, and is now realizing how harmful that was. If I can prevent him a dreadful fate, or death, I will take any action I can."

Flora said nothing for a moment. Through the Headmaster's speech she had sensed a quiet grief that startled her. Albus' eyes were still distant, his thoughts likely far away from the circular office.

"What about Potter?" she finally asked. Her shrewd expression had softened. "What if he does not wish to help Malfoy? They are enemies; they have attacked each other."

"They will likely do it again," Albus said, nodding. "That cannot be helped. There is history between them as well, but I hope they will one day be able to tolerate each other enough to be able to work together for the greater good."

"And if that never happens?"

"Then I will be very surprised, indeed."

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_Now?_ Draco sent through the coin.

A moment passed, then the coin grew hot and vibrated in his palm.

_Nearly there, it read. Send something bigger through._

Draco wiped at his forehead, and took the half-eaten apple from the cabinet, setting it aside to feed to the birds later. Even now, he could hear their lively chatter off behind him somewhere. He'd let them out of their cage and they'd delighted in exploring and perching around the Room the entire morning. Every time he looked at them he couldn't help but think of their dead, mangled sister, and it twisted at his heart.

Something bigger… His eyes landed on a trunk lying on its side, its lid wide open. Musty, moth-
eaten robes were spilling from it.

He grabbed it and dragged the tangle of robes to the side, closed the lid, and hauled it up and into the cabinet.

There was a voice pleading with him to not continue, but he'd been ignoring it since it had started when he'd stepped foot into that room.

He had to think of his parents. There was no room to think of anything else. Not even Granger, and the impact this would have on their fledgling trust of each other.

He closed the doors over the trunk, shut his eyes, and waited, grasping the coin in his palm so tightly his hand lost feeling.

When he felt Greyback's response he held his eyes shut one moment longer. He forced himself to open them and finally looked at the coin in his palm. In all his anxiousness it took him a moment to understand.

To make sure, he flung the cabinet doors open, and sighed in relief and frustration to see that the trunk was still there.

"How's Krum?" Ron asked as they watched the owl fly off. They had caught the sun just as it had begun to dip into the waters of the horizon—the clouds above the treeline of the forest were dusted with purples and pinks on the bottom, the sky was turning darker. The owls above them rustled quietly.

"He's well," Hermione said, tucking a strand of hair that the wind had blown out of place back behind her ear. The bag Pansy had given her for Christmas hung at her hip, holding a number of books inside that she intended to return to the library later. "Quidditch training for the season begins soon."

"I know." Ron squinted at the sun, and Hermione, suspecting she knew what topic he wanted to breach, held still, arms crossed around her middle. "Have you thought about what you want, then?"

"Hm?" she asked, feigning confusion.

Ron turned pink. He scratched at his shoulder through his thick jumper. "Well, last time you said you had to think about what you wanted. I'm not sure what that meant but I was hoping by now you'd have some idea." He rubbed at the back of his neck. "It's been hell, waiting."

"Sorry."

"No," he said. "Take your time. I don't want you to feel like I'm rushing you."

"I really appreciate that." Hermione couldn't bring herself to look him in the eye but forced herself to. He deserved that much, at least. Though he tried to hide it she could see the hopeful gleam in his eyes and it only made her feel worse.

"This isn't easy to say—" his shoulders dropped and her stomach twisted into an uncomfortable knot. The beautiful glow from the sunset around them made his hair appear almost blonde with its strength. It was so warm she was beginning to perspire under her robes—or that could just have been the embarrassment and shame. She squinted up at him.

"You mean a lot to me, Ron, you know that. I just—I don't think we could work well together that
"Work?" Ron asked, grinning lopsidedly. "I'm not talking about a business partnership, Hermione. I'm talking about a relationship."

Why did it sound so wrong when he said it? Hermione fought the urge to wince.

"I know what you meant," she said. "But really, Ron—we fight all the time."

"What's wrong with that?" Ron asked. "Harry and I argue all the time, too. That doesn't mean we still can't be friends."

"But do you want to date Harry?" she asked.

Ron spluttered. "He's not bad looking, but it's you I'm after, Hermione, you know that."

Hermione looked back at the sunset. "I know." He conceded, shrugging. "We do fight a lot," he conceded, shrugging. "I guarantee you there isn't a single couple out there who's never fought before. It's necessary, sometimes. You can't avoid it no matter who you're with."

"That depends," she said. "I just don't want you to think I'm grasping at straws for reasons to say no to you. I just don't feel for you that way."

"I didn't either, once," he said stubbornly. Hermione shook her head. "I'm sorry, Ron."

"Is it—" he sighed. "What about Harry?"

Hermione frowned. "What about Harry?"

"Would you have said yes to him?"

Hermione gave him a stern look. "That would never happen because I know he likes someone else."

Ron seemed intrigued by that and appeared for a moment as if he wanted to ask the identity of Harry's crush, but shoved it aside in the end.

"You shouldn't compare yourself to Harry," Hermione said quietly. "I thought you were past this."

He looked away. "He always gets everything."

"At what cost?" Hermione asked angrily. "What does 'everything' mean to you? Have you not been paying attention? Don't you remember all the things he's lost?"

"Of course I do!" Ron protested. "I'm not an idiot!"

"Then don't resent him for something you made up! This is about you, not him." She jabbed her finger into his shoulder to emphasize her point. "I can't believe you, Ron, really!"

"Yeah, go on and talk to me like I'm a child," he snapped. "Is that why you can't like me, because I'm not as intelligent as you?"

"I already like you, don't be daft," she said. "Otherwise I wouldn't be friends with you."

"Or maybe you just like having me around so you can feel smart," he said dully.
"Get your head out of your arse, Ron. If you're not going to be rational about this, I'll leave."

"I'm sorry." He scrunched his eyes shut, let his head fall back, as if he wanted to fall backwards onto the floor and let it swallow him whole. "I'm an idiot, Hermione. I'm sorry. I am. I shouldn't have said that. It was an unfair thing to say."

Hermione blinked, and felt her anger deflate. "You're not an idiot, Ron."

He said nothing.

She approached him and put her hand on his arm. His bright blue eyes were lowered in embarrassment.

"You're like a brother to me," she said softly. "Both you and Harry. It would feel wrong to me to take it farther than that. And if we did and it all went wrong, I don't want to think about never being able to be friends with you again because of an awkward history. I'm sorry I can't return your sentiment."

"You're right," he said dully. "I just—" He shook his head. "I didn't mean to make a mess of this."

Hermione stepped closer, wrapped her arms around him. He reciprocated a little hesitantly.

"You were only being truthful. There's nothing to be ashamed of," she said.

He was so warm and pleasant to hug. Hermione felt comfortable with him, despite their rocky history. She almost wished that she could feel a little of what he felt for her towards him. The thought of breaching that gap was too daunting, however, and it held her still. She didn't want to ruin their friendship, and she couldn't force herself to feel something she didn't. It would be cruel towards Ron, and she would only tangle herself into another complicated mess.

I've got enough to keep me busy for now, she thought, and finally released him.

Ron smiled. There was a pain in his gaze she tried hard to ignore.

"I'll see you later?"

"Yes," she said, nodding. "I'll find you and Harry if you can't find me."

He turned and left, going down the narrow set of winding stairs a little faster than was necessary, and she watched him avidly all the while, afraid that he might miss a step and fall. The sunset had ended, and the scene around her was dark. The owls had begun to hoot more loudly. Hermione wrapped her arms around herself and sat down on the bench beside her, listening to the sounds of the growing night.

Draco left the Room, his stomach growling loudly. He glanced down at it, irritated, wondering just why human bodies were so weak and needy. If there were a potion that could have eradicated the phenomenon of hunger all together, he would have taken it in an instant.

What he found in the kitchens made him forget that thought at once. The elves were busy at their work, mixing things in bowls larger than their own heads with utensils three times thicker than their skinny little limbs. They worked quickly, efficiently, snapping their fingers to summon more spice, more meat, more flour. The aroma of it all, the sight of the meat pies baking in the large brick ovens made Draco's mouth water and his stomach growl louder.
No matter how many times he'd already been down to the massive room, he would still stop short just past the entrance in awe at the sight of the Elves.

"Draco Malfoy!" Bitsy hurried towards him, beaming. "Bitsy isn't seeing you for many weeks! Is you hungry?"

Draco struggled to pull up a smile. "Famished, actually. I was wondering if I could get something to take upstairs."

"Of course, of course!" She bowed low and turned abruptly to call two other Elves to help her assemble a basket, and they scurried off towards the table to pack it full despite Draco's protests that he would never be able to finish it all.

Draco stood near the fire, troubling thoughts still trying to push their way into his mind. He ignored them as best as he could, and focused on the smell of the food, the activity that buzzed all around him.

Feeling a prickle of goosebumps rush along his arms, he looked to the side, catching a blurred glimpse of great green eyes as the tiny body that held them ducked back out of sight. His stomach jumped.

"Dobby?"

He heard a squeak of surprise, and then a loud jangle and clatter of brass as a stack of bowls was tipped over accidentally by the fleeing Elf.

"Dobby!" one of the Elves shouted in alarm. "You is not taking care where you step! Clumsy!" the unnamed Elf snapped his fingers and the bowls flew in an arc towards the large sink and splashed inside. Incredibly quickly, they were scrubbed and rinsed by an invisible hand and arced back out of the sink and into a new stack in one polished, gleaming stripe.

"Dobby is sorry!" Draco heard the familiar squeaky voice exclaim. "Dobby did not mean to make a mess!"

Draco walked over to get a better look, and almost laughed at the sight of his former House-Elf. Dobby was almost unrecognizable underneath the amount of knitted accessories he wore. He must have been wearing at least five hats, each in a different color and pattern. His little legs were adorned by two mismatching tall socks better suited for human length-legs—they pooled around his ankles in a fuzzy heap. They had a pattern of Christmas trees on them. Around his neck he wore a large and thick cowl that threatened to overwhelm his entire face. All that one could see of it was his long, spindly nose poking out from the top and his huge green eyes, widened further by panic.

Had he made all that himself? Draco found himself overly curious to know.

Dobby watched him approach and shrank into himself, cowering underneath his layers. Draco wondered how he hadn't got heatstroke yet from the heat of the kitchens.

"Dobby is sorry, Dobby is sorry!" he shrieked, his agitated eyes never leaving Draco. "Dobby should not have spied on Master Draco!"

"Master?" Draco asked, and then, after a pause. "Hang on—you were spying on me?"

Dobby's hands covered his eyes. "Dobby forgets very briefly he works for the Malfoys no longer! Dobby is not saying he spied on Draco, who is not his Master! Dobby said nothing of the sort!"
The Elves now gathered around them looked back and forth between Draco and Dobby. The kitchen had gone almost completely silent. Perplexed, Draco cleared his throat.

"Er—could we have some privacy?" he asked to the onlookers.

The room cleared almost instantaneously. A brass bowl literally wobbled in the wake of the rush. Draco stared at it until it finally settled, then turned back to Dobby, who stood nervously before him.

"I didn't know you worked here," he said, not knowing what else to say. They were past the point of a greeting, and, considering their history, he wasn't sure that Dobby wanted one.

Dobby pushed back his stack of hats to reveal one large, floppy ear. He scratched at it.

"Headmaster Dumbledore is kind enough to allow Dobby to work here. Dobby enjoys Hogwarts very much."

"Oh," Draco said. His mind was drawing a blank.

"Dobby is knowing for a long time his former Master Draco is studying at Hogwarts," he said. "He visits him, sometimes."

Draco frowned, looked at Dobby skeptically. "Wait, what?"

Dobby reached up and took off one of his hats, began to twist it between his little hands. Draco belatedly noticed that despite the ill-fit of the rest of his accessories, the little sweater he wore seemed to have been made just for him. It had a 'D' knit into the center of the chest. It looked terribly familiar…

"Dobby has many bad memories of his former Master Draco," Dobby said, looking up carefully at Draco, as if expecting him to snap at any moment. "But he is also curious to see how his former Master is doing."

"Okay," Draco said slowly, "but when? This is the first time I've seen you in years."

The yarn-clad Elf finally shifted his gaze from Draco to stare at the ceiling innocently.

"Dobby visits his former Master when he sleeps, mostly."

Draco gave him a funny look. "Er. Why?"

With a flip of his hand, Dobby tossed the hat into the air, and caught it on his head neatly.

"Dobby isn't knowing how his former Master will react to seeing Dobby."

Draco looked at the floor.

"Oh."

Was it the heat of the fire or was it shame that burned at his cheeks? Old memories of his childhood pranks and bullying of the Elf resurfaced, and he looked away.

Of course Dobby would be avoiding him. Why on Earth would he willingly go visit him if years of mistreatment had led him to expect anything but friendliness? Draco felt absolutely stupid for not having realized it earlier.

"Dobby, I just wanted to say I'm-I shouldn't have—" He'd begun to stutter, and forced himself to
stop abruptly. He sighed, and met Dobby's curious gaze. "I'm sorry for the way I treated you. I was a rotten, spoiled, rude little brat and you didn't deserve that sort of treatment."

A wide, toothy grin stretched across Dobby's face. His eyes grew wide with delight. He stood straighter then, his hats wobbling dangerously.

"Dobby isn't sure he is hearing right, but if Dobby is hearing former Master Draco correctly then he is very, very glad and he accepts an apology."

Draco felt his spirits lift. "Thank you. I'm not proud of the way I was."

"Dobby sees that," the Elf replied. "Dobby has heard for months from the Elves about how nice Draco Malfoy is, but can not believe it. He says he must find out for himself so he hides every time his former Master enters the place where he works, and sees that his friends were right. He can tell Draco Malfoy is different."

Draco was tempted to ask how he could tell. Was it obvious? He felt a little pleased to hear it, but at the same time worry crept in. If Dobby could tell, could everybody else, too?

"It's good to see you again," he said. "I've wondered what happened to you."

"Dobby travels after he is freed by Harry Potter!" the Elf said happily. "And when he comes to Hogwarts he is happier still to be among friends. They leave gifts for the Elves, but they are not taken, so Dobby has many hats and sweaters to wear."

Draco looked at the Elf's clothing curiously. "Who makes these, Dobby? I don't know anyone in this school who knits."

"These is all made by Hermione Granger, friend of Harry Potter!" Dobby said. "She talks to the Elves and tries to get them joining her SPEWING, but they is not pleased to talk about it."

Now it made more sense. Although when Granger found the time to knit a dozen hats and scarves he couldn't imagine.

"...SPEWING?"

"Hermione Granger is kind, and tries to get other Elves to ask for pay and freedom," Dobby said in a low voice, as if afraid he might be overheard. "Other Elves will not hear of it."

That also made sense. House Elves were not ones to stray from tradition. He could see why they refused her gifts.

"And you?"

"Dobby earns his own pay!" Dobby said, grinning again. "He is a free Elf who works for pay! Dumbledore says Dobby might be the first in history to do this!"

His happiness was infectious. Draco smiled.

"Congratulations, Dobby."

"Dobby is not only seeing Draco in Hogwarts," Dobby added, his face growing more serious. "He is also seeing his former Master Lucius Malfoy, many years ago. He does bad things, then."

Thinking of Buckbeak, Draco winced. "He is very involved. At least, he used to be."
"Dobby remembers he played a mean trick on Ginevra Weasley," Dobby said seriously. "She might have died."

Draco frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Dobby doesn't know the particulars," the Elf replied gravely. "Harry Potter saved her because he is a great wizard. Harry Potter freed Dobby, and when Lucius Malfoy tries to harm Harry Potter, Dobby will not let him." He stuck his thin little chest out, looking almost fierce.

Draco, who'd never been told any of this before, was listening with great interest.

"How long ago was this?" he asked urgently. More old memories were coming up.

"Draco Malfoy would have been twelve years old in that year," Dobby said.

Draco remembered knowing that his Father had been in some way tied to the strange events of his second year, but had never been told or found out the particulars. Had he started it all? Draco remembered hushed conversations in the summer leading up to the start of the term, being puffed up with pride at his Father's secret mission. He had been happy then, knowing that people he didn't like had gotten hurt, or, in Granger's case, were Petrified. He was filled with hatred and distaste for his former self.

If I could get my hands on a Time Turner I'd go back and punch myself in the face.

Before Draco could reply, Dobby cut in.

"Has Draco Malfoy taken the potions Dobby has been leaving him?"

"Wait—that was you?"

Dobby nodded, his ear and hats flopping backwards and forwards.

"Dobby sees his former Master looks very ill so Dobby steals potions from Poppy Pomfrey and hides them in Draco Malfoy's things so he will not suspect."

"I found them," Draco said. "I never thought it was you behind it. You said you were spying on me, though. Was that why?"

Dobby took a second too long to wait to nod his confirmation, and Draco, not sure whether he should inquire further, kept silent for the time being.

"Excuse us," three Elves had appeared by Draco's side, bearing his basket of food. Draco, who'd completely forgotten about it, heard his stomach growl loudly.

"We is sorry to interrupt," said the tallest Elf, who reached no higher than Draco's hip. "But we is needing to get back to work or dinner will be late!"

"Oh, right." Draco took the offered basket, which was crammed full with wrapped food stuffs. Despite his ravenous hunger he knew he would never be able to finish it all, and wondered if Pansy felt like having a picnic. "Thank you."

"Dobby doesn't think he has ever heard Draco Malfoy say thank you before," he heard Dobby say in an awed voice. Draco flushed.

"I've got to go," he said.
Dobby nodded. "Dobby must get back to work. He has caused enough trouble for one day."

The Elves were rushing back into the kitchens, picking up just where they had left off with ease.

"It is good to see Draco Malfoy has changed," Dobby said, following him to the door. "Dobby thinks it is good for him."

"It was good to see you," Draco replied. "You look happy."

Dobby looked bashfully down at the floor. "Dobby is the happiest he has ever felt," he said. "After he was freed Dobby used to think ill thoughts of his former Masters, but now he can think ill of one less."

Draco felt oddly touched by the comment.

"Thank you, Dobby. For the potions, too. I mean it. You didn't have to do that."

Dobby beamed. "Harry Potter tells Dobby the same thing!"

Draco felt the door close behind him, and left in a near stupor, realizing for the second time in his life that he had been compared to Harry Potter. His scars itched as he walked away.
The third floor of the Hogwarts library had the distinction of having the least strict rules of the other two floors below it. This was partly because it was furthest away from Madam Pince's reach, for one, and secondly because whereas the first and second floors were connected by way of there not being a ceiling to separate them, the third floor was closed off to itself, and there were no bookcases to be seen. Whereas the first floor held nearly all the books in its labyrinth of bookcases, the ones on the second floor were interspersed here and there between tables.

The third floor was reserved for groupwork and students who could not adhere to the general rule of not being a disruptive ass, or whomever wanted a little more privacy. Despite the lax atmosphere (the third floor was watched over by volunteer seventh years who were rather lax in their doings), not many people visited the third floor. It was a long trek up a winding staircase, and the students generally chose more popular sites like the Great Hall or the courtyard to do group assignments in, as there was much more space there.

Hermione was a staunch regular of the first floor, and all morning she had deliberated on where to bring Malfoy for their first public studying session. The third floor would have been ideal, but she had made the mistake of going up there once to help Ernie Macmillan study for an exam and had been teased for over a week by students who insisted they'd gone up there to shag, as it was rumored some students did. Though it had only been two years ago and everyone seemed to have forgotten about the incident, she was not eager to tempt any more ridicule should she take Malfoy up there. They had decided to stay on the first floor, then, which she'd wanted to avoid in the first place, knowing how open the space was. Everyone would be able to see them. She had found herself more nervous than she would admit, but decided it was better to bite the bullet.

Malfoy's voice broke into her thoughts.

"People are staring."

She knew. She had felt the stares on her back from the moment they had entered the library together and sat at the same table. She'd even heard a soft gasp, and then the hiss of whispers around them.

"Pay attention to your work and not them, will you please?"

She had sensed his unease from the second they had walked through the doors. He was not usually a nervous person—something had him on edge, but she felt if she asked him he would not answer truthfully. She supposed most of it had to deal with him being in her company in front of everyone, but there was something that lied deeper that she had felt before, and was tentatively aware and cautious of.

"That's rather difficult to do when half the people in here won't stop bloody staring." Draco cast a pointed look over his shoulder at the other students who kept looking at them from over their shoulders. The whispers had died off, thankfully, since they had remained mostly silent but now and then, whenever they said something to each other, he could feel the weight of the stares increase, if that was even possible. He wanted nothing more than to shake it off.

"Have you never had anybody stare at you before?" she asked, not looking up from what she was
"You're not the worst looking person I've ever met, you ought to be used to it."

He flushed, but looked at her skeptically. It was a good thing she was speaking so quietly—if she had been only a little bit louder someone would have heard, and then the whispers would rise again.

"Did you just imply you think I'm good looking?"

She looked up and met his eye.

"You own a mirror, don't you? This shouldn't be ground-breaking news to you."

He made a face. "And you are? Used to the staring, I mean."

She shrugged one shoulder and turned back to writing on her parchment.

"People tend to stare when Harry's around," she said. "It's always been manageable except for during the TriWizard Tournament, when everyone seemed convinced that he and I were dating, and that awful Skeeter woman wouldn't stop asking me about it."

"I remember that. Couldn't go one day without hearing about it."

"Yes," she sniffed, reaching across the table to pull a book closer to herself and flip it open. "I'm sorry to hear it was such an inconvenience to you."

He shot her a look. "Don't be silly. I didn't mean it that way."

Her smirk told him she knew exactly what he'd meant. Draco huffed and turned back to his book.

All the windows were uncovered and the light that poured in from outside was bleak and grey. He wished the sun was out. Despite his thick robes he was cold, and would not have minded having the heat of the sun on his back. He wondered if Granger was cold, too.

"Is it really bothering you that much?" she asked after a moment.

"No," he admitted. "I just wish they'd mind their own business."

"It's not like we're telling each other our secrets or anything," she said simply, reaching out to dip her quill into her inkpot. "They're free to stare if they like. There's nothing tremendous to see here but two students studying." She looked up at him briefly, her quill never wavering from whatever it was writing. "Or trying to."

Draco sighed and picked up his quill. He caught the eye of a Hufflepuff whose name he could never remember—it had to be Ernie, or something like that. He looked away quickly, but Draco had caught the look of expectation on his face. Anger flared inside him and he squashed it down.

"They're waiting for an argument."

"Here?" she asked dubiously. "Now?"

Draco heard a door close loudly and looked to the entrance. He rolled his eyes.

"And Nott just walked in," Draco added under his breath. He felt rather than saw Granger turn to look, and then she stiffened and turned back in her seat.

"What should we do?" she asked, softly enough that only he heard her.

Nott was heading in their direction, smiling. Draco grit his teeth.
"He's seen us. He's coming this way."

He heard her swear under her breath.

"We can't leave, or he'll suspect something's up," she muttered. "We might just have to have that argument after all..."

"That won't be too hard," Draco replied quietly. "Nott's ready to stir it up, by the look on his face." He turned to look at her, just before Nott reached their table. "Whatever happens, you leave first."

She nodded without looking at him.

"Merlin, I've never seen two unhappier looking people," Nott said as he reached their table and sat down without being invited to. "The two of you might as well be at a funeral if one had to judge by the looks on your faces."

Malfoy had finally relaxed—or was pretending to be—and slung his arm over the back of his chair, slouching elegantly in his seat.

Hermione couldn't help but be begrudgingly impressed at his ability—he was a fantastic actor. She even found herself wondering if he really had been tense and paranoid only one minute ago.

"What do you want, Theo?"

Nott shrugged. "I've just come from detention, thanks to that." He gestured towards Hermione, who frowned. "It was actually enjoyable—Snape had me cut the tongues and tails off preserved vipers. I pretended each of them was her."

Malfoy smiled, but Hermione caught the sudden coldness of his demeanor, and even through acting she knew it wasn't meant for her. This revelation kept her from replying to Nott. Just how quickly had they become so familiar with each other that she was able to tell that easily? It was unnerving. Could he feel her uneasiness?

"Did he say what he needed those for?" Malfoy asked, smoothly steering the conversation away from Nott's violent remark.

"No. He got to crush the rattles into powder. He mentioned having taken their venom ages ago. I wonder where he keeps it." Nott made a face. "The old git vanished them all away before I got to even take one."

What did Nott want a dead viper for? Hermione didn't like the number of possibilities that jumped into her thoughts. She wouldn't put it past him to put one under her pillow.

Nott eyed the table, the books strewn about, the blots of ink on their hands. "You two have been hard at work as well, I see."

"Yes," Hermione said, "and I would appreciate it if you left so we could get on with it."

"Now, now, Granger," Nott said, smiling, sprawling out further in his chair, watching with bright eyes as her scowl deepened. "I'm only here to help in any way I can."

"Oh, I doubt you're doing it for my benefit," she said, rolling her eyes. "Not like I even need or want your help."

Nott turned to Draco. "Do you mind me being here?"
Draco’s voice was emotionless, but Hermione felt its bite all the same. “Not at all. Feel free to stay.”

“There, see?” Nott smiled at Hermione, who shot back a sarcastic, exaggerated smile of her own to show her delight. He chuckled. "Don't be so alarmed, Mudblood. I don't plan on staying long."

"Shhh."

The three of them turned to find the shusher, but found that everyone in the surrounding tables had bent their heads low.

"Bite me," Nott said loudly in response. He stared at the outsiders for a couple seconds longer, as if the mystery shusher would reveal themselves in defiance, but nobody seemed willing enough to deal with Nott.

Draco felt Granger twitch beside him, as if about to tell him off. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye and sent her a sharp look to make her reconsider. She caught it and still scowling, looked away.

"What are we studying today?" Nott asked as he turned back to them, crossing his arms over his chest. "Must not be very interesting if it's got the both of you looking so cross."

"Are you sure it's got nothing to do with your presence?" Granger asked.

Nott laughed. "You don't have to hide it any longer, Granger," he said. "I saw the way your eye lit up when you saw me across the room."

She gave him a disdainful stare. "Don't you dare even insinuate that I could ever like you."

Another 'shhhh' rose from the tables around them.

"For God’s sake," Draco said, looking around disgustedly, "have you all got nothing better to do? Shall we all start yelling to actually warrant your shushing?"

He was met with a few annoyed looks from the students around them, but nobody said anything.

"We're about done here anyhow," Granger said, shutting her inkpot. "I've got to meet with someone else."

"Fine by me," Draco said.

"Give Weasley our love," Nott said slyly.

They both froze, but Draco caught himself just in time to remember that he was still acting, remembered to look at her in a mix of intrigue and revulsion.

"You lied to me, Granger," he said, forcing himself to smile in a way that was not at all friendly. "And after I asked so nicely."

She glared at him and then at Nott, a blush on her cheeks. "It's none of your business. Neither of yours."

Draco could feel her anxiousness though she hid it well. He wondered if she could tell he was as curious as she was to know how Nott had found out about herself and Weasley.

"I was only trying to make small talk," he said flippantly. "It isn't my fault I've got to approach the more taboo subjects just because you're no fun at conversation."
"You try having a normal conversation with someone who speaks only in insults," she snapped. "You ought to clone yourself and speak only to him if you think you're such a delight to speak to."

"Is he a good kisser?" Nott asked Granger, who turned even redder. "Lord, what a picture that makes. Draco, make sure to Obliviate me later."

Draco forced himself to laugh.

"I can do a much better job," Granger said, reaching to grab her wand from where it lay on the table in front of her. "And I can make you forget so much more than that, too."

Nott gave her a challenging stare. "I'd like to see you try."

She laughed, and Draco watched Nott carefully, noting how his expression darkened.

"Please," she said, still chuckling. "It'd take hardly any effort on my part. I'd be happy to do it."

It was always fascinating to see the power plays between people. It was one thing to experience them oneself, and another entirely to watch it unfold as a third, uninvolved party.

*Or not entirely uninvolved.*

He remembered numerous instances of seeing things like this unfold within the confines of his own house, between his Father and his friends, between his mother and hers, and all the other players in between. Even last year, when he and Granger had still been bitter enemies, with every interaction he had felt the ebb and flow of the power dynamics shift between them with every sentence that had been spoken, every action that had been made.

Now where did they stand? He wasn't completely sure.

Sure, Granger held the upper hand—he was the one who had asked for her help, after all. She had been helping him for some time now, as strange as that was to verbalize, and he was now in her debt.

And *I'll likely continue to be.*

The question was, would he ever be able to repay her for her kindness? The overwhelming feeling was that he would not, and it troubled him.

Granger and Nott had continued their verbal abuse of each other without him. Their voices were sharp and hushed.

He had been working on the cabinet again that morning before she'd sent for him. On this newest attempt, the trunk had mysteriously gotten lodged halfway into the back wall of the cabinet, with the other end nowhere to be seen. Greyback had not gotten back to him yet, as he was busy doing Merlin knew what else, but he could clearly picture the other end of the trunk sticking out of the second cabinet like something out of a surrealist painting.

Granger and Nott had finally settled down. Draco, who had ceased to pay attention, looked up to find that they were not even looking at each other, but Granger was packing up the rest of her things, and Nott was staring disinterestedly out at the surrounding tables.

"Are you two children done with your row?" he asked in a bored drawl.

"Are *you* done daydreaming yet?" she replied. "I still need to look over that assignment for Potions."

He pushed it across the table at her. She took it and scanned over it faster than he thought possible.
He suspected she wasn't taking in a word he had written, and was only pretending to in her impatience to leave.

She pushed it back at him. "It's nothing spectacular, but it'll do."

Draco looked at Nott, who'd taken Granger's quill and held it in one fist on top of the table, bending it out of shape with his wrist.

"How encouraging," Nott remarked dryly. "I can see now why you're the best tutor."

"Shall I take you on, too, and see how well your work compares?" she asked, extending her arm for her quill.

"Don't get overconfident, Granger," Draco said. "Don't think I'm doing this because I need your help."

Nott dropped the broken, mangled quill into her palm. "I can't imagine you having anything you could teach me."

She tapped the quill with her wand, and it mended itself quickly.

"That's fine by me," she said, and rose from the table, slinging her bag over her shoulder. She looked at Draco. "I'll be expecting an update on your Charms paper before midnight. It should be done by then."

Draco nodded. "Don't expect anything 'spectacular'."

She patted him on the shoulder as she passed the table.

"Oh, don't worry," she said. "I never do."

Nott scoffed, and Draco fought not to grin as she left them alone.

She had forgotten a scrap of parchment. Nott grabbed it and inspected it, as if thinking that it was part of her notes, or a torn-off piece from her assignment. It was blank. He crumpled it and left it on the table.

"How are your scars?" he asked Draco.

"I keep forgetting they're there," Draco replied honestly. "I'm still not used to them."

"Will you still be able to play Quidditch?"

"Probably," Draco said. "But Quidditch doesn't interest me much anymore."

Nott gave him a funny look. "Why not?"

"Search me. It just doesn't."

Draco had to restrain himself from jumping out of his own skin as Pansy dropped into the seat beside him.

"What're you two doing here?" she asked casually. "I can't remember the last time I've ever seen either of you in the library."

"The same goes to you," Nott replied. "Don't you go acting all high and mighty just because you're
bosom friends with the Mudblood now."

Pansy gave him a look. "I would appreciate it if you didn't use that word around me, Theodore Nott."

"What, Mudblood?" Nott contrived to look confused. "What's wrong with it? You've used it before, after all."

"Yes, well, not anymore," she sniffed.

"Well just because you don't like it doesn't mean I'm going to stop using it," he said.

"Do as she says, Nott, and choose your words wisely," Draco said. "I'm so tired of dealing with that Gryffindor that any mention of her name makes me want to be ill."

He felt Pansy's surprised look and ignored it. He hadn't told her yet of his and Granger's agreement to act as if nothing at all had happened between them. He would have to remedy that immediately, once Nott was gone.

Nott looked at them both sourly.

"Have it your way, then. But mark my words, soon it won't matter."

"What does that mean?" Pansy asked, raising one brow.

"Have you two not been paying attention?" Nott asked, rolling his eyes.

"Clearly not," Draco said.

"Considering your Father's role in it, I'm shocked," Nott said, slinging his arm over the back of the chair beside him. "I thought he'd have told you."

A bubble of anxiety began to rise inside Draco. He managed to glare at Nott, and a familiar anger took hold of him.

"Tell me now what you're talking about before I rip it out of you."

That was enough to compel Nott.

"The Ministry's going to enact a law that will force all Mudbloods to be investigated."

"That's already been going on thanks to Umbridge," Pansy said impatiently. "Nothing new there."

"Hold your tongue," Nott snapped at her. "I wasn't finished."

"How about I cut yours out, you sexist pig?"

"My patience has been tried enough today," Draco added coldly. "Apologize to Pansy."

Oddly, Nott seemed unbothered by Draco's demand.

"Forgive me, Pansy."

"Only this time," she said stiffly. The two of them stared at each other for some tense seconds before Nott continued where he had left off.

"Not only does will Muggleborns be investigated, they'll have to be tagged and registered into the
"Tagged?" Draco asked, his brows raising. His stomach sank to his toes. "What for?"

Pansy answered him, her voice flat.

"So they can be tracked."

"Don't look so dour, Pansy," Nott said, chuckling. "I know you're friends with the Mudblood Granger now but look at it this way—if you ever have a pressing need to locate her in a short time, all you've got to do is take a trip to the Ministry. Better yet, whistle, and she'll likely come running."

"Is that all, then?" Draco asked, forcing himself to sound bored.

"They're still working out the particulars, from what I've been told," Nott said, shrugging, a gleeful smile on his face. "But apparently Umbridge is really pushing her case for there to be more restrictions on use of magic by Mudbloods."

Draco forced himself to smile, because Nott wouldn't look away from him, and he could tell he was expecting a certain reaction from him. He could feel his pulse like the beat of a drum, reverberating through him.

"Fancy that," he said.

"Don't go blabbing about it to anyone else just yet," Nott was saying. "I only know because my dad told me, and the news isn't like to make the papers until weeks, maybe months from now since nothing's finalized yet." He ran his tongue over his teeth. "I can't wait to see the look on Granger's face when she hears about it. She thinks she's so high and mighty now, wait until they've got her collared like a mongrel." He laughed.

Draco's hands had balled into fists—so tight he thought he felt his bones begin to give way under the pressure. His whole being ached with an intense longing to launch himself across that table and sink his fists into Nott's ugly, grinning face.

"I don't think that's funny at all," he heard Pansy say, her voice dripping with ice.

"No, of course you wouldn't," Nott said, sounding irritated. "You've gone and let her turn you into some bleeding heart."

She rose from her chair in one sudden movement, nearly knocking it over.

"Fuck you, Nott."

Nott laughed loudly. It echoed around them. "Looks like I was wrong!"

Everything had gone too still. The quiet chatter of the other occupied tables around them had stopped abruptly.

There was a clattering of furious footsteps behind them growing closer.

Pansy sat back down at once.

Madam Pince stalked over to their table, her pale, wrinkled face twisted with anger.

"You three," she hissed, pointing a bony finger at them. "Behave or leave at once!"
Nott stood up slowly, brushing himself off, as if he had all the time in the world.

"No need for an escort," he said calmly. "I was about to be on my way."

Pince glared at him. "See to it that you do it without causing another disruption."

Nott nodded at Draco. "I'll see you later."

He grinned at them over his shoulder as he walked away. The other students in the area stared curiously after him.

Pince looked at Draco and Pansy expectantly over her glasses.

"Alright, alright," Pansy said, standing back up. "Though it was him who started it all."

"Then next time you have an argument in here, I suggest you take it somewhere else."

Draco swept all his things into his bag and rose from his seat.

"Duly noted."

"Before you say anything about what happened back there, you should know it's all an act," Draco muttered to Pansy as they walked quickly down the corridor.

"That's a relief," she said, sighing. "I knew something was up—but I'd started to think that you'd bumped your head on a doorframe or something and had gone back to your former self."

"It might have been easier if I had," Draco said sourly. "Every word that idiot says made me want to knock his teeth down his bloody throat."

"Do you really think the Ministry's going to do all that?" Pansy asked.

"It's hard to stomach, but I can see it happening," he replied. "Especially now that He's got all his puppets filling spaces within the Ministry. He's going to come after anyone he wants and there's little we can do to stop it."

She let out a sharp exhalation and looked down at the ground. "I wish there was."

Draco nodded. Pansy's anger continued to rise.

"It's barbaric," she said, scowling. "It's cruel. Where's the sense in restricting someone's magic?"

"Remember, they think that Muggleborns stole that magic somehow."

"Gods, how stupid." She looked at the ground. "I can't believe I used to think that way."

"Me, too."

"So she knows you're acting like this?" she asked, running her hands through her hair, as if wanting to brush her frustration away.

"Of course," Draco said. "She's doing the same. We've got to. Nott's getting a little too close for comfort, lately, and if he knew what's going on, I wouldn't have a bowtruckle's chance in hell of coming out of this alive."

As if I actually did.
Pansy loosened her tie. Somebody crossed the adjoining corridor, and they fell silent and waited until the nameless student disappeared. She leaned against the wall.

"I don't like the way he's been butting in. He's been antagonizing Hermione and I for weeks now and I want to know why."

They had reached the exit doors. Pansy reached out and pushed them open, and they strode out onto the soggy lawn. A fine mist fell from the sky. Draco spotted some students out on the grounds, over by Hagrid's hut.

"So do I."

Pansy pulled up the hood of her cloak, securing it over her head.

"Do you think he knows about your mission?"

"He can't. Only my parents, Snape, and the Dark Lord know about it, and they were all sworn to secrecy."

Now she looked worried. "But could he suspect we're not in with the rest of them anymore?"

"Merlin, I'd hope not," he said, suddenly feeling ill. "You really think he suspects?"

"I've got no clue," she said. "But it would explain why he's sniffing around all of a sudden. I'm not sure I believe that he just wants to avenge you."

Draco winced. He had lost sight of the other students on the grounds. He wondered where they'd gone.

"I don't want to be avenged, and not by him."

"We should tell Hermione about what Nott said," Pansy suggested. "Fuck Nott and his sick satisfaction. She should know. All of the Muggleborns at Hogwarts should know so they can prepare themselves."

"You're right," he said. "But how? I don't think everyone else will trust us as much as she might."

Pansy chewed on her lip, her eyes narrowed in concentration.

"I can talk to Luna Lovegood," she finally said. "She can help."

"Her?"

Pansy shot him a look.

"Sorry."

"Her dad owns that paper, remember?" she said.

"Yeah. You're saying she can get him to publish something about it?"

"Of course."

Draco took his scarf out from his bag and wound it around his neck. "Anyone can get hold of it, though. What if Nott sees it and knows we told?"
"He won't," she said confidently. 

Draco looked at her curiously. "And how are you so sure?"

"Because paper holds secrets better than mouths can," she said, grinning. "And it'll take a few weeks for the issue to be released. That'll be enough time for Nott to not immediately suspect us. Let's get back inside—we've got to find Luna as soon as possible."

The figures that Draco had spotted by Hagrid's hut were none other than his most regular (and sometimes, only) visitors. If he had taken a closer look, he would have seen that they had noticed him at approximately the same moment that he had caught sight of them.

Luckily, the trio had been set of seeing Hagrid, and though they recognized Pansy, they were not quite keen on approaching her if she was with Malfoy, although Hermione felt that it was quite rude to just ignore them even if they were so far away.

"Is that Pansy?" Ron had asked as they'd approached Hagrid's front door. He squinted towards the castle's main entrance, shielding his eyes from the rain.

"Yeah, it is," Harry said, looking over. "Should we go say hi?"

"Malfoy's there, too," Hermione said.

"Forget it, then," Ron said, turning away. "Do you think they can see us? He's looking this way. If he tries to start something…"

"He won't," Hermione said.

"How do you know?" Harry asked.

"Because he just turned away," she said, looking at them through the corner of her eye. "See?"

They were all startled into taking three steps back when the front door swung open rather violently and Hagrid appeared, his face cropped out of view by the small doorway.

"Blimey, Hagrid," Harry said, "we were just about to knock."

"Eh? Who's there? Hagrid stooped low and stepped out past the door.

"It's us," Ron said cheerily. "Did we come at a bad time?"

"Hate ter say it, but yeah," Hagrid said, shutting the door behind him with some trouble. Before he could manage it completely Fang bounded outside, running in a crazed loop around the trio.

Hermione shrieked with laughter as Fang stood on his hind legs and hooked his paws on her shoulders, depositing sloppy, frantic kisses on her face.

"Fang, back!" Hagrid ordered, but Fang only threw himself at Ron next, and then at Harry to greet them before he finally settled at Hagrid's side, his tail wagging so hard his whole body shook. "I'll make yeh a leash one day, so hear me Merlin."

"Where are you going?" Harry asked.

"Dumbledore's sent for me," Hagrid said. "I'm late—had some trouble wranglin' some wil' Hippogriffs las' night, my back's sore."

"Alright, I guess we can't keep you any longer," Ron said.

"Guess not," Hagrid said, looking a little crestfallen. "But yeh lot are welcome to visit me later this week."

"We'll be there as soon as we've got some free time," Harry said, grinning. "Keep the kettle warm, yeah?"

Hagrid beamed.

"We should get going," Ron said, brushing rain from his hair. "I need to be somewhere warm."

"Yeh shouldn't be out here, anyhow," Hagrid said, hoisting a heavy bag over his shoulder. "Yeh need ter be studying!"

"Oh, we'll be doing that once we get back inside," Hermione said, looking at Harry and Ron expectantly. "Right?"

"...obviously," Harry said, after she elbowed him in the ribs.

"Oi, who's that over there?" Hagrid was looking over at the entrance.

Hermione glanced in that direction quickly. "That's just Malfoy and Pansy."

"Hm." Hagrid pressed his lips together—they could tell by the way his beard moved—he appeared to want to say something, but thought better of it.

Until Ron spoke up.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothin'," Hagrid said. Fang had stood up and stretched, a high-pitched whine emitting from his mouth as he yawned widely. "Malfoy give you any trouble since that fight, Harry?"

"None," Harry said, a little perplexed. He cast a mistrustful look over in Malfoy's direction. He and Pansy were hurrying back up the steps and into the warmth of the castle. "Why?"

"Jus' wonderin'."

The trio exchanged a curious look between themselves. A stronger wind started to blow—they all ducked to shield themselves from it except for Hagrid, who took it as easily as if it were a gentle breeze on a sunny day.

By now Malfoy and Pansy had disappeared back into the castle. Hagrid had not stopped looking after them.

"You're awfully quiet, Hagrid," Harry said after a moment. "What is it?"

Bored, Fang trotted around the grass around them, occasionally stooping to sniff at something on the ground. He let out an impatient puff of breath as he looked at the Forbidden Forest, or perhaps it was a quiet, warning bark.

"Malfoy seem a bit funny to yeh lot lately?" Hagrid asked, finally looking away and back to them.

"Yeah," Harry said at once. "It's odd."
"It's like he's a balloon someone let the air out of," Ron said, snickering.

Hagrid made a face.

"Why do you say that, Hagrid?" Hermione asked intently.

Hagrid looked around them quickly, then scratched at his nose.

"Don' go spreadin' this 'round," Hagrid said, bending low to meet their eye level. The wind whipped at his long, shaggy hair. The three of them leaned in closer. "A month ago, Malfoy comes hollering at my door, saying he needs help. Had an injured bird—don' know where he found it, but it's wing was torn up a bit."

"Did he hurt it?" Ron asked, his eyes wide.

"He came here?" Harry asked, frowning. "He said he needed your help?"

"Exac'ly," Hagrid said, nodding. "I though' it was a joke. Didn' believe him, at first."

"But…" Ron said, his eyebrows raised.

"But. He seemed genuin'ly concerned. A li'l frightened, like he'd jus' seen a thousand Inferi or somethin'."

"That sounds completely unlike him." Harry took off his glasses and wiped them on his robe. He looked up at Hagrid, squinting. "Did he steal anything from you? Say anything odd?"

Hagrid frowned and thought for a moment. "Nothing's been missing. He didn' say much, either."

"Well, what did he do?" Hermione asked, fidgeting with her scarf.

"I asked him to help me repair the wing," Hagrid said. "He did it, and wanted to know if the creature would be okay. He looked ill, like he was about to be sick."

Harry and Ron held expressions of suspended disbelief, occasionally looking at each other as if wanting to confirm that what they were hearing was real. Hermione held perfectly still, trying to picture the scene Hagrid had painted for them.

"The oddest part," Hagrid said, hoisting his bag over his other shoulder, "is that he wasn't rude. No comments, no prissy tone. Nothin'. He was…respectful."

Hermione wanted to laugh at the looks on their faces. A stab of worry pricked at her instantly after, quieting her relief. Of course it was almost incomprehensible for them. They hadn't seen the extent of Malfoy's change like she had.

_How the hell will I manage to make them believe it?_ She wondered. _They don't even want to believe what they're hearing now._

"What do you think happened?" she asked Hagrid. She had to know what he thought of him now. She was almost sure that his opinion of Malfoy had changed by the way he had looked at him not five minutes prior.

"I'm not likely ter know, am I?" Hagrid smiled. "His story was, a cat attacked the bird and he found it that way."

"Yeah, that's likely," Harry scoffed.
"If this was a year ago, I would've said the same thing," Hagrid replied. "I migh' sound like I've been hit in the head with a bludger, but I believe he didn' hurt that bird."

They stood in a surprised silence, except for Hermione, who found herself biting her lips to keep from saying that she believed it, too.

Hagrid whistled with his fingers to call Fang to him. The boarhound had wandered way off and now emerged from the outskirts of the forest, his tongue dangling from his open mouth, slobber dripping from its end.

"Let's get yeh back inside," Hagrid said, and motioned for them to walk with him.

The moment after Hagrid had left them, a small folded paper crane flew through the air and hovered in front of Hermione. She started, and held out her hands. It dropped into her palms, and Harry and Ron looked on curiously.

"Who's it from?" Harry asked.

"And what's it say?" Ron added.

Hermione scanned the note, her brow furrowed.

"It's from Pansy," she said. "She says we should meet her in the empty History of Magic classroom on the fourth floor immediately. She's got something she wants to tell us."

"Sounds serious," Ron said, crossing his arms. "Is she okay?"

Hermione let the note fold itself back up into the crane, which rose into the air once more and beckoned them to start walking with a crook of its little paper wing before setting off, gliding through the air.

"I don't know," she said. "Well, let's go."

"Pansy?" Hermione pushed the classroom door open. "Hello?"

"I'm here." Pansy appeared at the door instantly, causing Hermione to jump backwards into Harry, who stumbled backwards into Ron.

"Sorry," Pansy said, looking flustered and nervous. "Come in quickly, and shut the door behind you."

"Are you alright?" Harry asked her as they righted themselves and walked into the classroom.

"Fine," she replied a little distractedly. She grabbed Hermione's arm and led her behind her to the center of the room.

Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. Malfoy was there at the back of the room, looking at her intently. He looked composed as usual, but the strict lines of his form suggested a nervousness that spread at once to her.

Harry and Ron had caught sight of him, too.

"Why is he here?" Harry asked Malfoy, immediately drawing out his wand.

"Hear me out, Harry," Pansy said, spreading her palms in front of her chest, as if ready to push him
back in case he lunged at Malfoy. "We don't want any fights. We just need to talk to you."

"Malfoy," Hermione called. "What's going on?"

He stepped up beside Pansy, looking wary and guarded, but there was an urgency in his gaze that was troubling.

"There's something important you need to know, and we need your help."

"You need our help?" Ron asked, his mouth hanging open.

"Yes." Pansy sighed, pushed her hair back and away from her face. "Yours, and Luna's."

"Luna?" Hermione asked. "What for?"

"The Ministry is planning to set something in motion that not many people know about," Malfoy said. "We figure we might as well warn everyone before it comes."

"Warn us about what?" Harry asked, his eyes narrowed.

"The Ministry wants to round up all Muggleborns and register and tag them," he said, and Hermione felt her heart sink. "They want to do it soon, probably once term is over. I don't know how long they've been keeping it under wraps but I can guarantee they want to take you all by surprise. There's less resistance that way."

The trio stood there, blank-faced and stunned.

Hermione stared unashamedly into Malfoy's eyes, hoping that what he had said was just another part of his act, but he looked just as grim as she felt, and she felt her heart sink further.

"How do you know it's true?" she asked faintly.

"Nott told us," he said. "Pansy just wrote to her father to verify it in case it's a lie, but he seemed sure about it."

"So why tell us?" Harry asked. "Why do you care all of a sudden? What's in it for you?"

"I'm not thinking of myself here," Malfoy said coldly. "I'm thinking of the people this might affect."

"Why?" Harry asked, stepping closer. "Don't pretend you're not happy about this. You probably cried with joy when you heard about this."

"Don't make assumptions, Potter," Malfoy said. "You've got no idea what you're talking about."

"I know exactly what I'm talking about," Harry said. "Don't think I don't know what you've been up to, Malfoy."

"Harry," Pansy cut in. "Please, put your wand away. Don't start anything now. If you can't trust him, you can trust me. We want to help everyone." She gestured to Malfoy. "We genuinely want to help."

Hermione stepped beside her. "I'll help you."

Pansy smiled at her, her eyes shining. "Thank you."

Harry and Ron stood silently, looking at Hermione as if she'd just declared an undying love for Umbridge.
"What?" she asked them, a little angrily. "If it's true, we can't just sit around and do nothing. We've got to spread this news."

"You want to work with Malfoy?" Ron hissed.

"If it helps other Muggleborns prepare themselves for what the Ministry is planning, then yes!"

Harry had crossed his arms, and was glaring at Malfoy over Pansy's shoulder. He seemed indecisive.

"Prove that you genuinely want to help."

"Is this not proof enough?" Malfoy asked, his lip curling. "What more do you want me to do?"

"I don't believe that you're doing this out of the goodness of your own heart," Ron said. "I think you just want to make yourself look good. Do you think we'd all just forget what you did to Hermione last year?"

They all went still.

"I apologized to her for that," Malfoy said after a heavy pause. "I'm not proud of what I did. It's none of your business, either, but she got back at me for it. I think we're even now." He looked at Hermione for confirmation.

"I think we are," she said. Her mouth was dry.

"Oh, for fuck's sake—" Ron threw his hands up. "Really?"

"Yes, really," Hermione said hotly. "I know it's hard to conceive, but we've moved on from that."

"When?" Harry asked, his brows raised.

"I've spoken to you about this," she said, an edge to her tone.

"But why in Merlin's bloody name would you ever forgive him?" Ron asked.

Hermione hesitated. She glanced at Malfoy. He appeared as uncomfortable as she felt, and that gave her comfort.

"Because people change," she said.

Ron's mouth went slack. Harry hadn't stopped staring at her.

Maybe she'd lost her mind. Maybe she'd made the wrong choice after all when she'd gone into the Infirmary in the dead of night to demand the truth from Malfoy. But it was too late to turn back, and it was still too early to be able to tell if she truly regretted it yet.

There was no safety net to fall back on here. She had made the decision to trust and work with Malfoy, and whatever came of it, she would have to deal with it. She could only hope that any damage that came in the future would be salvageable.

They all turned to stare at Malfoy. He met their collective gaze evenly, but his ears glowed pink.

"She's right," Pansy said quietly.

"Have we all gone mad, or am I having an extremely realistic dream?" Harry asked. "What the hell is going on?"
"Look," Malfoy spoke up sharply. "You're acting like I'm asking you to promise me your first-born. All I want to do is help spread some information. That's it."

"But why?" Ron insisted.

"Because I'd rather you get a fighting chance than get taken unaware," he said, his eyes on Hermione's. "And because fuck the Ministry."

Hermione didn't dare look at Harry and Ron. She was sure their mouths were hanging open.

"How can we be sure you're not an imposter?" Harry demanded, drawing out his wand from his pocket.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I'll believe that you're serious about this when you prove you're not under Polyjuice."

"Where the fuck would I get Polyjuice?"

"Snape," Harry spat. "Who else?"

"Potter, if I started coughing up blood in the middle of his class he wouldn't pause to give me a lozenge."

"Give us one good example before we hex your lights out," Ron said, also taking out his wand. He raised it to point between Malfoy's eyes.

Malfoy thought hard for a moment, his jaw clenched tight.

"At the Quidditch World Cup," he said, finally looking up, "I warned you lot to keep hidden or Granger would get hurt."

Hermione blinked, taken aback. She'd forgotten about that entirely. She felt Pansy's confused stare on her, but said nothing.

Ron's arm relaxed a little, but Harry held firm.

"We weren't the only ones in that forest," he said. "Anyone could have overhead you."

"Goddamnit, Potter," Malfoy snarled. "You've got your wands pointed at my bloody face and mine's been in my pocket this whole time. That should be enough for you, you greedy twat."

"I think I've got a right to be greedy for proof after everything you've ever done since the day we met you," Harry said evenly.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. He reached up, and slid off his robe, then his jumper. When he began to unbutton his shirt, everyone took a step back.

"Whoa, whoa!" Ron exclaimed, lowering his arm in alarm. "The hell are you doing?"

"You wanted proof?" Malfoy asked. He'd managed to open his shirt, and they all stared in intrigued horror as he grabbed hold of his undershirt and pulled it up to reveal a section of his abdomen, marred with vivid red scars of the slashes that had landed him in hospital.

"How's that proof?" Ron asked scornfully.
"Ron," Pansy said, her tone reproachful.

"If I were under polyjuice, the scars wouldn't have shown up," he said, meeting their stare defiantly. "That's their defect."

Nobody dared speak. Hermione stared at the vivid red gashes and pictured the bloody lavatory as she had found it after the attack.

"You're the Boy Wonder at Potions, now, aren't you, Potter?" he asked. "If you really were top in Slughorn's class you'd know that."

Harry had nothing to say. The tops of his ears were pink.

Hermione, who'd quickly realized Malfoy's intention, nodded.

"He's right," she said dully.

There was a knock at the door, and they all jumped. Before anyone had the chance to say anything, the door opened, and Luna Lovegood walked into the room.

Her long, pale hair was braided and coiled around her head tightly, with some odds and ends stuck into it. Behind one ear there was her wand, and behind the other, a quill. Some twigs bearing budding leaves had been woven into the sides of her head.

"Oh, am I late?" Luna asked, looking at them all with wide, unstartled eyes. "Sorry."

Her eyes landed on Malfoy and his bared chest. She turned a bit pink. "This isn't what I was expecting at all."

Malfoy went red and hurriedly began to redress.

"Is anyone else coming?" Ron asked impatiently.

"No," Luna said, putting her crocheted bag down onto the floor, and pulled out some parchment and an inkpot. "I think it's just me."

"You're right," Pansy said, walking to the door. She locked it and returned to them.

"Yeah, a locked door's just what we need," Ron said.

"If this is too much for you, you're welcome to leave." Malfoy said as he pulled his jumper back on.

"The hell I will!"

"Could somebody please tell me what's going on?" Luna asked, sitting down at a desk beside them all.

"We need you to publish something in The Quibbler," Pansy said. "That's your dad's paper, right?"

Luna beamed. "Oh, yes. We're quite proud of it."

"Well, the Ministry's planning to take action against Muggleborns," Hermione said.

"That sounds serious," Luna said.

"It is. They want to blindside us. We can't let that happen."
She sat down beside Luna, and Harry followed suit. Ron still seemed suspicious and agitated—he remained standing. Malfoy and Pansy lingered by the windows.

"I'm going to write my dad and tell him to save us a spread for this month's issue," Luna said, scribbling onto the parchment. "I'm sure he'll be more than happy to."

Pansy covered her hand with hers. "Thank you so much for doing this."

Luna smiled. "I'll do anything I can to help."

A cold gust of wind made them all look to the window, which Malfoy and Pansy were now closing. An owl had just flown off. Pansy held a note in her hands.

"It's from my father," she said, her face ashen. "He wants to know how I found out about this. He doesn't seem happy."

Harry looked at Hermione. "So it is true."

Her expression was grim.

"Tell him you just heard it as a rumor," Malfoy said quickly to Pansy. "He can't know who told us, or Nott will know we spread it."

Pansy sat down at a desk and wrote hurriedly onto the back of the parchment as they all watched. She stood after a moment, and handed it to Malfoy. "Will that do?"

Hermione watched as Malfoy stepped closer to Pansy, his posture bent protectively toward Pansy as he read the letter. Ron stared at them a little suspiciously. Harry and Luna seemed not to want to eavesdrop, but their eyes were still trained on the Slytherins, too.

Malfoy nodded. "I'll go send it."

"No," Pansy said, taking the letter from his hand. "I want to do it. I need some air." She looked at Hermione. "Will you come with me?"

Hermione stood at once. "Of course."

When they reached the door, Hermione looked back at Luna, Ron, Harry, and Malfoy.

"We'll be right back. No fighting."

She met Malfoy's eye. He nodded. Harry and Ron did the same.

"I can't believe this is happening," Pansy said as they walked quickly in the direction of the Owlery. "It feels like it's not even real."

"It could be worse," Hermione said. "Thank you for telling us, though."

"I had to," Pansy said. "Gods, Hermione, I almost broke my cover when Nott told us about it; he was saying how fun it would be to see you tied up like a dog, those were his words exactly, or something like that, and I almost bit my tongue off trying not to curse him…"

Hermione said nothing. Of course Nott would rejoice in seeing her rights stripped away. It didn't matter to him in the slightest. She, and others like her would be rounded up and tagged and interrogated and maybe even have their wands broken and he would stand there and laugh.
It was a dark, saddening thought that sometimes she found herself wanting to permanently return to the Muggle world. How easy would it have been had she never met Harry, or Ron, or even Malfoy and Nott? She would be in a nice school close to her home and she would be able to see her parents every day and never have to worry about a Dark Lord trying to take over everything. She wouldn't have to worry about OWLs or NEWTs or Apparating.

The one constant, the one thing she could never escape no matter which world she was in, however, was the hate. The horror. War and death. All separate and one at once. They all tied into and fed each other, continuing the progress of the cycle. Nothing would ever stop it.

"Hermione?"

"I'm sorry," she said immediately, tearing herself away from her thoughts. "I got distracted."

They had reached the Owlery, and began to climb the stairs.

"How do you feel?" Hermione asked Pansy, who was in the process of coaxing and old barn owl to come down.

"I should be asking you that," Pansy said, looking worriedly at Hermione as the owl landed on her outstretched arm. "Are you alright?"

"I'm angry, actually," Hermione said, feeling the wind whip her hair around. She tugged her robe tighter about herself. "I'm properly angry."

Pansy whispered something to the owl, who flew off promptly. She joined Hermione at the top of the steps.

"I am, too."

When they got back into the class room a few minutes later, they found nothing amiss, to their surprise. Harry and Ron were talking to Luna quietly, sitting in a small group. Malfoy was still standing by the window, and had cracked one open to let some air in. He looked their way as they entered, his eyes instantly locking onto Hermione's.

"What did we miss?" Pansy asked, walking over to Malfoy.

"Well," Luna said, standing up, putting her things back into her bag slowly, "I don't want to sound rude, but we're going to need more information if we want to publish an article about this. Malfoy told me everything he knew and it's not much, really."

"Is there any way you could get more information?" Harry asked, looking from him to Pansy. "Either of you?"

"We could talk to Nott again," Malfoy offered. "He seemed happy enough to tell us earlier. I doubt he knows more than that, though."

"Anything that can help, will help," Hermione said. "As long as it doesn't put either of you in danger."

"Danger from what?" Ron asked. "I'm not implying anything, Pansy, but isn't this something you should've known already?"

"Normally, yes, I suppose," she said. "But neither of us are currently in contact with our families."
"Why?"

Hermione shot Ron a look.

"Sorry," he said, but his gaze lingered on Malfoy, and he was not the only one who was wondering why Malfoy was not speaking to his parents. Hermione and Pansy were the only ones who knew why.

"We'll talk to Nott again," Pansy said. "Although I feel I'll need to restrain myself to the chair to keep from punching him."

Malfoy smiled at that briefly before he regained his composure.

"Let me know when you have more information," Luna said, tucking her hair behind her ears to reveal her favored radish earrings. "For now, I think all we can do is have a small column warning our Muggleborn readers to prepare themselves and know their rights."

"That's a great idea," Harry said, standing.

Pansy glanced at the clock. "We should get going. I feel like we've been here too long and someone might find us."

"I'll see you all at dinner," Luna said before she left, smiling. "I hope they're serving ice cream for dessert."

Hermione approached Harry and Ron, who had walked over to Pansy and Malfoy.

"Thanks for telling us about this," Harry said, a little stiffly. "I don't know why you're doing it, but, thanks."

"Don't thank us," Malfoy replied.

"It's the right thing to do," Pansy added.

"Well if it can get you into trouble, we appreciate what you did," Harry said, looking only at Pansy.

"Thanks, I guess," Ron said vaguely. To Pansy, he said, "See you at dinner."

"Of course," she said, and he joined Harry, who had opened the door. He looked at Hermione.

"Go on," she called to them. "I'll join you at dinner."

They gave her a strange look, but left.

"Oh, wait," Pansy said suddenly, "I'm actually starving—I'm going with them, see you in a bit!"

And without waiting for either Draco or Hermione to reply, she left the room. They stared after her curiously.

Now that they were alone, she noticed the tension leaving Malfoy's body. He seemed more relaxed. He took a deep breath, as if to steady himself.

"That wasn't so horrible," he said, and she gave a half-smile. "I half-expected Potter to slice me back open again."

Hermione grimaced. "The only reason he didn't is because he still feels terrible about it, even if he
doesn't like you."

Malfoy gave her a thin-lipped smile. "That's some consolation, I suppose."

His eyes were magnetic. She couldn't look away. The calm glow of the grey, spring sunlight lit him from behind gently. There was a stray strand of hair that was stuck in his eyelashes—it moved every time he blinked. It must have been itchy and uncomfortable but he didn't do anything to pull it free. She found herself with the startling impulse to brush it away for him. Shocked by it, she clenched her fists and held them behind her, reminding herself that those were the hands she had once used to slap him, when things had been different.

"Thank you for doing this," Hermione said.

"Don't thank me," he said. "I just don't want them to think they can do what they want. They can't pull tricks like this." He paused. "I want you to have a fighting chance."

Hermione's nails bit into the flesh of her palms. Her hands were damp.

"Did you really do this for all Muggleborns?" she asked quietly. "Or are you doing this for me?"

He gave her a slightly challenging look, and stepped a little closer. Hermione fought not to step back.

"Granger," he said softly, and she shivered, realizing just then and there that she rather liked the sound of his voice, especially when it was this low and saying her name, and the shape his lips took when he said it. He leaned in a little closer, and she held her breath, not even daring to blink. His eyes were like a frozen ocean.

His lips moved again. After a missed beat she took in his reply.

"Stop asking questions you already know the answers to."

Her mind scrambled. She felt it short out, like a telly suddenly switching to static. It jolted her.

She stared wide-eyed and frozen at him, horrified and intrigued by the thought that she had just wanted to kiss him. If he kept staring at her like he was now she very well just might, and that scared her even more.

What just happened?

"I'll see you tomorrow, for tutoring," she blurted out, and bolted from the room, not daring to look at Malfoy again.

Chapter End Notes

(i made up the thing about the defect with scars and the polyjuice potion. in this fic the polyjuice only makes you appear as the person would without their scars, like if they were a base model and you had to buy the premium and get the accessories or something. i guess if you wanted to impersonate someone in this world and they had a big scar on their cheek you'd have to replicate it with an illusion spell, makeup, or cover it with something. ta for now xx)
The Birth of Names

Alone under the roaring quiet of her dorm, Hermione ran her hands through her hair, dragging it away from her face. She stood bent over the lavatory sink, water droplets running down and dripping from her face, the soft *plip, plip, plip* as loud as Ron's snoring. She opened her eyes and forced herself to take in a long, deep breath. There was a strange pressure around her neck.

She braced her hands on the sides of the sink and took another one, and slowly, the pressure faded.

When she straightened, and looked in the mirror her reflection stared back at her.

She looked frightened.

Hermione turned away and dried her face on a towel.

As she entered her bedroom, smoothing lotion onto her face, she took a cursory glance around, just to feel better. There was nobody there, and that was good.

She put the bottle of lotion onto her bedside table and sat on the side of her bed, folding herself over until her front was pressed against her thighs, her forehead rubbing against the fabric of her pyjama bottoms, her hair falling around her like a blanket. She sat that way for several minutes and didn't move, but forced herself to continue to breathe slowly, to force out the panic she had felt upon waking up only moments prior.

The silence roared on.

Confusion gripped her now, and refused to dislodge itself from her thoughts. She winced and wrapped her hands around her knees.

*I thought I was over this…*

Apparently not.

She had forgiven him. The nightmares had ceased ages ago. He had promised her he would not harm her again.

*Though you really don't believe that, do you?*

She didn't know, but the more often she thought about it, the more she realized she didn't.

*No matter how much you wanted to.*

Hermione ignored that thought.

It had felt so real…

She'd woken, choking, gasping for breath, the vision of Malfoy's hateful, grotesque face hovering over hers, watching as he strangled her into conscientiousness.

Some of her hairs tickled her throat and she flinched, brushing it away in a quick, panicked movement. A moment later she laughed at herself, and let out a deep breath.

It was only a dream. That was what she had to remember. She had to try hard to remember the last time he'd looked at her with that kind of expression.
She forced her hands to keep still. She forced the images of the nightmare away. She forced herself to stand, and walk to her dresser and begin to dress for the day, pushing the nightmare to the depths of her mind, where it would hopefully be forgotten.

Instead she drew up the memory of the way he'd looked at her the day before, in the classroom with Harry, Ron, Luna, and Pansy. The concern, the thawing ice of his eyes as he'd looked at her before she'd all but run away.

'Stop asking questions you already know the answers to,' he'd said.

Hermione blushed and sat up slowly, the memory of the nightmare fading fast.

*Am I attracted to Malfoy?*

Gods above, things just kept turning worse, but it was true…

*How did I let this happen?*

The image of his bared abdomen flashed back to her, riddled with scars, his eyes like mercury, the way his lips formed her name. She blushed harder.

*This can't possibly be real.*

So he was good looking. There wasn't any harm in acknowledging that, was there?

*He's always been one of the better looking boys in our year. Everyone knows it.*

She had noticed, too, early on, but had chosen to ignore the physical appeal and focus on his repulsive personality instead. His face was too angular, she'd told herself, his lips too cruel, his eyes too cold and sharp. All the beauty in the world couldn't hide a terrible personality.

*But everything's different now, isn't it?*

His face might have been too angular, that was true, but he did have lovely cheekbones and a well-sculpted jaw. His lips she'd deemed cruel, naturally only because of the words that came out of them, but in reality they were pleasing to look at, and as she'd learned, soft and enticing, though it hadn't felt that way the first time around. He was tall, and though she'd never had a preference towards blonds she realized now she liked that his hair was such a strange, pale color. She tried imagining him with hair as black as Harry's or as bright red as Ron's, and failed.

Hermione put her face in her hands.

*There's no use denying it,* she told herself. *You like him. You really should have been more careful.*

But there was a stark difference between finding someone attractive and actually fancying them! She was positive she was not at that point.

Yet, the voice said slyly, and she winced, ignoring the nervous flutter of her stomach.

"No," she said out loud, surprising herself. "This is as far as it gets."

The empty room seemed to disagree with her. Hermione dropped her hands and went to get dressed, her stomach rolling uneasily.

*It worked.*
Draco almost flung the coin at the opposite wall. He was sweating as he reached out to open the cabinet to confirm the news for himself.

There was nothing there. The trunk was gone.

Relief and disappointment warred within him.

What was his next step? His head was spinning. He didn't know where to start.

The coin grew hot again. He glanced at its message with dread.

*Let me through,* read Fenrir's message.

Draco's blood ran cold.

*No,* he instantly sent back.

*Why not?*

Draco shuddered, deeply regretting that he'd ever conceded the right to be a part of his mission to the werewolf. He had regretted it then and would regret it when the time came, for though Fenrir had made him a promise he knew Greyback was not a man of his word, and was brash and impulsive to a fatal fault at times, if the stories he'd told him growing up were any indication.

And speaking of Fenrir, he was still waiting for an answer, and Draco was too familiar with his impatience.

*Not the right time,* he sent back, and hoped that would be the end of that.

Instead, he got another reply.

*When?*

Frustrated, Draco gripped the coin harder and concentrated, knowing the reason for Fenrir's insistence.

*I'll let you know,* he sent, and shoved the galleon into the pocket of his robes, waiting for some tense moments for it to signal that Fenrir had replied, but no such thing happened, and finally, he closed the cabinet doors and left the Room of Requirement behind him.

There was a sharp knock at the door.

Hermione looked up from her book, blinking. Another knock came. She stood swiftly, using her finger as a marker and approached the door.

When she opened it, she was met with the surprise of finding Justin-Finch Fletchley on the other side. He was still in his uniform and sported a scowl on his face.

"Justin?"

"I want to report someone," he said at once, shoving all pleasantries off to the side.

"Oh—" Hermione opened the door wider. "Alright then, come in."

He stepped inside quickly, glancing over his shoulder before doing so.
"Are you alright?" she asked, setting her book down after tucking a clean quill where her finger had been.

"Frankly, no," Justin said, looking rather disturbed. "I'm not sure how to begin."

"Sit down," she ordered, and a tea tray appeared beside her before she could even ask, holding two steaming and fragrant teacups and a small plate of biscuits. She carried it to the table carefully and sat down opposite Justin.

"What's bothering you?" she asked. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," he said quickly. "I'm only annoyed." He accepted his teacup gratefully and blew into it for a moment, then looked at Hermione over it. "You're Muggleborn, right?"

"Well—yes," Hermione said, frowning. "Why?"

"I am, too," he said. "I didn't mean to be rude—I just wondered…" He took a gulp of tea and winced.

Hermione looked at him carefully. "Have you heard anything in the news lately?"

"What?" he asked, still wincing. "No, not really. Depends on what you mean. But I want to report Theodore Nott, that bastard."

Hermione went still.

"Why?" she asked, though she had a strong suspicion she already knew the answer.

"He's always been a right tosser—used to throw rubbish at me during class when the professors weren't looking, and when I shouted because of it I would get in trouble. Stupid little things like that, really." He paused to take another sip. Hermione followed suit though she had no appetite for it.

"I'm not complaining about that, though," he continued. "For the past several weeks he's been following me around, calling me, ah…well…"

"A Mudblood," Hermione finished for him.

"Yes." His face was red, but Hermione couldn't tell whether he was embarrassed or angry. Most likely it was both. "He's been caught doing it, too. Snape didn't care, but Sprout told him off. He'll get a detention for it but he could get a hundred more and he'd keep doing it. He's tried getting me to fight him, too. I know he wants to get me into trouble."

"I wouldn't put it past him," Hermione said bitterly.

Justin looked at her in surprise. "Has he been doing it to you, too?"

"I thought I was the only one," she said. "Although it doesn't come as any surprise that he's targeting other Muggleborns in the school."

"Why, though?" Justin asked. "We know all Slytherins hate us—"

"That's not true," she said, a little sharply.

"Oh, right," he said. "You're friends with Parkinson, still?"

"Yes." Hermione reminded herself to keep calm.
He nodded to himself. "I was wrong about her, then. I'm glad. I didn't believe her for a while, but I trust you."

"I'm glad to hear it," Hermione said. "Why didn't you go to Dumbledore instead of me? I'm only a Prefect, the worst I can do is give him another detention, and we both know that's not going to make him stop."

"I don't know," Justin said, hastily swallowing another scalding gulp of tea. "He's gone every time I stop by his office. I reckon he's got better things to worry about than something like this."

"I'm sure Professor McGonagall would be just as happy to talk to Nott," she suggested. "Or we can talk to Professor Snape."

Justin looked unsure. "Maybe."

"Do you know if he's been targeting anybody else?" Hermione asked.

"Colin Creevey. Terry Boot. I don't know any others." He made a face. "I half-expected Malfoy to start in on it, too, but I hardly see him around anymore."

"I doubt Malfoy would be a part of that," she said, ignoring the violent swoop her stomach had done upon hearing his name.

Stop it, she scolded herself.

"We're not likely to know," Justin said, shrugging. "He does seem different, though that fight between him and Potter threw me for a loop."

Hermione took a biscuit from the tray and broke it cleanly in half. "Me, too."

Justin placed his teacup down on the table. "Sorry for bursting in on you like this. I've just had about enough I can stand of Nott. Every time he comes up to me he looks so gleeful, it makes me want to drive my foot up his Pureblooded arse."

Hermione coughed to hide her laugh. "Don't be sorry. I'm glad you told me about this." She frowned. "We should talk to Dumbledore about this as soon as we can."

"Well, he's not here today," Justin said flatly. "I already checked. I asked McGonagall when we could expect him back and she said she didn't know." He crossed his arms. "What sort of Headmaster takes all these vacations without warning, and is never around to deal with the problems in his school?"

"I'm sure they're not vacations," Hermione said. "He's not just a Headmaster, you know. He's got loads of things he's got to deal with. Perhaps you could start writing a letter of your complaints against Nott, and I'll do the same, and then we could turn it in to his office."

"That's a good idea," he said. "I'll tell Colin and Terry, too. The more complaints there are, the higher action he's got to take."

"Excellent," Hermione said, and saw him to the door. "Let me know when you've submitted them."

"I will." He waved, and hesitated. "Thanks for listening."

"Of course," she replied, and closed the door after him.

She stood there for a moment, one arm around her middle, the other massaging her temple.
She had stayed inside her room all day, trying to focus on her assignments, but was now beginning to feel restless. She wanted to talk to Pansy, or Malfoy, but hadn't heard from either of them all day. Harry and Ron had visited earlier and tried to convince her to go outside with them and take advantage of the improving weather to take a walk or toss a Quaffle around, but she had declined, to their disappointment.

Where would she even find them? It would have been easiest to write them a note and ask them to meet her somewhere in the castle, but she reckoned she would be able to find them in the Great Hall, if not the library.

The first thing to do, then, was to exit the room. She did that swiftly, deciding on a whim to go to the library first, knowing she had a better chance of finding Pansy there than Malfoy.

No sooner had she crossed into the adjoining corridor, however, that she heard the familiar unpleasant tones of Nott's voice drifting along the space from quite a ways behind her. She stopped abruptly, her stomach twisting into a tight knot.

It was difficult to hear what he was saying, or who he was talking to. Hermione ducked into a doorway, and listened more keenly.

"You wouldn't have gotten such a low mark on that paper if you'd put more effort into it," came Blaise Zabini's voice.

"What do I care about what marks I get on some irrelevant paper?" Nott asked impatiently. "I've got bigger things to focus on."

Hermione rolled her eyes, and raised her wand, casting a Disillusionment spell over herself, not in the mood to bother with either Nott or Zabini currently.

Hopefully they won't come this way...

"Astoria said she saw Draco looking at the Mudblood the other day," Zabini said. "Said he turned red when he realized she'd caught him."

Nott laughed. "Probably thinking something naughty, though I can't see why. She's nothing special."

"She's tutoring him, isn't she?" Zabini asked.

"Yeah. What an insult, to be paired with her out of all the other Prefects. I'd have refused, if I were him."

Hermione's ears glowed with heat. Her hand itched to raise her wand and send a hex their way.

"Must be a nightmare, having to listen to her longer than a minute," Zabini remarked. "As if she didn't prattle enough during class."

"I found them in the library yesterday," Nott said. "You should've seen them—it was like they were about to start a duel right then and there. I took it on myself to intervene, of course."

Zabini's laugh echoed around the corridor. Hermione rolled her eyes and wondered just when they would get out of the way so she could leave already.

She was granted a tiny miracle when, after waiting for a tense minute, to hear their voices take a turn in the corridor behind her and grow more distant.
She exhaled heavily, and suppressed the quiet voice inside her head that called her a coward for not having wanted to deal with them. Keeping the concealing spell on, she hurried towards the library.

The search there was fruitless. Neither Pansy nor Malfoy were there, and she exited the library after a speedy run through of the three floors, a little breathless and annoyed. Only then did it occur to her that she could have just sent them a note to meet her somewhere, but by now it was too late. She stood outside the library's doors for a while, debating what to do next. Should she continue the search? Or just get back to her studying? Hermione wasn't sure what she wanted, and it was frustrating.

The doors opened, and she jumped aside in time to avoid getting hit, flattening herself against the wall.

She saw Ron first, and her eyes threatened to overtake her whole face. When was the last time he'd voluntarily gone to a library by himself?

Next came the realization that he wasn't alone.

"Feels like a time jump every time I get out of there," he said to Lavender Brown, ruffling his hair, as if to shake out dust. "I think that was the only time I've never fallen asleep in the library."

Lavender giggled. "That didn't stop you from trying," she said, smacking him on the arm. "I had to keep pinching you awake."

He glanced at his arm and laughed. "I'll be all black and blue tomorrow."

"Shall we get to lunch?" she asked, tucking her hair behind her ear. "All that studying has me famished."

Ron grinned. "Yeah. Let's go."

Hermione watched them leave, an incredulous and somewhat confused grin stretched across her face.

Lavender had a crush on Ron... Interesting. Did he know? He had to know.

*Does he like her, too?*

It was hard to tell, mainly because she hadn't been able to get a glimpse of his face. By now, they had disappeared from her view, and before someone else had a chance to hit her with the door, Hermione rushed off in the direction she had come from.

She walked quickly back towards her room, and when she reached it, stopped short to see Malfoy standing there, his hand raised to knock at her door.

The sound of his knock reverberated loudly in the wide, empty corridor.

He waited patiently, looking down at the floor, then around the corridor a little suspiciously.

When no answer came from the other side, he knocked again, and shifted from one foot to the other.

Hermione sidled up behind him as quietly as she could manage.

"I can take a message, if you like."

"Fuck-"
He turned sharply, face white and eyes wide, his wand out and ready to fire. Hermione dodged it easily, laughing so hard her belly ached.

"Show yourself," he hissed.

"Relax," she said, ending the spell, "it's just me."

He gave her a withering glare, an angry flush spreading across his cheeks. "I might've taken your head off."

"Don't be so sure," she said, "with eyes that wide one would think you'd have had better aim but you were clear set on punishing that window over there."

His glare didn't last too long after that. He pushed a hand through his hair and let out a huff. "Why are you walking around like that?"

"I was looking for you, actually," she said, and his eyebrows raised. "But Nott and Zabini were nearby and I didn't feel like having an encounter."

"Nor would I," he said, as she unlocked her door by whispering her password. She held it open, and gestured for him to enter. He did, and she followed suit, pausing at the doorway to take another glance around the corridor to make sure that neither Nott nor Zabini were still hanging around.

"Has there been any more news?" she asked, slipping off her shoes. The door closed and the fireplace sprang to life, warming the room with an unearthly speed. Malfoy took off his shoes without her prompting, and she had to bite back a laugh at the feel of how odd it was to have a shoeless Malfoy in her dorm.

"It's only been one day, so no," he said, sitting on the couch opposite her. "I haven't seen Nott since yesterday."

Hermione grudgingly relented. "Justin Finch-Fletchley came by today to tell me that Nott's been targeting the other Muggleborns at Hogwarts, not just me."

Malfoy shook his head. "That isn't surprising. I bet it's like a game of cat and mouse to him—he probably misses Umbridge."

"I wouldn't doubt it," she said. "We're going to all write accounts of what he's done to us and hand them over to Dumbledore and see what comes of it. He's been given enough detentions and nothing changes. We're hoping for something a little more drastic."

"I, for one, would love to see him get thrown out," Malfoy said, and she nodded in agreement.

"You aren't the only one."

He reached into his robes and pulled out a scroll.

"I brought my Charms paper." He held it out to her.

"Oh-s" she waved her hand at it, gesturing for him to keep it. "There was really nothing wrong with it. I only said that to play along."

"You're sure?" he asked. "I don't want to get a bad mark because of you." He smiled, and Hermione felt her stomach lurch just a tiny bit.

Stop, she pleaded with herself. What's gotten into you?
"If you do get a bad mark, it'll be for falling asleep during class. Don't think I didn't catch that, yesterday."

"Oh, please, that was hardly anything," he said, shrugging one shoulder. "Besides, Flitwick wasn't in yet."

"Then make sure to get some rest," she said firmly.

He had been rummaging in his pocket. He pulled something out and looked at it casually. Hermione had only been half-paying attention so she didn't catch the sudden twisting of his features into an expression of dismay but he recovered quickly, and she only caught the end of it, as he was rearranging his face, pretending to look as if nothing were amiss.

"Is something wrong?"

"No," he said quickly, stashing his scroll back into his robes. "No, everything's alright."

"Okay," she said, a little hesitantly. "Well I didn't really have anything planned for today. I just wanted to know if you had more information."

Malfoy nodded, having regained his composure quickly. "I'll talk to Nott once I find him."

He made to move towards the door, but Hermione opened her mouth at the same time to speak, and he halted, looking at her with his eyebrows raised.

"Have you tried speaking to anyone about…" she motioned to his arm.

"No," he said. "You and Pansy are the only ones who know."

"Would you consider speaking to Dumbledore about it?" she asked.

He sighed. "Granger, he would never believe me if I told him everything."

"You don't know that," she said. "He's very understanding."

"The only reason he allowed me back was because I said I would be on my best behavior. He had no reason to, but he let me stay. I believe that's about as much luck as I'll get with him."

"But you could still at least try, Malfoy."

"I got into that fight with Potter. And injured two others. He won't be willing to lend a hand much less an ear."

"You still haven't told me why you did that."

"It wasn't intentional," he said quickly, his eyes earnest. "I never meant to hurt them. Not even Weasley."

Hermione crossed her arms. "Clearly you meant to hurt somebody."

Malfoy frowned. "I have no choice. If he messages me tonight saying I've got to kill the bloody Whomping Willow, I'd have to do it."

"That's why I need to know," she said, passing a hand over her forehead to brush her hair back. She stood and began to pace. "If he can reach you that quickly we need to tell someone as soon as possible."
"Granger—" his face was pained. "If I told Dumbledore, I'd be sent to Azkaban, or expelled."

He rolled up the sleeve of his robe and then unbuttoned his shirt sleeve, pulled it up to the elbow, exposing the Mark for her to see.

"All they need is one look at this and they'd cast me out. And my parents would suffer for me being found out."

"Voldemort will kill your parents?" her voice was thick with disbelief.

He nodded. "I can't let that happen, Granger. Call me selfish, call me evil, but I won't let them be murdered." He seemed to intercept her thoughts. "I know we're a bad lot. I know my dad's a prick and, well, my mum does what she can to not be one, but I don't want to be the reason they die."

He looked so torn. Hermione nodded, knowing she would be feeling the same were she in his place.

"I understand," she said softly, and relieved, he let his arm fall back to his side.

"Thank you," he replied, looking at the floor. His ears were red.

Hermione sighed. Talking to Dumbledore would have been the easiest option. Surely he could arrange for some sort of protection. He would know what to do in an instant, and she was only a Prefect. What could she do?

"What if you spoke to Harry instead?" she asked carefully, already knowing his response.

His voice was flat and final. "No. He wouldn't hesitate to carve me up again. He'll think I'm trying to trick you with all this reformed nonsense just so I can properly kill you."

Hermione smiled grimly. "He already does think that. And he'll have to get through me if he tries using that hideous curse again."

Malfoy looked at her in surprise. "You would defend me?"

"I think I'm the only person who would," she said. "And Pansy, of course. Unless you would rather we didn't."

He looked away. "I would greatly appreciate that. But if it gets you into trouble with them I don't want you to put yourself through it because of me. I…I've killed a man, remember?"

She did indeed. It was difficult to forget a secret like that.

"Who was he?" Hermione asked after a short pause. "Do you know?"

"He was a Death Eater," Malfoy said quietly. He ran a hand through his hair and Hermione saw that it was shaking. "He used to kidnap Muggles for the Dark Lord's use but accidentally betrayed him. It was his third offense so the Dark Lord had me kill him."

Hermione covered her hand with her mouth. "Kidnap Muggles?"

"You've seen the reports in the Prophet, haven't you?" he asked. His eyes and voice had gone dull, as if repressing pain. "At least, back when they bothered to write about it. The Dark Lord controls the Ministry now so nobody cares, but if there was a report on a bunch of Muggles who was missing, it was Wells who did it."

"That was his name?" she asked.
Malfoy nodded.

"Well, some would argue that you've done a service, killing that man," she said slowly. "Although you would probably still be sent to trial for murder."

Malfoy looked at her, his mouth a straight line. "I've accepted that possibility. I didn't enjoy killing him."

Hermione began to pace again in front of the fire. Its heat and the physical activity was beginning to make her sweat—she unclasped her robe and set it over the back of the closest chair.

"Talking to Harry is our best option," she said finally. "I know you don't like it and I know it's risky but no matter who you talk to there's going to be a risk. If you don't want to hurt anyone else then it needs to be as soon as possible before Voldemort sends you another order."

Malfoy looked at her warily. "How soon?"

"Today, preferably."

Malfoy shook his head. "He won't believe me, Granger. Once he finds out I was behind Weasley's poisoning he won't want to listen to another word I've got to say."

"He'll have to," Hermione said. "He'll be angry about Ron, of course, but what matters is that he didn't die. If you come clean quickly he might want to work with you."

Malfoy shook his head. "It's not going to happen. He'll never trust me, Granger."

"That's the thing, Malfoy," she said sharply. "Nobody will. You've made a name for yourself here for the past six years and now you've got to either lie in the bed you made or undo it and start over. You've got to prove to them you're not lying like you did to me."

Malfoy gave her a look. "It took you months to believe me. We haven't got the luxury of time now."

Hermione let out a frustrated sigh and sank back into her seat. "Why are you being so obstinate? Gods help me, I'm trying, but you're not letting me."

"I don't want to rush into this in a manner that'll get me killed before I can save my parents," he said hotly. "Is that so hard to understand?"

"No, of course not," she shot back. "But you yourself just said we haven't got the time to do this the right way. If you want to get out of the mess you put yourself in you need to get your whole foot in the water, not just your bloody toe!"

"They'll lop off my foot," he snapped. "Then the rest of me!"

Hermione threw her hands in the air. "I already said I'd defend you! What more do you want?"

Malfoy went quiet. The rigid line of his shoulders bent, and he looked away.

"I don't know," he said, his voice as soft as the flickers of the fire behind her. "I'm scared, Granger. I don't want to fail."

Hermione stared at him in shock, not knowing what to say.

"I'll talk to Potter," he said after a long pause. "But I need to think on it first. Give me until tomorrow."
Relieved, Hermione stood up. "Yes, of course."

She approached him cautiously, and reached out to touch his arm at the same time he decided to stand up from the couch to leave. She hadn't accounted for that, and they both looked at each other in surprise.

They were both very much in each other's personal space. She was so surprised she took a half-step back immediately, blushing, and cursing herself for it. Malfoy did the same, and almost fell backward onto the couch.

They stared at each other. Hermione couldn't help but think of her alien desire to kiss him from the day before, and stared curiously at his lips.

"I'm sorry if what I said to you yesterday made you uncomfortable," he said suddenly.

Hermione lowered her arm and reluctantly looked up to his eyes. Whether he had noticed her stare or not, he didn't show.

"You didn't," she said.

He watched her carefully.

"Really?" he asked.

The fire popped, but neither one jumped.

"It's the strangest thing," she muttered, "but your comment was not unwelcome."

He shifted closer, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know," she said, her eyes darting away from his. "This is all very new to me. But I'm glad you've changed." She forced herself to meet his eyes again. "I'm afraid I like you much better now."

Tentatively, his hand came up to cup the side of her head, light as a feather, gauging her reaction. Hermione's heart began to race. She felt the urge to flinch, the nightmare from earlier that day still present in her mind, but strangely, the touch felt natural. Not frightening in the least. She stared at him through wide eyes.

"Perhaps too much."

"If it bothers you to have me this close, tell me," he said, his eyes trained on hers, watching for a negative response. His thumb brushed her ear gently, and it shook her.

Hermione hesitated. The fire's heat was scalding her back even though it was several feet away.

"If it bothered me I wouldn't have let you come this close," she said softly, and his hand came into contact more firmly with her head, his fingers weaving into her hair, rooting themselves in her.

He let out a shaky breath disguised as a sigh.

Hermione shifted uncomfortably.

"What is it?" he asked at once, withdrawing his hand from her. "What's wrong?"

Hermione let out a breath and smiled nervously. "The fire's burning my back."
He nodded in relief and followed her as she walked away from the fire, leaning against the far wall to cool herself down.

He seemed to think that the moment had passed, but Hermione found she was not done. It was a new feeling, a strange and not entirely unwelcome one—she wanted more.

"Were you going to kiss me?" she asked, surprised by her own boldness. Where had this come from? She was running headlong into something new and terrifying and found she could not stop.

"Only if you wanted me to," Malfoy replied, his voice husky.

"Would it shock you if I said I did?" she asked, smiling.

He paused, a grin working itself across his face. "Yes, actually."

"This is absurd, isn't it," she asked, shaking her head. "I don't know what's happening. I feel like I'm not myself."

The light from the fire outlined his form in a red glow, as if he were some ominous figure.

"You look just the same to me," he said, coming a little closer again.

Funny—he did too, but he was so fundamentally changed that she found herself wondering if this was all some hyper-realistic dream.

She reached out—didn't have to reach far—grabbed his sleeves and pulled him closer.

"What are we doing?" he asked, his voice so soft she almost missed it.

"I don't know," she replied, her head swimming with the feel of having him so near. His robes were warm and soft in her hand and she held onto them tightly, afraid of what would happen next if she let them go. Though she was pulling him closer he still held a tiny whisper of breath between them, as if still not wanting to frighten her.

His eyes almost glowed in the fire's light. Hermione had never known anyone else with eyes the color of his—not quite blue, not quite grey—they were in between and so clear she fancied in the right light she might see right through them, but they were fixed on her with an intensity that rooted her in place and comforted her all the same.

*This morning you told yourself it wouldn't get any farther. Now look what you're doing.*

*I don't care,* she thought. *Let me be reckless for once.*

She pulled him closer until their chests touched. His face was only inches from hers. He stood at a slant over her—he brought his hands up to her face again, his touch so gentle she craved more, and was frightened of herself for it.

"When I kissed you," he began, stepping closer into her, "I meant it. Every second, every touch."

It was hard to breathe. Hermione tried to clear her throat and couldn't.

"I knew it was wrong," he said. "I shouldn't have done it, and you were right to hate me for it, but it was impossible for me to forget." Slowly his fingers traced the curve of her jaw, and under his touch she shivered. "I've wanted more ever since."

Her voice came out a whisper. It was a physical challenge to make it louder; with the way he was
looking at her stealing the air from her lungs.

"I know," she whispered. She was beginning to feel feverish—she licked her lips, watching how his gaze followed her tongue and sharpened at the movement. "It was another reason for me to be afraid of you."

"I was a beast," he murmured. "When you threatened me to stay away from you, that was when I realized I only wanted to do the opposite. I thought I'd ruined any chance I might have with you, however small. I wish I'd never done any of that to you. I can see how tense you get when I touch your neck."

It was getting more difficult to speak, let alone breathe. Her mouth was beginning to run dry. The wall had made her cold again, but the heat from him was strong enough to keep it at bay—even then she felt herself to be cold on one half and warm on the other—an utterly strange and almost unpleasant feeling, as if she had a high fever.

As if wanting to take more of his heat, her hands came up to his chest and pressed flat against him; he looked down in surprise, she shuddered, feeling warmth bleed into her hands. He mistook the action as a gesture of rejection, and froze.

"It's okay," she managed to say, and he relaxed. "It's just instinct."

She looked into his eyes. Still like ice, but she no longer felt cold. That was just the way they were. There was a sadness in them that he fought to hide but it reared itself now as she looked at him, and she couldn't help but wonder if he was aware of it.

_and what else is there you haven't told me, that still follows you?_

What put that there? She wanted to know.

Wordless, he searched her face.

Shifting slightly, she raised her head to meet his gaze, and searched his expression for a moment.

His heart began to beat harder under her stare until he felt it would beat so loud the sound of it would reverberate in the space around them, threatening to swallow them.

She had noticed him shaking and he wished she hadn't. As if he hadn't appeared weak enough already. But this was his penance, and if it earned him her trust he would have thrown himself off the top of a Quidditch hoop and through the eye of a gnome's needle if she demanded it.

That she trusted him enough to have him so near, to speak to him without malice or irony was victory enough, and he was grateful. He wanted to kiss her more than anything, to show her how he felt, how he still wanted her, though he didn't deserve her.

But I'm greedy, and I'll take this, he thought, relishing the sensation of their physical closeness. If it's the only thing I'll ever get.

His mind was full of the thought, the desire, and though he made a valiant effort to tear himself from it and focus on the present matter, he couldn't keep his eyes from straying to her lips and trying to remember what it felt like to have them pressed against his, but this time he wanted it with her consent. He wanted to kiss her and know that she wanted it too and have it returned genuinely, not out of fear.
She shifted on her feet and he snapped himself from his thought. She stared at him unabashedly, probing his eyes and face as if he were a specimen under a microscope. He tried to return the stare and held it, more nervous than he remembered being in a long, long time.

There could be no doubt of his sincerity. She wondered if she would ever regret this.

*Am I making a mistake?*

*Probably.*

If only she still had her Time Turner. At least then she could breathe easier knowing that if this all ended badly she could still change it all and save herself.

"Did that kiss really leave such an impression on you?" she asked, fiddling with the clasp of his robes. "I would have thought my blackmail would have been more worth notice."

"It was impressive," he admitted. "but paired with that kiss, it only made me realize I wanted to be closer to you, rather than farther away."

"And here you are," she said.

"Here I am." His eyes fell to her lips. She noticed, and faltered.

He stepped closer, closer. He lowered his hand from the side of her head to trace her bottom lip, dragging over the velvet skin. Hermione hardly dared breathe. Her eyes threatened to close. His breathing was rushed. He bowed his head, almost touching his forehead to hers. He ached with want.

"I want to kiss you again, Granger."

The prettiest blush spread over her cheeks, like a watercolor stain on porcelain. He traced over her bottom lip again, and her knees threatened to buckle.

She remembered how it had felt to have Viktor Krum kiss her in the privacy of the empty library when everyone else had been dancing at the Yule Ball. She remembered kissing Cormac after Slughorn's party, the thrill of knowing anyone might have seen them. Ron's surprise kiss. None of them had felt like this, and she hadn't even kissed Malfoy yet.

*You're really doing this?*

Hermione had already made up her mind. *Shut up.*

This was too fast. The events of the previous months, starting from the beginning of term, had snowballed and waited for just the right moment to roll down and collide into her.

Had it really been mounting up all along? Hermione was dazed at the thought.

When they'd gathered in that classroom the day before with everyone else she had seen him standing protectively at Pansy's side though he was the one under scrutiny, and it had shifted something inside her. That wasn't the only thing, either—she remembered him on his hospital bed, lying there as peaceful as could be, how he had asked her to visit him, his kneeling form at her feet, him handing back her wand and asking her if she was okay. The events of the day before, when he had put himself in danger in order to help her. The words he had spoken before she had fled. It had all affected her from the beginning and she'd never even noticed.
When it all hit her, Hermione would have liked nothing more than to sit down, but Malfoy was still there, still changed, still real, still so close she could feel every exhalation.

"Only if you allow me to," he continued, unaware of her distress. "I haven't forgotten the unfairness of the first kiss."

"You already apologized for that, and I forgave you," she reminded him gently. "I'd be lying if since then I hadn't thought about how it might feel now that things are different."

He blinked, licked his lips. "Really?"

Unable to speak, heart beating in her throat, she nodded slowly.

*I've been turned into a fool by his stare. Oh, Gods.*

"Hermione," he said her name softly, and she jumped.

"Yes?" she'd begun to shake from anticipation.

"Hermione." He said it again, like a child learning a new, important word, relishing the feel of it on his tongue, the sense that one's vocabulary has grown. He whispered it like an incantation, and her heart constricted. As if they were listening, the very walls of the castle seemed to close in on them. The fire itself quieted the sounds of its flickering, as if it didn't want to miss a word.

She'd never heard her name before. Not the way he said it, like it wielded enough power to level a field of trees if one didn't say it properly. Coming from him, it sounded like the stillness of the air before a sudden, heavy rain. It felt like the first touch of sun after a long night. It smelled like his robes, the tang of green apples on his breath. As she watched, his lips formed around it carefully, shaping it into something she'd never known it could be, like the first time something is named. It gave her an odd sense of power.

His hands wound their way to cover hers, still bunched on the part in his robes.

"Will you let me kiss you?"

She paused, and in that pause a million different outcomes sprang up in her mind, both bad and good.

*What are we doing? What am I doing?*

If they let this continue, what would happen in the end? Would she tell Harry and Ron? How would they hide this from everyone?

*Is this really what I feel? Or was this born from pity?*

She could not lie to herself or try to sabotage this when it had hardly begun. She was attracted to him, and wanted this as much as he did, though it made her feel like she was out of her mind to admit it.

*I am. I have to be, to be doing this.*

Perhaps she'd been thrown into an alternate universe. Perhaps this was all some elaborate hoax, but to have dragged on for so long, she didn't dare believe it.

The unthinkable had happened. If someone had told her years ago that this would happen, she would have bet all her magic on the outcome that it didn't.
But you like him, don't you?

And that was the only question that mattered currently. As an overthinker, it was in her nature to think and think and think about things until she had answers and plans. For now, strangely, she was compelled to do the opposite. There were too many ways this could go and for once, she wanted to be swept along in it, not wary of every step that came next (though she knew she would be anyway).

"Yes," she breathed at last, and the walls slid away like sand.

His hands moved, one to cup the back of her head, the other, to rest on the small of her back. Keeping his eyes fixed on hers, he leaned down, and came even closer until his head was just under her chin and his lips were inches from her throat. Hermione felt his hair graze her skin, his warm breath brushing against her, and her heartbeat quickened.

At once he came closer, and then his lips were on her throat, pressing softly. The hand on the back of her head firmed its grip, threading its fingers through her thick hair once more. Hermione's eyes closed, she tensed, but let him continue. Her hands loosened for a fraction of a second in shock, sliding down his robes to his waist before her grip readjusted itself and she clutched the fabric more tightly, her knuckles growing white.

"Are you afraid?" he whispered into her throat. The rush of hot breath against her skin...Hermione shuddered again, blushing, her head lolling back.

Her voice was a whisper. "No."

He bent his neck further, and slowly, so she had time to pull away if she chose, let go of her head and caught her hands instead, gently prying them from his robes and weaving his fingers between hers on each hand and then pressed them to the wall on either side of her head. In doing so his body came within an inch of hers-Hermione let out a sharp breath but said nothing. Moving carefully, so she wouldn't be startled, he moved to a different spot on her throat and pressed a gentle kiss there, and moved on, repeating the action until he had left a stripe of kisses along the front and sides of her neck. All the while she remained still as stone, breathing shallowly, only moving to tilt her head back ever so slightly.

If seen at from the wrong angle, and by a stranger's eye it would have appeared that he was a feeding vampire. The thought occurred to Hermione and she swallowed her laugh; he felt her shudder against him and paused briefly, but after a moment, she turned her head to expose more of her neck, a little shyly, and he acknowledged her invitation with his lips.

She dared not open her eyes, and trembled at every touch. She could feel his every breath on her skin, his hair brushed against her jaw; she struggled to contain her breathing, and failed. She was sure he could feel her heart pounding wildly, close as he was.

When he pulled back her eyes were still closed. He straightened his spine and pressed a final kiss to her forehead, and after a moment they opened. She regarded him carefully, with dazed eyes, and didn't say a word. He understood the question in her eyes.

"For the bruises I left you," he explained quietly. She blushed again; her palms had gone moist against his. He let her go slowly and she brought her arms back to herself, never taking her eyes from his.

They stood in silence for a moment, neither knowing what to say. Hermione touched her neck, in silent amazement, still feeling his kisses on her skin.
"What now?" she asked. He was smiling.

"Will you say my name?"

She blinked. "What?"

Malfoy stroked her cheek, leaned in once more to nuzzle slowly at her jaw, his lips brushing against her skin, so warm, so gentle, his breath fluttering the strands of hair there, and she shivered again. "I am asking you to say my name."

Hermione hesitated. This, she realized, was the game changer. Not the confession of admiration, not the kiss, but the exchange of names. They could have kissed a hundred times and things would be likely to stay the same, as Malfoy and Granger. Schoolmates. Enemies. Strangers.

The kisses he'd given her were more intimate than a regular snog session, she decided. And somehow not only had she trusted him to come so near but she had allowed him to do it, and to continue, to one final time apologize for the worst times he'd ever hurt her. The uttering of her name—the act was half done, if she followed suit then they wouldn't be Granger and Malfoy but Hermione and Draco, and that sounded much more serious. What would it make them?

He had bent to her neck again, angling his head to kiss her there again and again, almost reverently. She felt each kiss and gripped his shoulders, head spinning, wondering if she had the courage to speak out loud, or even manage to keep standing.

"Name me," he said between kisses. "Call me by my name, Hermione. Let me hear what it sounds like through your voice."

Oh.

"Draco," she whispered, and he paused. It felt like walking for the first time. His hands came up to hold her face. She pulled him from her throat and made him look at her.

"Draco." Saying his name made her feel like she was in an open field, armed with limitless energy, free to run wherever and for however long she wanted. Like the air before a lightning strike. It was like remembering the name of a loved book long forgotten, like the first taste of hot chocolate after a fierce winter snow. It felt like falling off a cliff backwards into roaring waters.

His arms wrapped around her. She pressed against him and finally dared to hold his cheek with her palm, tangle it through his hair, brush her fingertips over his lips. His eyes weren't ice. They were the color of summer rain, the image of a churning ocean. They swallowed her with one look, and if she said his name one more time she would drown.

"Draco."

He smiled, and when he pressed his lips onto hers, the gentleness was shoved aside for a raw hunger that consumed them both.

Hermione's hands had turned restless; they grabbed at his hair, held his face, clutched at his shoulders. Her hands latched onto his tie and tried wrestling it away from his throat, ultimately failing their task because she was otherwise preoccupied. Trapped between him and the wall was a delicious feeling—with nowhere to go and nowhere to fall she enjoyed the insistent pressure of his lips crushing against hers, the heat of him overwhelming her.

His hands, too, were not shy to roam. They tangled in her hair just as hers had done in his, one cupped her head and the other slid down her spine to press her firmly against him, hungry, hungrier
for contact. She was as fierce as him in her want and it was pure elation and relief to feel that she wanted him, too, that she had finally moved past her fear of him, and that he had finally earned her total trust.

They were both panting in the wake of the kiss. She was flushed, lips swollen, tousled and beautiful. He assumed he must look a mess in comparison.

They looked at each other, their eyes glinting. Draco wanted nothing more than to back her up against the wall again and continue snogging her properly but the coin was flashing hot in his pocket and it had been since he had begun to kiss her, and was on the verge of burning a hole into his thigh. He was consoled by the look in her eye, that she likely wanted to continue, too.

Abruptly, her smile died. She ran her hands through her hair, and he watched it fall heavily across her shoulders, remembering how it had felt in his hand.

"What now?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said honestly. His lips were still warm. He was still struggling to believe what had just happened. "I suppose we're in for it, now."

She laughed quietly. "That must've been the most impulsive thing I've ever done."

"Do you regret it?" he asked seriously, dread tingeing his confidence.

"No."

He fought to contain his relief.

She looked at him and smiled, a little embarrassed at the state she had left him in, and muttered an *Accio*. A second later she had a fresh Slytherin tie in her hand. He stared at it curiously.

"It's yours," she said, handing it to him. "You forgot it last time you were here."

Draco took off his tie and switched it with the fresh one. "Thank you."

She walked him to the door. "I won't tell anyone if you don't."

Now it was his turn to laugh. He passed a hand through his hair to try to unruffle it.

"We've got ourselves into a mess," he said, reaching up to brush a lock of hair away from her forehead.

Hermione gave a grim smile. "We were already in one."

Draco leaned in, pressed a kiss to her cheek.

"Thank you."

She looked at him curiously. "What for?"

"For this," he kissed her on the lips; a lingering, soft pressure against hers, and had to force himself to pull away. "And for all your help. Whatever happens, I want you to know I am in your debt."

She frowned, but before she could reply he opened the door and stepped outside.

"Goodnight, Hermione," he whispered in case anyone was lurking nearby.
"Goodnight," he heard her say, and then the door shut.

When he was a safe enough distance away he ducked into an alcove and pulled out his wand and the Galleon from his pocket, his spirits already fading fast. It had got much darker outside since he had stepped into Granger's room. How odd that felt to say.

What did Fenrir have to say now?

When he had been talking to Granger—Hermione, he had sent him a message to expect a letter from his father promptly. The news was a little worrisome but nothing to warrant more messages so quickly.

"Lumos," he said, and shined the light on the gold coin.

_Opened it yet? Fenrir's message said. Are you ready?

Uncertainty bloomed inside him, and without hesitation he stashed the coin and his wand back into his pocket and all but ran to his dormitory, ignoring everyone along the way until he was safe between the curtains of his four-poster and clutching the letter in his hand that had revealed itself on his bed, invisible and waiting for its recipient's touch to show its contents.

As Fenrir had said, it was from his father. Draco tore it open.

_The Dark Lord has decided he has waited long enough to hear from you. Fenrir has informed us you have opened a pathway into the school. If you do not act by nightfall tomorrow and complete your mission he will storm the castle himself and execute us all for gross incompetence._

_Do not fail._

Draco's hands had gone numb. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead. The letter dropped from his hands and withered into dust on his bed, and the snake on his arm opened its mouth wide and constricted around his arm.
Too wound up from the events of only one hour past, Hermione decided she would sneak into the Gryffindor dorms, because she was sure she would not be able to sleep, and did not feel like sleeping in an empty room anyhow. After Malfoy had left, she stood in the center of her bedroom, fingertips pressed against her lips, still a little dazed from bewilderment and an odd sort of buoyancy that she unsuccessfully tried to ignore.

Her neck was still warm and flushed from his attentions to it; she shuddered to remember the feel of his lips grazing against hers, and sidestepping the memory, fled to collect a change of clothes before she had to go splash herself with some cold water.

She had encountered no problems until she reached the Fat Lady's portrait and found that she was not there. She had waited there for ten minutes, not too annoyed, thankfully, as her mind was too preoccupied with something else. When she heard the clink of a bottle and the sound of a very heavyset person lowering themself into a chair, she stood, and whispered the password.

There was a short scream.

The Fat Lady staggered backwards and sank into her chair, her hand pressed over her heart.

"Who goes there?" the Fat Lady cried, her eyes wide and darting around.

Hermione revealed herself, smiling apologetically.

"Sorry," she said. "It's only me."

"And what," she said, still trying to catch her breath, "are you doing, still up so late? Were you planning on scaring me half to death?"

"Of course not," Hermione replied. "I had trouble sleeping—I thought maybe I could sleep here instead."

"Of course, of course," the Fat Lady said, sighing. "Get inside, child, and sleep. It doesn't do to have a proper young lady out here in the dark, you know. The things some of you students get up to at this time of night..." she shook her head as she poured herself another glass of wine.

Hermione had to suppress a smile at that. The portrait swung open to reveal the common room, halfway to pitch black except for the dying fire in the hearth, which sprang back to life at once, like a slumping soldier correcting their posture at the approach of a general.

"Goodnight, my dear," she heard the Fat Lady say as the portrait began to close over the entrance.

"Goodnight," she whispered as she climbed inside.

Upon entering she realized just how tired she was, and her eye fell upon the invitingly squishy armchairs and sofas around the fire, the plumped pillows littered about the space.

She took one step toward them, and then changed her mind. What would everyone think, when they came downstairs in the morning to find her there instead of in her dorm? It was a silly, paranoid thought, but she was afraid that they would immediately know what she had done, that they would
sense her having done the unthinkable.

Resisting the urge to sneak into the boys' dormitory to give Harry and Ron a good fright, she crept up the steps to the girl's dormitory silently, up the narrow and winding staircase, past the small landings that led to the doors that guarded the bedrooms of the older girls. When she was almost to the top, she reached the dorm she had once shared with Ginny and Parvati Patil. Both their curtains were drawn around their beds. Hermione was glad they were asleep. Ginny had the habit of staying up very late, either to read or write, among other things. Hermione knew that if Ginny had been awake on this particular occasion, she would have demanded to know why Hermione was still up and why she had come so late without letting her know.

Granted, she would still face those questions in the morning, but at least she would have time to prepare.

Hermione sat on the side of her bed and carefully took off her shoes, setting them down in a way that would make no noise. She drew the curtains around her bed, changed into her pyjamas and gathered her hair into a braid, hard as that was through her curls, her teeth and skin care routine had already been taken care of before she had left her own dorm. With nothing left to do, she sat in the center of her bed with her hands fiddling at the worn ends of her bottoms, almost wishing Ginny had sensed her arrival after all.

Wake up, she thought, glancing in Ginny's direction. I've just kissed Malfoy and I don't know what to do next.

If only she could tell anyone. Not that she wanted to, as she preferred to keep personal matter to herself, but it would be nice to have someone know and understand the situation enough that she could get another perspective into it, and some advice would most certainly would not be frowned upon.

She laughed quietly to herself and leaned backwards until her head met her pillow. How upside down everything had become. She adjusted into her favorite sleeping position, and fell asleep almost instantly.

"Another biscuit?"

Minerva began to shake her head, but paused, and reached out anyway to the tray on Albus's desk, grabbing the closest biscuit and bringing it down to her lap, where instead of eating it, her hands worried it between her thumbs, the crumbs falling into her lap.

Albus sat reclined in his chair, his long beard falling over his front like a white waterfall, his withered hand lying motionless on the desk, the other writing on a piece of parchment.

By now everyone in the castle had gone to bed except for them, and a certain Slytherin. Albus had asked Minerva to visit him after dinner, and she had arrived, punctual as always, already in her bedclothes covered by her oldest set of robes, a heavy shawl about her shoulders. Her hair, always pulled back into an austere bun, was let down and braided into one thick coil that trailed down her back.

It was not unusual for the two to meet in such informal conditions. It was a sort of ritual they had adopted and held for many years, to meet after the school day was done and confer, or sit in silence and allow the pressures from all around fall from their shoulders for an hour or two.

This time, however, was different.
A strange sense of foreboding had penetrated the office before Minerva had even arrived. Albus was warm as always, but quiet, and odder still, restless.

Minerva let out a sigh and tapped her wand onto her lap to vanish the crumbs from her unfinished biscuit.

"You're brooding again, Albus," she said in a warning tone.

He had finished writing his note by then, and sealed it with wax.

"I'm afraid there isn't much time left."

"Regarding Draco Malfoy?" she asked, and Albus nodded.

"How are you certain?"

"The term will end soon. They are likely pressuring him to act as soon as possible. I would not be surprised if he acts before the end of the week."

Minerva shifted in her chair. "We still have no clue if he will manage to do it."

Albus took off his spectacles and rubbed at his eyes, sighing. "He must, or they will kill him and his family. They will not accept anything less. I have asked Severus to do it if Draco cannot, but that, too, will put him in great peril."

"Is that so bad?" she asked plainly. "Considering the alternative?"

"I am already dying, Minerva," he said quietly, and her features shifted to an expression of helplessness and frustration. "It may not look it, but I am in great pain."

"Then look for better Healers," she said quickly, angrily. "I will help you."

"I have already tried," he said. "Severus is the only one who has managed to do anything. He has helped me steal an extra handful of months to live. Were it not for him, I would have died last year." He raised his withered hand, inspecting it from multiple angles. "He managed to contain the curse to this arm, but the curse is relentless, and is spreading to the rest of my body. I will not let it devour me."

"Amputation would not have stopped it completely?" she asked, also staring at his arm.

"Alas, not all of the curse was contained into this arm. "Severus did what he could, but by then the curse had hidden itself away and attached itself somewhere else. It is only a matter of time before it reaches my heart or lungs, whichever it decides to attack first."

"What if Malfoy cannot do it?" she asked. "What happens then?"

"Then we must find another solution, and quickly."

Minerva shook her head, looking towards the wall. Albus looked at her, a sad smile on his lips.

"I have lived long enough," he said softly. "I would rather end my life soon than have his cut too early. I will not see another student of mine lost to those forces."

Minerva said nothing for a moment, but finally relented to her most pressing thoughts.

"You understand my selfishness," she began, "in trying to find a way around this. I don't want to
lose you."

Albus's eyes shined behind his spectacles. "I do. I'm quite flattered, actually."

"Don't you go giving yourself airs," she said, smiling a little, though her eyes were wet, too.

"I don't think I have ever had as good a friend as you, Minerva," he said. "Most people tire of me rather quickly. I don't blame them."

"It's their loss," she said. "Though sometimes you do get a little too cryptic. It wears a little thin, at times, but I know you do it for a reason."

Albus chuckled. "Do you remember your first year here as a Professor? I was convinced you hated me."

Minerva laughed at the memory. Despite her usually stern expression, she had a warm, lovely laugh.

"You were—and still are—the strangest wizard I've ever met. I thought you were making fun of me every time you spoke to me. I felt you were too young for the position."

"Oh, I could never make fun of you," he said. "I'm glad we got to know each other very well throughout our years here. I'm afraid Severus would never humor me for tea and biscuits at this time of night."

Minerva suppressed a smile at that. "I am glad, too. It has been an honor to work alongside you. I would not trade these years for anything."

"I'm relieved to hear that," Albus said. "I seem to remember you threatening me with your resignation once or twice."

"Well I never said it was easy."

"I don't think you would have stayed had it been easy."

"I don't think so either."

"And I don't think I would rather have anyone else take my place when I am gone."

Minerva gave him a long stare. "Don't tease me, Albus."

"I'm afraid we have no time left for jests. I cannot walk calmly into what happens next without knowing that I leave my students and my school in the hands of someone I trust completely and have every faith in."

"I'll do it," she said, and frowned, shaking her head. "I only wish the circumstances were different."

"As do I," he agreed. "But we are rarely given the luxury of choosing how things play out." He paused. "Watch after Harry. The coming times will not be easy for anyone, least of all him. He must complete my mission when I am gone."

"I still think it's too dangerous," she said, "but I promise."

Albus nodded and his eyes closed briefly.

"If I could stretch your kindness a little more," he added, "I need you to promise me you will protect Malfoy as well. He will need every kindness we can give him. We must remember he is not who he
used to be, and is acting on love for his family."

Minerva hesitated, but only for a fraction of a second. Her bent brow suggested she had questions she still wanted to ask. "I promise."

Albus picked up a piece of parchment off his desk. "An hour before you arrived I received this letter from Hermione Granger. She wrote to say that Draco Malfoy is completely changed from whom he was last year. She says he has proved himself to be trustworthy and regretful, and ashamed of his past behavior, to the point that he has asked for her forgiveness and that she has given it, but only after she was sure of his character. She also says that he has confirmed he is a Death Eater, and that he is under threat by Voldemort, that he has confessed his wish to leave Voldemort's grasp, but does not know how to ask for help."

Minerva's frown deepened. "Why did he not write it himself?"

"Probably he thought I would not believe it, but she says he does not know about the letter."

Minerva sat back in her chair. "Well. I have seen it all now."

"I confess it relieves some of my worries," Albus said, running a hand through the ends of his beard. "I have been waiting for him to ask for help—I feared he would be too proud to do it. Even if he admitted it only to her, that is enough for me to know we will not be dragging him into something he does not want."

"You mean we will have to take him with us."

"It is the only way to prevent his murder."

"And Lucius and Narcissa?"

"Our main priority is Draco. If we take him, even with him willing, they will believe he is our hostage or prisoner, or maybe even that one of us has killed him. We must rely on that. As long as I am dead it will buy us time and he and his parents will be safe. We may approach Lucius and Narcissa later, at the earliest opportunity."

"Reformed or not, he will be a target amongst our own," she said, raising a brow. "I hardly believe the rest of the Order will be willing to accept him, especially after...that."

"It can't be prevented, but I have prepared for that. I trust in you to make them reconsider hostility, but ultimately it lies on Draco himself to push past old prejudices, if he has not completely conquered them, and prove he is worth our effort. Now that you have heard Hermione Granger's account, I hope you will be able to vouch for him with less trouble."

"Would it not have been simpler to speak to Malfoy himself and tell him you are aware of what he must do?"

"It would, but I want no chance of that secret being discoverable to anyone undesirable. If we fail to take him, and if Voldemort looks into his mind and sees that he has spoken to me, he is as good as dead."

"Promise me, Minerva," he said, a little more urgently after a bleak pause. "Promise me you will not let him fall."

"There's so much I can promise," she said by way of answer. "I cannot be his mother. He has one already, and look what she has put him through."
"Let us not forget that his father had a role in this," Albus said. "And I never imagined to ask you to be a parental figure. I only ask that you not blame him for my death. Please remember that I planned this, and that I would rather have him saved than take up more time than I have been allowed."

"You see Grindelwald when you look at him, don't you?" Minerva asked, only daring to ask the question because she knew, that as her closest friend, Albus had never lied to her.

Albus's bright blue eyes were misty. He didn't look away or even reply, but nodded, the barest inclination of his head.

"I see a boy," he said. "A lost boy whose friends and family failed him. I stood by and let Gellert become a threat. I did not intercede when Tom Riddle was my student and I suspected him. I saw what they became. I knew there was a risk. I did not do enough."

"You could not have prevented everything," Minerva said sternly.

"I will take my chances and prevent anything I may," he said, and stood from his seat.

Minerva stood too, and he approached her.

"I am forever grateful to have known you and have had the honor of working with you," Albus said. "I am indebted to you, in this life, and what may come after."

"Don't talk nonsense," she said. "You owe me nothing."

She stepped closer and they embraced.

She patted his back. There were tears in her eyes.

"I am glad I met you too," she said. "I will watch over them. I promise."

"Thank you." He drew back and they separated. "It gives me great comfort now, in spite of what's coming, to know there is someone here who I trust completely."

Minerva bent her head, her eyes turning uncharacteristically red.

"I will greatly miss your company," he added quietly.

"And I yours."

There being nothing left to say, Minerva nodded one last time and gave her friend the best smile she was currently capable of giving, and then left the room quickly, struggling to stop the heedless tears that had begun to leak from her eyes. Albus was weeping, too, but made no effort to hide it. He sat back in his chair and with his good arm propped the cursed one onto the desk. Fawkes was asleep on his perch, and had been since Minerva had come in. He opened the pocket watch lying on the table and took the time. It was already dawn. The sun would rise soon, and he'd had no sleep whatsoever, but felt no exhaustion yet.

He had a brief urge to go visit Hagrid, but stopped himself. His heart was heavy enough and his arm ached from the chill. Now and then he'd feel sharp stabs of pain along his chest—his breath would catch involuntarily but a moment later it was gone, but still spreading inside him, latching onto its next target. It was uncomfortable to breathe, sometimes, but there was little could be done. Even Severus had admitted defeat to the curse, taking it as a personal fault though he hid it behind impatience.
It would be best to leave as soon as possible. He should try and sleep now, even if he wasn’t tired.

He would have to go get Harry after lunch. It wouldn’t do for him to miss too many of his classes.

For now, though, he had another letter to write.

The hour was early, the air cold. There was no wind, just an eerie stillness in the night that did nothing to calm him. Above, the stars and moon were hidden by a thick wave of clouds, muddling their light so that the school grounds below were a patchwork of shadows and branches that stuck out above the line of trees.

He had taken off his robes because he was sweating despite the cold. It lay in a rumpled heap beside him on the ground, and his arms were around himself, holding tight to suppress the shaking that had come over him.

The warmth, the feverish memory of Granger—Hermione's kisses were regrettably flung far from his thoughts. In the face of the horror and anticipation of what he had to do, he tried to bring up the memories, the physical sensation of her pressed against him, her hands and lips scorching him from the inside out, the erection he'd hidden as he'd left. The distraction was only fleeting.

*You could go back and tell her what happened. Ask her for help.*

He wanted to. But she was probably asleep by now, and he didn't know if he could bring himself to tell her what he had to do so soon after they had kissed.

*She'll know soon enough, anyway.*

And she would hate him again, once she found out the true nature of his task. She would become ashamed and regretful of the kiss, and of having forgiven him, and everything would come back to normal, and it was something he would have to live with.

They had run out of time.

His master had sent an order.

He had to obey.

His thoughts ran wildly for another solution. Every trail led back to her, and desperate, frustrated, he stepped up and onto the ledge, one hand plastered to the column beside him for balance.

*A coward's choice,* the voice said.

*I can't take this anymore.*

The wind began to pick up. It blew his hair in disarray.

Suicide was never ideal. He had never thought he would have come to this.

*But it's all too much.*

He was so high up Hagrid's hut looked like a black little dot; the trees may as well have been scribbles on parchment. His legs shook, his head pounded.

No more sleepless nights. No more blistering headaches. No more guilt over what he had done. Just darkness.
He stepped back off, tears burning at his eyes.

*You don't deserve peace*, the voice hissed to him. *Killer, liar, coward. You're a disgrace to your family.*

His family...he couldn't leave them behind. No matter what they had done in the past, no how they had endangered him in the past, he still felt a sense of duty towards them. They had raised him; they had spoiled him and loved him despite their faults. He owed them this, at least.

_Disgrace, disgrace, disgrace._

Another, calmer, gentler voice spoke up:

*Go to her. Tell her the truth.*

He couldn't think of anything else. He would have to run back.

He picked his robes off the ground and hurried back inside.

When he got to her door he remained invisible, just so no one could catch him off guard in case he didn't see them first. He knocked.

There was no answer.

He looked around quickly, then knocked again, a little louder.

No answer.

His heart pounded. He felt he might be ill.

He knocked again, three sharp raps against the door that echoed through the darkness. She would be cross to be woken up at this hour, but this was something that could not wait. He was itching with the desire to kiss her again, to touch her, to explore more than they had only just done, but that was no longer viable with what was coming next. She deserved to know the full story. He should have told her from the start. Now he would pay for it.

When she failed to appear at the door, he gave one last knock, loud enough to echo down the corridor. He didn't care if he was caught. He had to speak to her.

Nothing.

Draco let out an impatient sigh. She was either deeply asleep, or gone. He had heard Ginny Weasley mention once during class that Granger sometimes slept over in the Gryffindor dorms. That must be the case.

He swore under his breath. What now?

"Draco."

He whirled around, heart in his throat, expecting to see her. He was prepared to laugh in relief.

Instead it was Snape, blended into the darkness but for the pallor of his face, the eerie dead glint of his eyes.

"How did you know?"
"You appear to be her most frequent visitor. Reveal yourself."

Draco did so, and faced his Head of House, expecting another reprimand.

"She left an hour ago."

Draco frowned. "How do you know that?"

"I saw her leave, just after you did." Snape did not blink, there was no malice or glee in his voice. If he knew or suspected what they had been doing, he didn't allude to, thankfully.

"I know they sent you a message. What did they tell you?" Snape asked.

Draco's eyes were dry to the point that blinking was uncomfortable. He kept his voice as quiet as he could. "I've got to do it today, or He'll deliver his promise."

"What time will you do it?"

"I don't know."

"How will you do it?"

"I can bring them in through the Vanishing Cabinet. I fixed it."

"What do you need?"

"Nothing," Draco said. "I've got to do it on my own or he'll punish me."

"I took the Vow for your mother," Snape reminded him. "I will assist in any way I can. That means that if you cannot do the deed, I will do it for you."

"No," Draco said. "He said I have to do it. No one else. When He gave me the order, He said I have to prove I'm useful. If you or anyone else does it, He'll murder my parents."

Snape leaned back. "I see." He looked at Draco carefully. "You are ready, then."

Draco shook his head. "I have to be."

A mouse running across the floor caught their attention. Draco almost jumped. Snape watched it carefully, and muttered an identifying spell to make sure they were not being spied on, but the mouse ran on, ignorant to their situation.

"Go," he told Draco. "Sleep, if you can. Whatever you need to tell her, it can wait."

No, it can't.

But there was nothing to be done. There was no way he could hunt her down, much less in the Gryffindor quarters.

Snape was already halfway down the corridor, almost invisible in the dark. Draco cast one last look at Hermione's door, as if at that very moment she would appear there behind it, but it didn't happen, and after another slight hesitation, he left.
"Draco?"

Slughorn looked expectantly to Malfoy's usual seat. It was empty. Hermione glanced at it and looked back to the front of the room, fighting the stab of worry and guilt that ran through her.

Ron shifted in his seat beside her, yawning widely. Hermione fiddled with her quill, blinked, and let her eyes remain closed for a second longer than necessary. They felt dry. The night before she had dreamt of nothing but woke full of wonder at what she had done. She had met Ron, Harry and Ginny and they had met with Pansy for breakfast. They had talked and laughed and Hermione had joined in for fear of them suspecting something was amiss. Her eyes had frequently strayed to the doors, her stomach doing a jump every time they opened and she anticipated making eye contact with Draco Malfoy, whom she had snogged only a handful of hours ago.

She felt herself begin to turn red and desperately tried to think of something else to make it go away. Slughorn had begun his lecture and was pacing slowly around the front of the room, gesturing to the cauldrons lined up around him. Snippets of the lecture broke through the haze, and she latched onto them, realizing he had just asked a question.

"…would produce the desired effect?"

Hermione's hand was already up in the air.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Wormwood," she said confidently.

Slughorn looked taken aback, but smiled in bemusement. "Not quite, Ms. Granger—wormwood would produce an entirely different effect altogether. Perhaps someone else would like to try?"

Hermione went red. Ron turned to stare at her, his eyes wide.

'Are you okay?' he whispered.

Hermione nodded quickly and looked away, her heart pounding.

"That's what you get for not paying attention. The ONE time you drift off, and you make yourself look like a fool in front of everyone."

Pansy had given Slughorn the correct answer in the meantime, and once Slughorn had turned away from the class she glanced at Hermione and sent her a worried look, nodding her head upwards, as if to ask, 'What's the matter?'

Hermione shook her head. For the rest of the lesson she managed to keep her thoughts in the present and made sure that all the answers she gave were correct.

As everyone was filling out of the dungeons, Harry nudged her with his elbow.

"Are you alright?"

Hermione sighed. "I'm fine. I—I just didn't sleep well last night."

He nodded, and when Ron joined them, he leaned in close. "I've got to go with Dumbledore. He
won't say where but I reckon we won't get back until after dinner." He looked intently at them both. "I've got a bad feeling about tonight."

"Me, too," Hermione confessed. It was the first thing she had felt upon waking.

"Blimey," Ron said slowly. "I thought it was just me. My stomach's been making knots since this morning."

"What do we do?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know," Harry said. "I don't think Dumbledore will want to stay instead. He said we've got to go today, but..." He fumbled at his pockets, grasping for something within their depths, as if he'd forgotten which pocket he had put it in. At last he pulled it out and held it out to the two of them, just as Pansy approached them.

"Hello—argh," she stumbled as they pulled her towards them and into an alcove. The corridor was empty, at least, but they would take no risks.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Not so loud," Ron said warningly, and her brow bent in confusion.

"What is it?" she whispered. "Something's happening, isn't there?"

"Not yet," Hermione told her. "But we feel like something's going to happen tonight."

Harry held out the bottle again at that moment, so everybody missed Pansy's face turn ashen. Her expression, however, betrayed nothing.

"Is that-?" Ron asked, looking at Harry's hand.

"Yeah," Harry said. He thrust it out toward them. They edged back nervously. "Take it."

"Harry, you can't," Hermione said. "If you don't know where you're going you're better off with it than us."

"I'll be with Dumbledore," he reminded them. "We can manage." He paused, as if realizing something. "You'll be needing the map, too." He withdrew it from his robes and set it down on the table.

"That's hardly enough Felix Felicis for one gulp, let alone two people," Pansy said, looking doubtfully at the bottle.

"Four," Harry said. "I want you to take it, too. And Ginny."

Even as guilt tore at her, Pansy couldn't help how touched she felt at the gesture.

"Potter," she said, weakly, holding back tears, "you're going to make me cry in front of everyone."

"Take it," Harry urged them. "It's still enough. A small sip for each of you."

Hermione reached out and took the bottle reluctantly. The gold liquid shimmered brilliantly inside the bottle.

"And if nothing happens?" she asked.
Harry smiled. "Then you have fun."

"Sorry, I'm still lost," Pansy said. "You said you're leaving? Where? And why?"

"I'm going with Dumbledore, I don't know where," Harry replied quickly. "It's to defeat Voldemort."

Pansy's eyes widened. "Wait, you're taking him on, just like that?"

"We're just looking for old stuff of his that can make him weaker."

Pansy's eyes were still wide. Her brows lowered a fraction in confusion. "Oh…okay…"

"We can explain later," Ron said. "There's no time—look, we're all going to be late to our next class."

"Shit. I've got to get up to the sixth floor. I'll see you lot before dinner." Pansy hugged them all in one go and then dashed off, abandoning the notion of going to class for something that was more crucial. She had to speak to Draco. She set off for the dormitories, praying that he would be inside.

After Pansy had left Harry turned to them.

"I've got to go. I'll be back as soon as I can. I promise."

Ron hugged him. "Be careful, mate."

"You, too."

Hermione wrapped her arms around him tightly. "Do you have the cloak?"

"Yeah. Dumbledore said we'd need it."

They broke apart.

"Come back quick," Hermione said, trying to smile.

"I'll try."

He turned and left.

Now both Hermione and Ron could hardly pay attention during Charms. Hermione spent the entire length of it silent and twisting at the ends of her long sleeves. Ron tapped on the desk with his quill incessantly to the point she had to kick him under the table a few times when he got too loud. They took notes sporadically, although at the end of the lesson Hermione's parchment was completely filled out and Ron's brief paragraph covered less than a third of his.

When the bell rang and everyone rushed off to dinner, Hermione grabbed Ron by the arm.

"We've got to find Ginny."

They didn't need to consult the Maurader's Map, fortunately, as they found her sitting at the Gryffindor table already well into her meal.

She initially seemed resistant to their request to follow them, but seeing the grave looks on their faces, she picked up her plate and goblet, said adieu to Neville and Luna, and they exited the Great Hall. (Ron followed suit and brought a large plate of food along with him, with enough to share.)
They found Pansy waiting outside the Great Hall, and she joined them eagerly, her face pale with worry.

When the door shut behind them in the nearest empty classroom, Ginny sat down to finish her meal. The rest of them stood around anxiously without speaking to the other.

"Aren't any of you hungry?" Ginny asked. "If Harry's right and something does happen, we're all going to need our energy." She picked up a buttered roll from her plate and held up it. "Come on, we didn't bring this much to eat by ourselves. If we just sit around and worry it won't do any good."

Pansy sat down and took the roll, and Hermione was the last to sit, sharing half of Ron's steak, although nobody finished their whole meal but Ginny. They ate in relative silence, periodically talking about what had transpired in their classes that day. When they finished, they stacked up the plates and with a wave of Hermione's wand, they were all made spotless.

"Why gather here?" Ginny asked, settling into the coziest chair in the room. "Surely we could have waited with everyone else in the Great Hall."

"If something were to happen, and we still don't know that it will," Hermione began, "it's easy to get separated when everyone starts running around. We're already together so we can avoid that. And —" she pulled the tiny bottle from her safest pocket, "Harry gave us this."

Ginny sat up slowly, her eyes fixed on the golden potion.

"Tell me he drank some for himself."

"He didn't. This is all he had."

"We told him he needed it more than us," Ron said, "but he insisted. Said he'd be with Dumbledore so they'd be alright."

Ginny snorted. "Classic Harry." She scowled down at her hands in her lap. "If he doesn't get back in one piece I'll whack him with my broom."

"Why?" Ron asked, frowning.

"I don't want my boyfriend to die, don't I." Ginny froze, and looked out of the corner of her widened eyes to look at her brother. She caught his stunned expression, and burst into laughter. "I guess you would have found out one way or another. Sorry."

Ron sputtered. "Y-you and Harry?"

"Yeah. For a while now. Not that it's any of your business," she said. "We weren't going to keep it a secret forever, but he was worried you'd get angry."

"Angry? Me? To have my best friend and my sister get together?" Ron stood, looking rather lost, and turned to Pansy, who was smiling.

"Did you know?"

"No," she said, "but I can see it now. I like the two of them together."

Ron turned to Hermione.

"Did you know?"
"No," she said, catching Ginny's wink behind Ron's back. "It shouldn't surprise you, Ron. They've had a thing for each other for a while. Why do you think they spend so much time together?"

Ron gestured wildly in the air. "They both love Quidditch?"

Ginny laughed. "Among other things."

"Eugh, Ginny, don't."

Ginny stood up and embraced Ron.

"We were going to tell you at the end of term. It's not that serious, either. We like each other's company."

"I don't know how I didn't notice it before," he said, chagrined, shaking his head. "I'm going to have a word with him when he gets back."

"A nice one, I hope," Ginny replied. "Remember, with Michael Corner? You don't get to put your foot in. This is my life, not yours."

"I know," he said, a little reluctantly, and when they parted, he shook his head.

"I can't believe this. My sister? I'm gonna kick his arse."

"Do that, and I'll kick yours after," Ginny warned.

Ron started to laugh.

"Oh, Merlin," he said in between breaths. "It was so obvious."

Hermione stood and placed her hand on Ginny's arm.

"I'm glad for you and Harry," she said, and Ginny beamed.

"Me, too!" Pansy said.

"Well enough about that, anyway," Ginny said, and sat down again in her chair. "I really don't like just waiting here. How are we to know whenever something's happened if we're cooped up in here?"

"We should go somewhere else," Pansy agreed.

"No," Ron said suddenly. "Harry said to stay together. Remember what happened at the Ministry?"

Hermione and Ginny looked down at the floor. Pansy looked around curiously.

"What happened?" she asked.

Hermione hesitated before answering. "At the Ministry last year, when we went to…"

"Fight the Death Eaters," Pansy filled in.

"Right. We went in a group but things got out of control. Everyone got split up. We weren't as careful as we should have been and Harry's godfather died."

"Oh."

"Besides," Ron said, grabbing the bottle of Felix Felicis from the front desk, and staring at it
"morosely. "Slughorn says this stuff doesn't last long, even you're taking a regular size dose. This isn't
even half of one, and we're splitting it four ways. We'd be lucky if it lasted ten minutes."

"Fine," Ginny said. "We'll stay here." But she didn't sound happy.

Silence ensued. Ron began to peruse the map, watching for when Harry and Dumbledore came
back. Ginny made herself comfortable in her chair and tried to nap. Pansy sat down by a window
and seemed rather grave and lost in thought. Hermione had her schoolbag with her, and normally
would have taken any opportunity to either read or complete her assignments, but was too distracted
to do so. When she wasn't thinking about Harry she was thinking about Draco, and where he was,
and what he was doing, and if he'd had as much trouble sleeping as she the night before.

He had told her that Voldemort had forced him to do the awful things he had done so far. Would
Voldemort have him try to attack again tonight?

Her blood ran cold. She fervently hoped not. He had shown her the toll this all took on him. Once
Harry came back she would find Draco and drag him to Harry, have him confess, and they would
sort something out—if Dumbledore had read her letter by now, hopefully he would have some sort
of advice or he would help them. Draco would be furious that she had told the Headmaster but it had
been unavoidable. He would have had to find out sooner or later, and sooner was always the best
option, in her opinion. He would have to see the truth of that though she fully expected him to be
angry, but it was something they would both have to deal with when the time came to it.

Had he skipped the rest of his classes, or just the one? Or did he simply not want to see her? She
should have gone to check on him, but she couldn't imagine herself trying to break into the Slythein
quarters. Likely she would be found out before she'd even take one step inside.

"What are you going to do?" Ron was asking Pansy, who had begun to pace around the room.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't want to hide. I don't want to support them, either. If they come, and
if they see me, they'll expect me to stand aside or join in."

"But if they see you with us, you could get in trouble," Ginny said, rubbing at her neck. She had
fallen asleep and just woken.

"I know," Pansy replied. She seemed nervous. "Look, I know it's still speculation at this point, of
Voldemort attacking, but I want you lot to know I'm with you. I don't want to go back."

"Back where?" Hermione asked.

"Back home," Pansy said, turning red. "My dad will push for me to become a Death Eater. My mum
will push for me to become engaged. I couldn't visit or write to any of you and I'll have to pretend
that I'm still one of them." She looked away. "Last summer was bad enough. I can't take it."

"Stay with us," Ginny said at once. Ron nodded.

Pansy looked up in shock. "What?"

"Mum won't mind," he said. "Now that Fred, George and Percy have moved out we've got spare
room. Mum loves having people stay over. If you can tolerate the shouting and the mess, we'd be
happy to have you stay with us."

"But won't they be able to find me there?" Pansy asked. "I've run away before. They can find me
easily."
"The Order put wards all over the Burrow, since they visit all the time," Ginny said. "We haven't had an incident yet. But if you want, you could probably stay in Grimmauld Place instead. There's more people there."

"What's that?" Pansy asked.

"The Order's headquarters," Hermione explained.

"It's not as official as it sounds," Ginny said, catching Pansy's expression. "It's Sirius's old home. We've cleaned it up and made it livable. Duller than the Burrow, though. Everyone's always so grim when we meet there."

"Are you sure they'd even be okay with having me there?" Pansy asked. "My father is a Death Eater, after all."

"You're not your father," Ron said. "And we trust you. That should be enough for them, though they'll probably want to verify you're not pulling our leg."

"Oh."

Something strange happened then. A strange ripple went through the air, making them all shudder. The hairs on Hermione's arms stood at end.

"Did you feel that?" Ginny asked in a hushed voice.

"Yeah."

"What could it have been?"

"Explosion in the Potions room?"

"Ha."

They waited tensely for several seconds, but nothing happened. They began to relax again when Ginny abruptly went to the door and flung it open, standing in the frame, stiller than stone.

They all heard the faint screams.

Ron unstoppered the bottle, his face white as snow.

One by one the Death Eaters exited the cabinet, as it was too small and narrow to accommodate more. Dolohov came first, then Rodolphus, then Bellatrix, Crabbe, Goyle, and on, until a group of about twenty was assembled before him, shifting on their feet restlessly, looking in amazement or disgust at the chaos of the Room around them, wands already in hand, waiting for the plan to be announced. Draco's hands were so damp he had to consciously keep a tighter grip than normal on his wand, for fear of having it slip through.

Greyback was the last one through, struggling to push his massive frame through the limited confines of the exterior of the portal. He emerged, hunched over and crouching sideways out of the cabinet until he was free and able to stand at full height again. He looked at Draco, his coarse, wild beard flecked with droplets of rain.

"About time, pup," he said.

Draco nodded. His heart beat so hard he wondered at how it hadn't jumped out of his chest yet. They
were all staring at him, waiting. Aunt Bella was looking around the room disinterestedly, her eyes flickering to the door every few seconds, as if restraining herself from running to it.

"Dumbledore isn't here," he said, and they fell quiet. "But he soon will be. I'm going to cast the mark over the school. That should hurry him up, but we've got to wait until he's here to leave this room."

"Fuck that," Crabbe said.

"I didn't come here to just stay cooped up in this disgusting room all night!"

There was a chorus of agreement.

"If we attack them now he'll come faster," Dolohov said. "He'll come running to protect his flock."

"We'll catch them all by surprise," Bellatrix said, clapping her hands with relish.

"No," Draco said angrily. "If we attack now their people will come and try to run us off."

"They will come anyway, Draco," Bellatrix said impatiently. "Like rats around a fresh corpse." She smiled, her lips pulling back to reveal a silver tooth amongst the uneven rows of yellow. She strode up to Draco and cupped his chin with her hand, pinching his cheek with the other. "You needn't be nervous, darling. The Dark Lord had half a mind to not let any of us come after all and make you go about this alone, but your Father persuaded him to leave the plan untouched." She gave his cheek a dubiously playful, light slap. It still stung.

"Dumbledore isn't even here yet," Draco said, swallowing his fear temporarily to respond to his Aunt. "What if he doesn't come at all?"

Bellatrix withdrew from him with a sharp laugh.

"He wouldn't dare abandon his students. He'll be here soon enough, I guarantee you. But if we don't give him a reason to hurry, he won't." She shrugged her shoulders and turned away to join her husband, Rodolphus.

"We can take them," Greyback said confidently, clapping a heavy hand over Draco's shoulder. "Don't be scared, pup. We'll take care of them while you go do your task."

Draco didn't feel reassured at all. Greyback's hand was heavy and hot on his shoulder, and it made a shiver run down his back that he had to try hard to suppress.

He opened his mouth, feeling beads of sweat form at his hairline, grasping for something else to say that would hold them all there, but the hand on his shoulder tightened. Draco understood the message.

"Now," Rodolphus said loudly, catching everyone's attention. "This is the boy's first task set by the Dark Lord. He has asked us to follow his orders to ensure success."

"Aye," some of them said. The others nodded.

Rodolphus turned to Draco, a slight, insincere smile on his lips. "Any words of encouragement?"

Draco's hand clenched into a fist. They were mocking him. They were treating him like he was a child. Would they even care if he died?

If he had the bravery, he would have defied them. He would have taken his parents and gone out of their reach. He would have never joined them, and accepted the burden of a task he knew he could
"No killing," he said, looking round the room to stare at them square in the eye. A good number of the Death Eaters looked displeased at that—even Bellatrix looked at him as if he'd sprouted wings from his ears.

"Restrain them if you must," he continued, speaking with enough force and authority that they could not doubt that he, at least outwardly, was prepared and unafraid. "Stun them, lock them up in rooms, I don't care. Just get them out of your way as long as you don't kill them. The Dark Lord won't appreciate the spilling of magical blood if they might be of use to us later."

There was a low murmur of assent.

"Shall we take prisoners?"

"No. We'll aim to do this as quickly as possible. Our main focus is getting to the Headmaster."

Strange, the more he spoke the more confident he felt. That was not something he was pleased to discover. Inside, though, he still very much felt like the contents of his stomach, however meager, were about to come rushing back up.

Bellatrix stepped forward, smiling coyly.

"And the Mudbloods?" She clasped her hands together like she was about to pray. "Let me have one, Draco!"

"Never."

His mother had forbid her sister from bringing her slaves into the Malfoy Manor, but Draco had known all along just how horribly she treated them, if she even bothered to let them live so long as to serve her.

He was grasping for a reply when Rodolphus saved him the effort.

"You have too many as it is," he said to her curtly. "I forbid you from taking another plaything until you rid yourself of at least one."

"Three is not too many!" she hissed at him, baring her teeth.

Rodolphus struck her across the face. Bellatrix took it without making a sound, her head snapping to the left at the blow, but when she righted herself she was laughing silently, her silver tooth glinting wet with blood.

Draco fought hard to contain his disgust, remembering a time when he had been proud to call her his aunt.

"Let's go," he said.

Everyone set off for the door, almost as if in a race. Draco felt bile creep up his throat. He started out after them, reaching for his wand, hoping that somehow he could find a way to minimize most of the damage, but Greyback had not let him go.

"Your Father couldn't come," he said. "Not for lack of trying. Told the Dark Lord he could help you, but the Dark Lord wants him close until you've finished."

Draco frowned. Why would he want to come?
"It's better that he isn't here," Draco said, watching as the door closed behind Goyle. He turned to Greyback, who at last had let him go. "You made me a promise."

"Aye," Greyback said. "I'll hold it. But only this once. I won't steal your glory." He scratched passively at his neck. "How will you find Dumbledore?"

"I've got someone in Hogsmeade keeping an eye out for me," Draco said, fishing the Galleon from his pocket. "They'll send word when he's nearby."

"Best get to it, then."

Draco nodded. His mouth was dry.

The rain had subdued somewhat since the morning, but still fell steadily as he breached the Astronomy Tower. He wondered if Granger—Hermione had noticed the commotion yet. He had sent everyone down to the first floor, where dinner must have just been ending. The Death Eaters would find themselves amongst a heavy flow of students, and he found himself almost praying that his schoolmates would join in numbers to fight off the small squadron. He hadn't been able to see how it started, but had heard the shouts of alarm rising in volume as he ran up the steps.

He couldn't take too long. It was lucky enough that he had managed to come up here without any impediment. Coming back down might be a different story.

Pansy. I need to find her.

His alarm for her wellbeing wore off as quickly as it had begun. Pansy was in no danger. Death Eaters never attacked each other unless under order by the Dark Lord. As long as she kept hidden and didn't join the fight, he had no cause to worry.

But she had grown close to the Gryffindors, and he recalled all the times she had openly sympathized for Hermione, before he had even begun to see her as human.

She was likely down there now, in the thick of it.

By now his hair and cloak were wet through. He didn't care.

Draco thrust his wand up towards the air.

"Morsmordre."

The green light erupted from his wand and shot high into the sky before settling and hanging in the air, writhing, forming into the snake and skull. It glowed eerily, casting a sickly green glow over the roof and himself.

The Dark Lord would be happy. He was getting what he wanted, and Draco hated himself for giving in, but the image of his parents, kept as collateral in their own home, surfaced in his mind, and with one last loathing look at the mark, he turned and slipped back into the castle as the skull's huge mouth opened and closed, the snake slithering in and out, as if they were laughing at him.

"Merlin," Ron said, clutching at a stitch in his side, "we were right. I thought we'd just become really paranoid."

"At least we were prepared," Ginny said, raising her wand to shoot a hex at a tall figure that had just
ran through the intersecting corridor, but recognizing the student robes the person wore, she hastily put her wand down.

They were alone in the corridor but the sound of battle echoed all around them. They stopped running momentarily to catch their breath.

Hermione had kept her eyes peeled the whole time as they’d run, seeking Draco. He had said the Dark Lord would order him to act again, and he couldn't refuse. Was this all because of him? Had he done this?

She heard the answer all around her.

They began to run again, and when they reached the open area before the Great Hall, where the noise was thickest, they found the commotion. Already there were several bodies lying on the ground. Hermione felt her knees turn weak. At the same time, the four of them recognized the forms of the Death Eaters spread out over the space. It was so loud Hermione covered her ears, wincing.

She couldn't tell if the Felix Felicis was working yet, or if it had already faded off in the time it had taken them to run all the way down here. The textbook said that when taken, it gave a strong feeling of happiness and optimism, but she felt none of that now. Was it because of the tiny dose she'd taken?

Ginny shouted something unintelligible out of rage and raised her wand. The Death Eater closest to them fell to the floor, and the hysterical second years they had been intimidating fled immediately, fighting to go up the crowded staircase.

Another Death Eater noticed, and raised their wand, aiming for them.

"STUPEFY!" roared Ron, and the curse hit the Death Eater on the shoulder, instantly rendering them unconscious. He made to run into the fray but Hermione held him back. He looked at her curiously.

"Be careful!"

He nodded, and before Hermione could let him go he had grabbed her and brought their mouths together rather aggressively. Hermione stiffened in shock. The kiss lasted only an instant—the next he was gone and Hermione stared after him, surprised and irritated, but there was no time to reflect on it because Pansy was staring at her, her mouth slightly open. Hermione looked around to see if there had been any other witnesses. Ginny was already gone—when had she left?

Pansy looked at Hermione carefully. "Am I allowed to ask?"

Hermione sighed. "Later." She promptly pushed Pansy away and back into the corridor, which was still mostly empty.

"Hey—" Pansy frowned at her. "What're you doing?"

"You can't fight with us," Hermione told her bluntly.

At this, Pansy's expression of confusion turned to one of hurt. "And why not?"

"If one of them sees you, they'll know you've turned against them. What if they decide to kill you or punish you because of it? I don't want you to get hurt."

"I know what I've gotten myself into," Pansy said impatiently. Her eyes darted around at the action behind Hermione, who had grabbed Pansy by the shoulders. "I thought you knew that."
"What if one of them out there is your dad?"

Pansy looked back at her. "Then he'll know the truth, at least."

"Ok." Hermione hugged her. Pansy held her tightly. When they withdrew, Hermione looked intently into her eyes and asked the question she had been holding back since the commotion had begun.

"Did you know this would happen?"

Pansy hesitated.

"He told me he was being forced to," she said in a shaking voice. "I don't even know what this is all for. I swear, Hermione. V-Voldemort's got his parents hostage—if not, we would have told you, I tried to get him to but he was afraid."

"I believe you," Hermione said. "But I need to find him. Do you know where he is?"

"No," Pansy admitted. "I haven't seen him in days. I tried looking for him earlier but I couldn't find him." Her eyes were filled with tears.

Hermione nodded, already mocking up a checklist of places she had to go look for him. Ron had taken the map with him, and he had already disappeared within the mass of people.

"Don't let them see you," she said, "and be careful. I'll find you as soon as I can."

"Okay." Pansy drew up the hood of her robe and ran back towards the fight. There was an extremely loud crashing and shattering sound somewhere off in the distance. Hermione gasped as the ground shook beneath her feet. She looked up to see the Gryffindor House hourglass had been dislodged from its perch along the wall and broken into millions of shards of glass and rubies on the ground.

Everyone was still fighting—Hermione scanned the area quickly, hoping to see either Harry or Draco, but found neither. Professor Flitwick was herding another group of first years to safety—many of them were crying—and he was clearing a path for them through the mess, knocking Death Eaters out of the way with magic, defending students who had their backs turned to a would be attacker. She spied Ginny and Neville dueling with another Death Eater, who seemed to be able to take it without much trouble.

Hermione stunned him from behind. Ginny and Neville paused, breathing heavily, and saw her from the other side of the room with her wand still raised. They nodded their thanks and ran on.

Sweat ran down her temples.

You're wasting time! A voice broke through her horrified stupor. Go!

Hermione turned and ran. The corridors had become more occupied by now—students ran through them, eyes wide in panic.

"What's going on?" someone asked her as she passed.

Two Hufflepuff prefects had their hands full escorting a large group of younger years away from the battle.

"But we want to fight!" cried a small dark haired girl.

"You're too young!" Hannah Abbott told her. "They've got more advanced magic than you—how are you going to fight against a grown Death Eater?"
When she was almost to the staircase, she found McGonagall coming down from them at an alarming speed.

"Professor," Hermione said quickly. "Is Harry back yet?"

"They will be landing on the rooftop soon," McGonagall said, frowning deeply. Despite them being clamped together, her hands were shaking, which Hermione found absolutely strange and terrifying. "Albus sent word. I have already summoned the Order." She looked at Hermione curiously.

"Where are you going?"

"There's someone I have to find," Hermione said.

"I would ask you to go someplace safe," McGonagall said, "but I know that will not deter you. Be careful."

"You as well, Professor."

She squeezed Hermione's shoulder and swept on, moving faster than Hermione had ever seen her go.

When she reached the fifth floor Hermione set off for the Room of Requirement at once. Strangely, its doors had been propped open, and when she peered inside, there was nobody there. She moved on, this time to the Astronomy Tower.

So Pansy had known all along. She shouldn't have been surprised—she was close to Draco, after all. Hermione couldn't fault her for staying loyal—especially when lives had been threatened in order to keep the whole matter a secret. She would have done the same for Harry.

Loud voices caught her attention, and recognizing one of them, she ran towards the source and onto the landing. She looked down the staircase and saw a masked Death Eater engaged in duel with Lavender Brown.

Hermione began to hurry down the steps.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Lavender hissed, flinging the hex from the tip of her wand with a snap of her wrist. There was a long cut on her upper arm that had torn her robe. It was still bleeding. Her long hair had fallen out of place from the usually neat long braid she wore. Hermione could tell she was tired.

The Death Eater dodged the spell, laughing.

"Stupefy!"

The spell caught Lavender before she could move out of its way. She crumpled instantly, and the Death Eater began to walk over to her body.

Hermione halted and raised her wand.

"Repulso!"

The Death Eater was knocked off his feet by an invisible force and pushed off to the side until his front met the wall. He somehow managed to avoid hitting it with his head, however, and struggled to get up.
Hermione reached Lavender and knelt over her.

"Finite Incantatem."

Lavender's eyes opened.

"Thanks," she said. Hermione tapped her wand on Lavender's arm and watched as a wad of gauze secured itself over the cut.

The Death Eater was getting to his feet. Hermione pulled Lavender up and pushed her towards the farthest corridor.

"Go," Hermione told her. "Find the rest of the DA."

"But—"

"It'll be fine."

Lavender looked unsure, but ran off. Hermione looked at the Death Eater, whose mask had come off when he had collided with the wall, and dimly recognized him as someone she had encountered briefly during the battle at the Ministry, but she couldn't remember his name. He was blonde and had long teeth, and a grotesque scar that ran across his throat. Hermione saw it, and froze, her hand automatically reaching for her own throat, as if there were an invisible blade there.

"There's too many damn kids in this castle," he said, sneering at her. His nose was bleeding but he wiped it away and spat on the ground. "Fuck what Draco said—I'm going to kill as many of you useless little brats as I can."

Hermione felt her insides freeze.

"Obscuro!"

His eyes were covered by an eerie film of white. He let out a scream of rage.

"What've you done to me, you bitch?" He raised his wand quickly and shot a hex at her in retaliation—Hermione dove to the side. He was pointing his wand at himself, trying to get rid of the temporary blindness.

"Immobulus!" Hermione shouted, but his eyes had gone clear again and he raised a shield, deflecting it just before it reached him.

"Diffindo," he snarled, pointing towards her wand. Hermione moved it out of his crosshairs, feeling the aftershock of the hex rustle the sleeve of her robe. In the next instant she found herself flying backwards—now it was her turn to hit the wall. Her spine radiated with pain and she cried out, struggling to regain control of her breathing. She stood up quickly, and seeing him raise his wand again she turned her head, flinching when the window behind her exploded, sending shards of glass flying everywhere.

Her foot had caught on something as she tried to move away and she fell—she felt something cold and sharp scrape along her forehead. She could feel it tear at her skin, and then a searing pain afterwards. Hermione fell onto the ground, gritting her teeth to stop a juddering gasp.

She could hear the Death Eater coming closer. Her forehead had begun to bleed. She held her hand to it and struggled to rise. Where had her wand gone? She looked around in a panic, and saw it nearby, lying amidst a sea of glass. She reached for it.
There was a loud BANG and her wand was knocked farther away.

"No!"

Something grabbed at her ankle and pulled her towards the Death Eater. Hermione scrabbled at the floor for purchase with her hands and feet, watched with fear as the Death Eater smiled and raised his wand at her.

"Avada—"

Expelliarmus, she thought, focusing as hard as she could in spite of her terror.

The Death Eater hissed in pain suddenly and grasped his wrist—his wand had been batted from his hand and landed a short distance away from Hermione.

Their eyes met. Hers, full of surprise, his, cold with rage.

They lunged for it.

Hermione reached it first, and pointed it at him just before he landed beside her.

"Stupefy!"

He went limp, just before hitting the floor. Hermione scooted away from him and stood, summoning her own wand. For good measure she kept his, and stored it inside her robe.

She looked down at his body, and tried to even her breaths. She was sweating, or bleeding still, or both. It ran down the right side of her face in a hot stream. She pointed her wand down to the Death Eater.

"Incarcerous."

Ropes appeared from thin air and coiled themselves tightly around his wrists, chest, and ankles.

Where would she go now? Surely Dumbledore and Harry would have arrived by now. And the Order? She listened hard, but nothing had changed in the sounds of calamity.

Her skin prickled. She was being watched. Hermione turned around quickly.

They had been on their way to the Astronomy Tower when a loud crash drew their attention to the left. He meant only to glance at the source of the sound but seeing someone standing there, froze. She was unmistakable, with her mass of heavy hair hanging down her back in disarray, rubbish and dust clinging to it from various points as if she had been dragged along the floor. She stood with her back to them, her shoulders rising and falling rapidly as if trying to catch her breath. She held her wand to her side, and when he looked down between her legs he could see a crumpled figure lying there and the glint of silver on his robes.

Dolohov hissed beside him. "Little bitch."

Draco sensed rather than saw him grab his wand. He began to step forward, and in a blind panic, Draco reached up and shoved him away so roughly Dolohov stumbled.

Dolohov trained his wand on him instantly, his expression a mixture of shock and rage. Draco scrambled for an excuse. He sneered at Dolohov.
"She's mine," he snarled.

Dolohov backed off, nodding, but his eyes still holding a glimmer of discontent.

"Hurry up, then, boy."

By now they had caught her attention. She had turned, one hand to her forehead to gauge the severity of a bleeding gash along her hairline. She saw him and stopped, her hand freezing by her forehead, her fingers dark with blood. The look of relief on her face instantly changed to suspicion when she saw Dolohov beside him, still wearing his silver mask.

"Draco?"

His heart wrenched.

She looked down, saw his wand in his hand. She frowned.

"What are you waiting for?" Dolohov snapped. "Take care of her, or I will."

The look of utter betrayal on her face made his grip on his wand loosen. He whispered a word.

"I trusted you," she said. Her voice was low and full of poorly disguised hurt.

Draco felt his stomach sink. She looked like she had expected this all along.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly, not knowing how much time they had before Dolohov realized he had cast a Muffliato on him so he wouldn't overhear what they were saying to each other. She hadn't realized it yet—her eyes kept darting from him to Dolohov uneasily. "They messaged me just after I left you and gave me an ultimatum. Either I do this immediately, or my parents die."

She was silent, rage clogging her throat.

"I know I should have told you the truth but I couldn't. I tried, last night but I couldn't find you."

"You could have told me sooner," she demanded, taking several steps forward until she stood right in front of him. "We could have prevented this."

Dolohov started forward, ready with his wand, but Draco held out a hand to make him stay where he was.

Without looking at him Hermione pointed her wand at Dolohov and a moment later he fell to the ground, unconscious.

Draco didn't even react. There were footsteps coming in their direction.

"You're taking too long, pup," he heard Fenrir call out. "I can smell you there. Finish what you're doing and get moving."

"I'm coming," Draco called back, and she grit her teeth and stepped back from him to raise her wand, pointing it directly at him.

"Hermione," he said carefully. "I need you to trust me one last time."

"What for?" she asked, her nostrils flared wide, her eyes reddened and wet. "You threw it all out the window the moment you let them in."
"I know," he said, raising his own wand at her. "I'm sorry."

Fenrir's footsteps were almost on them now.

"Who's there with you?" he called as he rounded the corner quickly and came across Draco and Hermione. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, a strange growl coming from his throat.

Hermione narrowed her eyes.

"Incarcerous!"

Draco raised a *Protego*. It shielded both him and Fenrir but he felt the force of her attack.

"Stupefy!" she hissed. "*Stupefy!*"

He dodged those too. "*Expelliarmus.*"

She stumbled backwards and her wand was knocked out of her grip and into his hand. He hadn't expected it to work. She appeared dizzy. More blood was leaking from the gash on her hairline.

"Let me have her," Fenrir said suddenly. His eyes were bright and he stared at the wound on Hermione's forehead longingly.

Draco glared at him. "Remember your promise."

"Aye, and I've kept it," Fenrir said, giving him an annoyed look. "I won't maul, her. Not yet."

He smiled at Hermione, showing all his disgusting, horrifying teeth. "Come to me, sweet," he said. "I won't let your corpse go to waste."

Her face went white. By now there was a clean stripe of blood that had run and dried down her face. Her hair was wet with it. Her eyes were dazed and she fought to stay balanced on her feet. Draco knew they only had a matter of time before she fainted.

"Leave her alone," Draco said angrily. "She's mine."

"No, I'm not," she said sharply, her words slurring a little. She edged backwards and away from them, even in her weakened state, knowing she had no chance against them without her wand.

"Take her, then, and move," Fenrir said, casting a lingering look at Hermione as he began to walk away. "I'll tell the others you got held up, but be quick. Let me know when you've finished with her so I can have the rest."

Draco tasted bile.

Hermione glared at him, and then at Draco, her eyes incredulous and hurt but she raised her chin, as if daring him to come near. Greyback laughed coarsely.

"How ferocious."

He winked at her from over Draco's shoulder, and then left.

Hermione shuddered. She swayed on her feet suddenly, and pressed a hand to her forehead.

"Don't you dare come near me," she said.
"You actually thought I'd do it?" he asked, hurt.

"No," she said. "It's just—you're a very good liar." She still looked at him a little suspiciously, and it made his heart sink.

Draco approached her carefully, both hands out and visible so she knew he would not try anything. He held her wand out to her, and she snatched it back at once.

"Repulso!"

An invisible force drove into Draco's stomach and sent him sailing to the opposite wall, as if a giant had punched him in the stomach with their forefinger. He collided against the wall, his head knocking into it backwards hard enough that his vision went black for a moment, and the spell had knocked all the air from his lungs.

He heard an odd sound and looked up at once to see Hermione fallen on the floor, but struggling to get up. Scrambling back onto his feet despite overwhelming dizziness, he rushed to her.

"Hermione."

"Get away from me," she hissed, and having managed to sit up, pressed the tip of her wand to her forehead and muttered a spell that Draco couldn't hear. He watched anxiously as the deep laceration on her forehead began to seam back together, but the blood remained.

"How much blood have you lost?" he asked urgently. "Who cut you?"

"Don't pretend to care when you started this," she said, her voice filled with so much anger that he backed away. She turned her head to look at him, the blood vivid against the pallor of her skin. Though her spell had stopped the bleeding, she still appeared faint, and if she didn't get looked at by a Healer she was likely to collapse again.

"You need to get somewhere safe," he said after a guilty silence.

She snorted. "No, I need to go fix this mess that you started." She stood successfully and brushed herself off. She didn't appear to be aware of the blood on her face. She trained her wand on him.

"You can either come with me and help take them down, or I can restrain you and hand you over to the Order."

"If I attack anyone from my side, they'll know I'm a traitor," he said. "They'll kill me. And they might kill you."

A scream pierced the air, rising above the calamity of sound surrounding them. Hermione twitched, as if wanting to go run to the source at once, but remembering he was still there, stayed put.

Draco stood gingerly, feeling the back of his head for any damage, but feeling none, he withdrew his wand from his pocket.

"Let's go," he said, and even though she nodded and set off at once, he caught the mistrustful glance she threw at him, and it tore at him, to know that within such a short span of time he'd gained her confidence and then lost it forever, but there was no time to think on it further because that shrill scream had started again. It turned his stomach.

Hermione was finding it difficult to run. She stopped short, clutching at her head. Draco paused, and
went to her. She shrugged his hand off her shoulder.

"I'm fine," she said.

"No, you're not," he replied. "You need to eat something."

"I can't eat at a time like this!"

"You've got to," he said firmly, "or else you won't be of any use."

She said nothing. Her eyes were closed.

"Hermione?" she didn't answer. "Hermione!"

"Shut up," she muttered, frowning.

Draco frowned in confusion and said no more.

A second later, something bumped into his shoulder.

"What—"

It was a large bar of chocolate. Draco handed it to her quickly.

"I wasn't sure it would work," she said. She tore the wrapper off and bit into it, chewing so quickly and dutifully he doubted she could even taste it at all.

She didn't bother to finish it. When she was halfway through she shoved it into her pocket.

"Better?" he asked.

She nodded, then she set off quickly towards the screaming, which had started up again.

They found Neville on his back, wheezing for breath. Tears streamed from his eyes down the sides of his face. His limbs twitched occasionally in aftershocks. Hermione rushed to him and knelt at his side.

"Neville! Neville, can you hear me?"

He nodded. It took a second or two for his eyes to focus and settle on her.

"Is he alright?" Draco came near, and Neville, recognizing his voice, looked at him. He frowned deeply in suspicion.

"Ignore him," Hermione said. With effort, she pulled Neville into a sitting position, and was surprised when Draco leaned in to help. Neville looked at him in shock.

"What happened?"


"Oh, Gods," Hermione whispered. "You need to get somewhere safe, and get looked at. Can you stand?"

Neville nodded and stood, a little shaky, but otherwise fine. He looked at Draco again.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.
Draco hesitated. "Trying to set things right."

Neville looked at him strangely, but nodded.

"I think we saw Madame Pomfrey over there," Hermione said. "She's tending to as many people as she can. Professor Sprout is with her."

"No," Neville said. "I'm going to find her."

It took them a moment to realize who he meant.

"You need to get looked at," Hermione pleaded. "I'm sure McGonagall has it under control."

"She's right," Draco said. "Bellatrix won't care if you're already hurt. She'll make sure you stay down if she sees you again."

"Then I'll get to her first," Neville said, and rushed down the corridor.

"Neville, no!" Hermione shouted, but he was gone.

"We've got to go," Draco reminded her. "The rest of your group is down there. They'll look after him."

Hermione ran a hand through her hair to push it away from her face.

"What should we do?"

He pulled something from her pocket and glanced down at it. Hermione caught a glimpse of gold and followed his stare.

"Why are you looking at a galleon?" she asked. "This isn't the time to count your pocket change."

Draco pressed it into her palm. "It's not just a galleon. It's one of the spelled galleons Umbridge confiscated last year from your group."

Hermione looked down at it and frowned. "You've been using it to communicate? With who?"

"People from my side," he said quietly. "They've been keeping eyes out for me."

Hermione looked at him warily. "How long have you been planning this?"

"Long enough to give me a chance not to fail." He paused. "You know I didn't want to do this. If I could have disappeared last night without repercussion I'd have done it. But I can't. I've got to at least try."

"What is it you've got to do?" Hermione asked quietly. "Draco, what is it?"

Draco only looked at her.

"I think you already know." He reached up, as if wanting to stroke her cheek, but put his arm back down before he could touch her. "And we both know how it's going to end."

Hermione said nothing. Her heart pounded. A slow, dreadful realization tapped her on the shoulder but she was too afraid to confront it.

"Come on," he said. "They're landing on the roof."
He turned to walk away, and frustrated, Hermione pulled him back.

"Come with me," she said. "You said Dumbledore's up there—you can explain it all to him—we can hide you somewhere—you don't have to do this."

He looked hesitant, frightened. Hermione reached up and pulled his face to hers, until their noses touched.

"Come with me," she repeated. His eyes closed. "We can keep you where they can't reach you. If you let us, we can help you."

Draco opened his mouth. He unconsciously leaned closer.

_BANG._

They jumped apart.

As if having broken from a trance, Draco grabbed her hand. He brought it to his lips and kissed the back of it, where her scars had never faded.

"Will you help me?"

Hermione squeezed his hand in reply. Together, they began to run.

When they breached the tower, it had begun to rain again.

At once Hermione spied Dumbledore, being supported by Harry. They were both pale, harrowed looking, as though they'd been gone for weeks rather than hours.

The Headmaster was panting, his face tinged grey. He slipped on the rain as he walked, as his eyes were half-closed.

Hermione gasped. There was the sound of someone running up the staircase behind them.

_OID!"

It was Ron.

He had come to the top of the stairs, just behind herself and Draco, and was looking angrily at them. Hermione realized she and Draco were still holding hands. She let go of it abruptly, but it was too late.

By now Harry and Dumbledore had noticed them, too.

"Barricade the staircase, if you please," Dumbledore's voice rose above the sound of the rain. "It will not hold for long but gives us more time. I must speak to all of you."

"Professor, you've got to get inside," Harry insisted. There were scratches on his face and his robes were torn and wet through. "You're not well."

"This cannot wait," Dumbledore said firmly. "We do not have much time."

After a second's pause, Ron hurried down the stairs, his wand ready. They heard him cast multiple spells, and then the scrape and crash of heavy furniture as it was places in the narrow passage. After a full minute of this, he hurried back up to meet them.
Harry had finally noticed Draco, and stared at him coldly.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"He is here to kill me," Dumbledore said, as calm is if he were remarking on the weather.

"What?" Ron stepped around to push Draco against a column, his wand at his throat. Draco winced, but said nothing.

"Did he drag you up here?" Ron asked, turning to look at Hermione.

"No," she said, going forward to try and pull him away. "Ron, let him go."

"No, what for?" he asked incredulously.

"Hermione," Harry asked, "what are you doing with him?"

"A question for another time, Harry," Dumbledore said, and slowly straightened. He looked at Draco, who had turned pale, his hair dripping water into his face.

"I know you are afraid, Draco," he said. "Don't be. We are here to help you."

"What?"

Draco was still cornered by Ron, who's wand was one misdirected jab away from taking out his eye.

Hermione turned her wand on Ron. "Let him go, Ronald."

Ron released Draco, but kept his wand trained on him.

"What've you done to her?" he asked. "Take the Imperius off!"

"Ron, listen to me!" Hermione said hotly. "I'm not under any spell!"

"Please lower your wands," Dumbledore said. "He has come here to speak to us. Is that right, Draco?"

"Yes."

"What do you have to say?"

"I was behind all the attacks this year," Draco said, taking off his robe. Harry stepped forward, ready to restrain him, but Draco gave him a look and rolled up his sleeve instead, showing them all his Dark Mark. "I've been under Voldemort's command."

"I knew it," Harry said, raising his wand. His eyes narrowed. "I bloody knew it."

"Lower your wand, Harry," Dumbledore said, a little sternly.

"Professor——"

"I need you to trust me," the Headmaster said. "All of you. That means not attacking each other."

They all stood in stunned silence. The rain bore down on them.

"Did you want to attack your peers?" he asked Draco.
Draco shuddered. "No," he said quietly.

Ron scoffed.

"Not even when Ron was sent to hospital because of your attempt?" Dumbledore asked calmly.

"No, sir." Draco looked at Ron. "I put Slughorn under an Imperius to deliver you the poison mixed into the wine, but you interrupted me and the spell backfired. I never consciously targeted you, or Katie Bell."

Ron's eyes were narrowed with suspicion. "You poisoned me by accident?"

"You got in my way."

Dumbledore chuckled. Draco looked at him warily.

"Where are your parents, Draco?" he asked. "I have not heard of them for some time."

Draco's adams apple bobbed as he swallowed. Since he had taken off his robes, he was left only in his uniform. His white shirt was soaked; it clung to his body and had become translucent. Hermione could see the traces of his scars.

"He's got them hostage," Draco said. "Voldemort."

Hermione jumped. It was the first time she had heard Draco refer to his master as something other than 'the Dark Lord'.

"He's going to kill them if I don't kill you," he said. "And then he'll kill me. I'm not doing this because I want to. I've got no choice."

"You must remember, Draco," Dumbledore said, "that you always have a choice. I believe it was your decision to confide in Hermione Granger and seek her trust that led her to stand with you here."

Harry and Ron looked at her in shock. Hermione went red.

"What the fuck is going on?" Ron asked her quietly. She said nothing.

"Had you not done that, I would not have allowed you to remain standing with your wand while I am weak, pained, and vulnerable. I received your letter," he said, looking at Hermione, "and I trust your judgment."

Hermione nodded.

"It was your choice to become a Death Eater, was it not?"

Draco's voice was bitter. "Yes."

"And how do you feel about it now?"

Draco pulled his sleeve back over the mark. "I wish I hadn't."

Dumbledore swayed a little on his feet, and Harry rushed forward to support him again, slinging one arm over his shoulders to share the Headmaster's weight. Dumbledore continued to speak as if nothing had happened, though they all heard the small groan that had come from him. "You seek to escape from it, then."
"Professor," Harry said, his voice pleading. "Please, you need to get inside."

Draco frowned. "...Yes."

Albus's tone changed. "You have brought intruders into this castle. You have attacked my students. You attempted to take the life of the girl who stands beside you. Why should I help you?"

Draco flinched at the accusations.

From the bottom of the stairwell, they heard faint shouting echoing around the open space below them.

"I don't deserve help," Draco said. "I didn't come to kill you. Voldemort expects me to fail so he can have a reason to kill my family." He opened his fist and let his wand drop to the floor. "I came to turn myself in."

Ron's mouth fell open. Harry stared at it wordlessly. The lens of his spectacles were fogged and dotted with rain. His robes hung heavy with rain. Hermione, feeling her own sodden hair, pushed it away from her eyes.

Dumbledore said nothing for a moment, but stared at him calmly until Draco's ears turned red.

"I am afraid I cannot help your parents," he said at last.

Draco's shoulders slumped, but he nodded, as if he'd expected it all along.

"Your parents are responsible for their own decisions. I am more concerned with you. I have kept watch over you, and I have seen the changes you have gone through. I am pleased you are not the same boy I was ready to expel at the beginning of this term."

"Professor," Harry said, his tone a warning. The sounds from below were coming closer.

"Hermione," Dumbledore said, and she jumped. "Please accept my apology for not being there to deliver you justice last year. Allow me to say, however, that although you had every reason not to, you have shown true compassion and strength in forgiving your enemy, and I am glad to see unity bloom from unlikely places. Very glad."

Harry and Ron looked at her again, compelling her to explain, but Hermione couldn't bring herself to. Not yet.

"Thank you, sir," she said.

There was the sound of many feet running up the steps. They heard muffled shouting.

Dumbledore staggered again. Harry was having trouble supporting him.

"Gods no," he said. "Professor, hang on—"

"I am already dying, Harry," Dumbledore said, trying to smile in reassurance. His face was growing paler and paler. His eyes were moving rapidly. "There is nothing Snape or Madame Poppy can do for me."

Harry frowned. "Snape? What—"

He groaned then—and slumped to the floor. Harry gave a strangled yell and knelt beside him. Hermione and Ron rushed to them.
"Arianna," he said, his voice weak and dry. "Forgive me."

"He's hallucinating," Hermione said.

"What?" Ron said. "Professor, we're going to get you to Pomfrey. Just hang on."

"Who's Arianna?" Harry was asking. "Professor, just try to stand."

Hermione grabbed him by the arm. "Harry, he can't. Can't you see?"

Harry tugged free of her grasp. "Come on, Professor," he said, his voice unsteady.

Dumbledore gave another yell. It sounded as though he was in pain.

"Hermione," Ron said quickly, "have you got any essence of Dittany?"

"That won't help unless he's got a physical wound," she said, tears gathering in her eyes. Draco had knelt beside her. His face was ashen.


Hermione transfigured a leaf from the floor into a cup. Harry's hands were shaking. He filled it and brought it to Dumbledore's mouth. He drank eagerly, messily, spilling it down his front. He reached to the side and grabbed Draco by the arm.

"Do it now," he said, and despite his current state, his voice was strong and firm. "Make sure they see it." He trailed off into a coughing fit. His saliva was red with blood.

The voices were even louder now. They could all hear the Death Eaters blasting apart the barricade Ron had set up in the stairwell.

"No," Harry said, pointing his wand at Draco again, his face livid. He uttered a curse.

"Harry, stop!"

Hermione's hand shot up and shoved his arm to point upwards, and his curse missed. Panting, he looked at her, his eyes full of betrayal. Ron too, appeared horrified.


"I can't," Draco said, shaking his head. "I can't do this."

His wand appeared in front of him and dropped into his lap.

"I am half gone already," Dumbledore said, his voice growing weaker the longer he spoke. They all had to lean in to hear him. "You would be doing an act of mercy, not murder." He began to cough again, his bright blue eyes screwing shut in pain. "Make your choice."

The last of the barricade was being cleared away. They heard a number of voices but could not distinguish one from the other. Harry had his wand in hand, looking as if he was about to tackle Draco. Hermione locked her arm through his to pull him back.

"He's not in his right mind!" Harry said, his voice thick.

"He's dying," she whispered to him through a distorted, shaking voice. "Oh, Harry, can't you see?" Tears stung at her eyes.
Draco stood at the Headmaster's feet, slipping on the rain. He was shaking, breathing heavily, clutching his wand in one hand. He stared at the prone figure, his eyes wild and desperate, lost.

"Please, Draco," Dumbledore said, his eyes, connected with Draco's, fell shut. His body began to twitch. Blood dribbled from his nose.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "Arianna, please… Arianna…"

They heard the clatter of footsteps resume up the stairs.

"Do it now!" Dumbledore said sharply, in between dry, heavy gasps.

Several things happened in succession, almost at once. Harry jumped up, his wand arm ready, the curse already having left his lips. Hermione and Ron pulled him down to the ground. His curse barely missed Draco, who had extended his wand arm towards the Headmaster, who was having trouble breathing.

"Look! It's Potter!"

"He's up here!" They heard someone yell. "They're up here!"

"Avada Kedavra."

The green light blinded them all. Hermione felt Harry lunge for Dumbledore, as if to shield his body, but she and Ron pulled him away. They landed together in a heap on the floor, but Hermione felt Dumbledore's body go slack only a moment before. She sobbed aloud, nearly choking on the rain.

"NO! GET OFF OF ME!" Harry yelled, writhing. Ron pinned him down. "PROFESSOR!"

"Incarcerous!"

Hermione's limbs were forcefully pulled together and restrained by an invisible force. A gag wound its way around her head and she screamed, tumbling over. She landed on her side and immediately began to feel around the floor for her wand as best as she could. Draco remained standing, looking with vacant eyes upon their Headmaster. The rain continued to fall.

"Hermione!" Ron stunned the Death Eater that had come through first. Harry was just getting up.

Someone else shouted another Incarcerous. Harry shielded himself.

"Sectumsempra!"

In the vivid green light of the Killing Curse that had yet to fade away, Hermione saw the tears coursing down his cheeks that even the rain could not mask.

*Relashio.*

*Accio wand.*

*Relashio.*

*Accio!*

Nothing happened. Had someone found it and taken it? Or had someone trod on it and broken it?

Ron ran to her side. He ducked from a spell, and crouched beside her. Hermione motioned with her
head towards the direction of her wand, but he didn't seem to notice. He stared at her like she was a stranger.

*Release me!* She tried pleading with her eyes. Harry was still sending one Stunner after another into the mass of Death Eaters, but they were keeping him busy, blocking them all and pushing through anyways.

Ron frowned at her.

"Who are you?" he asked. Hermione raised her brows in disbelief. Tears filled her eyes. He paused, and stood, running to attack the Death Eaters that had broken through. By now most of them had collected onto the Tower, standing around Dumbledore's body. Hermione, still unable to reach her wand, shifted on the floor to get a better view. Draco still stood there, wand at his side. His eyes were vacant, shocked.

"You did it?" she heard someone tell him. The shock in their tone was confusing.

"It's done," she heard Draco reply dimly.

"He's done it!"

If the rest of them heard, they were too busy to notice. There were more people coming up the stairs.

Ron had been bound, too. She couldn't see Harry. Hermione tried wriggling up into a sitting position and failed. She let out a frustrated scream into her gag.

"It's them," she heard a woman's voice call out. "Block them out!"

Several rushed to the entryway, wands ready, but before they could even begin the Order came rushing through. She heard Mad Eye's roar and the intermingled voices of Tonks and Bill Weasley shouting out curses.

One voice stood out above the rest.

"NO!"

She had never heard McGonagall sound so upset. It made her shiver. Hermione tried wriggling herself upwards again, hoping someone would find her quickly. A body landed on the floor near her; she stared into the stupefied eyes of Dolohov.

"You again."

A hand grabbed her by the hair and pulled her up into a sitting position. Hermione yelped in pain and glared at Greyback, who had stood over her, looking rather pleased.

"I thought Draco disposed of you somewhere," he said. "Lucky for me he didn't."

He reached over to push some hair away from her forehead, and frowned.

"You healed it. Pity. You look better with blood on you."

Hermione looked around in panic. Ron had been freed, and was fighting someone. A purple bruise was forming on his face. She couldn't see Harry, but spotted Lupin narrowly avoiding a killing curse.

Greyback hauled her to her feet roughly. "Let's go."
Where?

Accio. Accio!

He pressed himself against her from behind. "Now it's done, I've got no promises to keep." He brought her closer, turned her so she faced him. He grabbed her by the head and licked her cheek in one long, harrowing stroke. Hermione cringed. "I think I'll start with you."

Even though her arms were restrained by the wrist and elbow Hermione could still bring them back hard enough to jab into his ribs. She did so, as hard as she could. The problem with Greyback was that he was sturdier than anyone this might have worked on. Her elbows did little damage, and he only chuckled.

"You get two more tries," he said. "That's my rule. But you'll want to space them out. It won't do to tire yourself out quickly. The others never learned."

Others.

Accio wand. Please, Accio wand.

His grip in her hair was exchanged for a tighter one on her arms.

"Be quick, now," he said into her ear. "I may not have those silly sticks you all carry but I've got teeth, and I'll use them."

Hermione tried wrenching herself away, looking around in hopes of catching someone's attention. The battle hadn't even slowed down. Equal amounts of the Order and Death Eaters lay on the floor, stunned or bleeding. She felt vomit creep up her esophagus.

Greyback shoved her. "Go."

A red jet of light flew narrowly past her, missing her ear by an inch. Hermione hadn't even seen it coming, but heard with immense relief the sound of Greyback skidding backwards, uttering a surprise grunt.

"Stupefy!"

This time she heard Greyback fall onto the ground. In the next instant, she was free. Hermione stumbled backwards, wiping at her cheek. Greyback shouted something in anger but his voice was drowned out quickly, and Hermione almost looked back, amazed that with two Stunners he was still conscious. Someone else rushed in, she couldn't tell who, and blocked him from following her.

Someone grabbed her arm and began dragging her away quickly. Hermione immediately went to claw at the offending hand, and found McGonagall there. She let it drop with relief.

"Did he harm you?" McGonagall asked intently, pulling her through the crowd and towards the stairs.

"No." They began to descend the stairs. McGonagall had not released her.

"We need to go back," Hermione said. "My wand—"

McGonagall looked at her sharply. "You lost it?"

Hermione felt like a child. She blinked back tears. "Yes."
"I will look for it. You cannot stay here."

"But—"

They'd reached the bottom, and in the sudden quiet, away from the constant shouting and screams, Hermione's ears were filled with a strange buzzing. It took a moment to go away. When it did she finally noticed Draco, lying bound on the floor, unconscious.

"Gods," she whispered, and went to him immediately.

He was still breathing, and unhurt. She dropped her head and sighed shakily.

"He killed him?" McGonagall asked.

"Yes." Hermione wiped the rain from her face and sniffed loudly. She was shivering, but pulled off her wet, cumbersome robe and pulled it over Draco. "Dumbledore wanted him to."

As she moved something fell from the robe and onto the floor. Hermione's heart leapt, seeing that it was a wand. She picked it up immediately and remembered.

"You found it?"

"It's not mine." She wondered if the Death Eater she'd taken it from was still bound and waiting, upstairs.

If she'd had this wand all this time, why had she not been able to free herself from the restraints earlier? Or had her Accio worked after all, but she simply didn't notice?

"It will have to do. Take him to Grimmauld Place. Lock him somewhere and see to it that no one speaks to him or that he does not escape until this is over. Go now."

"Wait—you don't want him arrested?"

McGonagall looked at Draco for a moment, her expression revealing nothing.

"The Headmaster would not have allowed it." She looked at Hermione. "He allowed him to kill him."

Thoroughly lost, Hermione frowned. "Yes. He...he was already dying."

"Then his plan worked." McGonagall held out her hand to Hermione and helped her stand. "He has been watching Malfoy for some time."

"His plan?"

"I will answer your questions later, when all this is settled. It is imperative that he is taken someplace else."

"I can't just leave."

McGonagall held up a hand. "Potter and Weasley are fine. I cannot trust that they will not harm him," she gestured to Draco, "if I asked them to do this. The Death Eaters cannot hold for much longer. Some of them have begun to leave already and the Ministry is on its way. You need to leave now."

Hermione knew there was no room for discussion, and she rushed to follow the command, even
though the thought of leaving filled her with distaste. What would happen next?

McGonagall pointed her wand at Draco.

"Resurrectus."

Hermione jumped back in fright, watching as Draco, although still unconscious, sat up, removed the robe and handed it back to Hermione, as if he were sleepwalking. She took it gingerly and put it over her shoulder. He straightened, standing with one arm bent and ready for her to grab onto, looking rather like a statue than a human being. The effect was extremely unnerving, but Hermione went to stand beside him and grabbed his hand. It was cold as ice.

She looked at McGonagall.

"Grimmauld Place," she said. Her eyes were wet. "Keep him safe."

Hermione nodded. She grasped Draco's hand tighter, and turned on the spot.
Grimmauld Place was vacant and dark. The floorboards creaked loudly as they walked past the front doors and up the stairs. Hermione debated on whether or not to wake him, but decided against it, not knowing what she would have to expect if she did just that.

Would he try to escape? Go back to Hogwarts? Or would he shut down again, as she had seen him do just after casting the killing curse?

He was completely silent, eyes still closed as they reached the third floor. Hermione looked around, her heart tense, not knowing where to go. Her body was sore and cold, still damp from standing in the rain for so long. Her head hurt and felt light. They were both dripping water onto the floor.

After a long moment's deliberation, she continued to the fourth floor. Most everyone had a room on the second or third floors. It would be for the best to keep him away from them all. If need be, she would clear out one of the other rooms herself and stay there to make sure McGonagall's orders were kept.

He stood behind her, waiting for her next command, still as stone. The shocked tone of the Death Eater's voice floated back to her.

'You did it?'

Dumbledore's body was still there. What was happening now? Would anyone notice they were gone? And why had the Death Eater sounded so surprised?

"In here," she said, opening the door to the bedroom. Draco followed mutely. The bedroom had an adjoining bathroom; tall, narrow windows along the wall hung heavy with thick drapes that suffocated any light that might dare peek through. A handsome bed took up space along the center of the room. The furniture was dusty and ancient, but clean.

The fireplace was empty. Hermione stocked it, and set it alight with the wand. She was still in her skirt and stockings. There were tears all up and down them, and her skirt was wrinkled and torn past the point of salvation. When she looked down at her shirt she found blood stains all down her front. Her hand went up to her forehead, where a dull ache emanated from the cut there. The area around it was tender.

Draco didn't look much better. He stood there, frozen, still under McGonagall's spell. Silent, emotionless, trapped in unconsciousness. His hair was in utter disarray, there was a cut on his lip and the shadow of a bruise on the side of his face. He stared straight ahead at the wall, oblivious to her presence. She stood by the fire for some time to warm herself, watching him carefully from that side of the room, as if expecting him to burst into consciousness at any given moment.

The crackle of the fire was the only source of sound in the house. Hermione wondered where Kreacher was, and counted herself lucky she had not run across him yet. He would have been ecstatic to see a Pureblood inside Grimmauld Place, and would probably wake his mistress, too, if he found out.

Hermione went to the door and locked it. The heavy click it made didn't reassure her much.

The room slowly began to grow warm. Hermione grabbed the wand she'd stolen and pointed it at Draco hesitantly.
“Finite Incantatem.”

Nothing happened.

Frowning, she tried again, to the same result. Hermione tried a simple ‘Alohamora’ on the door and it unlocked, but when she tried locking it with magic, it would not.

She locked the door herself, and glared down at the wand, wondering where her own had gone. Would she be stuck with this one if she never found it?

She tried a simple ‘Accio’ next, pointing the wand at an old, frayed quill lying on the dresser. Nothing happened. Hermione threw the wand to the floor in frustration. She’d read about stolen wands that didn't work for their new owners but had never experienced it before. Could its former owner tell she wasn't Pureblood? Was that why it refused to work?

"Lie down and try to sleep," she told Draco. She wasn't sure what else to do. She watched as he laid down, his eyes falling closed. She walked to him, pressed her hand to his robes and muttered a drying charm. It didn't work as well as she'd hoped but at least he still wasn't dripping water. She dried herself off, too, and then brought her hand to his forehead before she could reconsider.

"Finite Incantatem."

He went slack, his head falling deeper onto the pillow underneath him, but didn't wake.

Hermione went to the fire and sat down a short distance from it. She was shaking again, starting from a slight tremor to full on shakes that made her draw her knees to her chest and cover her mouth with her hand. A stifled moan of grief slipped through her hand.

The fire’s heat dried up her tears before they had gone far from her eyes. Unable to control her breathing, Hermione let herself cry loudly, only after turning around to make sure Draco was asleep. Panic crawled up her spine.

Dumbledore, gone. She pictured his body lying in the rain.

What happens now?

What will we do?

Everything had fallen apart. How could they hope to defeat Voldemort without him? What was happening at Hogwarts now? Had the Death Eaters won? Were Harry and Ron alright? What about Pansy and Ginny? She wished she'd stayed.

What would happen to Draco? She had believed in him but he had kept that crucial secret from her. She understood why, but it still stung, especially after they had gone to such lengths to learn to trust each other.

Possibly worst of all, she had fallen for him. She had thought there was nothing more he had to hide. What an arrogant assumption. Could she trust him again?

Hermione covered her mouth to stifle a sob. She was heaving; wet, shuddery breaths were forcing their way through regardless. Her shoulders shook with the force of it.

A broken voice came from behind.

"I'm sorry."
Hermione jumped and turned around, wiping at her eyes quickly.

Draco had gotten up from the bed. His face was pale, drawn tight. His eyes were pained.

She couldn't help but glare through her tears.

"You should have told me sooner." Her voice was uneven. "We could have prevented this."

His eyes couldn't meet hers. "I know."

Hermione bowed her head. Her eyes hurt, her head, her heart, everything. Exhaustion seemed to pull her to the ground. She wanted nothing more than to lie down.

"Weren't we supposed to trust each other?" she asked shakily. "I didn't run when you told me what you were."

It was hard to keep the accusatory tone from her voice, especially considering what she'd seen. But she could not deny the feeling of betrayal that wouldn't leave her.

She'd believed him, and he'd proven her a fool, even if he didn't do it willingly.

"Why didn't you tell me? I could have helped you. I was trying to help you."

"I…I was afraid," he said. "I'd just gotten you to trust me. I was afraid that if I told you about what I had to do, you would take it all back or have me locked up…I couldn't even think about failure. Not with my parent's lives at stake."

"I wouldn't have," she said. "I would have helped you figure it out."

Draco dragged his hands over his face, kneeling beside her. He kept his hands over his face briefly, as if trying to hide his shame. When he took them away, his eyes met hers.

"Why did he help me? After everything I've done? He knew the whole time. How?"

Hermione had never seen him look so lost. She expected her own expression must be the same.

"McGonagall said he has…had a plan."

He looked more confused than ever. "She Stunned me. Did she bring me here?"

"No, I did."

"Why?"

"McGonagall told me to take you someplace safe."

He looked around the room uneasily, as if just noticing they were not at Hogwarts. "Where are we?"

"This is the Order's headquarters."

He nodded, his hands pushing at his hair. His hands were shaking so hard she could see every tremor. He seemed to become aware of it, too and with some difficulty, withdrew his hands from his hair to raise them in front of his face. His eyes were raw and bloodshot, still damp. His eyes were wild with grief and shock—he stared at his hands as if the act of just looking away would shatter the earth.
"That's twice now. Twice. Twice…" he said, his voice shaking as hard as his hands.

And he began to laugh hysterically.

Shaken, Hermione reached out and grabbed his hands. He kept laughing, his shoulders heaving.

"Draco."

"I guess they're happy now," he said breathlessly, tears sliding down his face. "They got what they wanted and I'll rot in Azkaban."

Hermione went cold.

"No, you won't," she said, tightening her hold on his hands.

"Yes, I will," he said, his laughter stopping suddenly. "I'm a murderer. A Death Eater. They're mad if they ever let me walk free."

"If you tell them what really happened, they might," she said quickly. "Or give you a lighter sentence. You said yourself you didn't want to do any of it. Voldemort coerced you."

He shook his head. "They'll never see me as anything other than a Death Eater, Granger."

Hermione frowned at the sudden use of her surname. Was he trying to distance himself?

"Then you'll have to make them see you as someone else."

He sighed, let his head fall back to stare at the ceiling bleakly.

"I should have just let them kill me," he said. "I should have said no. All of you would be better off with me and my family dead."

"Don't say that."

"You know it's true." He withdrew his hands from hers. "I never should have brought you into this."

"You didn't force me to," she said. "I made the choice to help you."

"You should have left me there," he said, shaking his head. "I need to see my parents. I need to know what's happening to them. None of your friends will want me here, even as a prisoner. Potter will want to kill me."

"If you had gone back with them then there would be hardly any chance of clearing your name. Everyone would think you were guilty because you ran away. Here you've got a chance to tell what really happened," she said. "She only ordered me to take you away and hide you here before someone else tried to get to you and attack you or turn you in. I'm supposed to protect you."

He looked at her, brows bent, searching her face for an answer. "Why?"

"I don't know." She looked at the ground. "I would have done it anyway, even if she hadn't told me to. You're not entirely innocent, but I know you why you did it."

Draco nodded, numb. "Thank you."

After a brief silence he looked over to the door. "Where is everyone else?"
Hermione wrapped her arms around herself. "Still at Hogwarts."

"And Pansy?"

Hermione bit her lip. "I don't know."

He looked at his hands, and flexed them.

"Twice," he muttered again "That's twice."

Hermione put her hand on his arm. He looked at her, his eyes roving over her face, from the not completely healed laceration along her hairline to the cut on her cheek, the tears in her eyes.

"How are you?"

She said nothing.

"I didn't mean it, what I said back there, with Greyback," he said. "About you being mine. I only said it so they could leave so I could talk to you. Greyback is a monster; if I hadn't made him promise not to hurt anyone he'd have gotten half the castle."

Hermione frowned. "Promise?"

Draco's eyes lowered in guilt. "He helped me with the cabinet."

"How?"

"He had the other one and let me know when it worked," he said dully. "My father asked him to help me."

She looked at him carefully. "You know him well, then."

"He's a family friend," he said, a bitter smile twisting his lip. "But he's no friend of mine."

"I understand." She looked at the fire. "He found me later and tried to drag me away from everyone."

His eyes widened with anger. To Hermione's surprise, he reached out and came closer, one hand in a tight grip on her shoulder, the other on her cheek. His eyes scanned her again almost frantically, his hand feeling the back of her head for any wound she might not be aware of. "Are you alright? Did he hurt you? Did he bite you?"

Hermione placed her hands on his arms to make him stop. "I'm fine. Someone else distracted him while McGonagall took me to you," she said.

He went slack with relief, bringing his arms back to himself. He passed a hand over his forehead, shook his head.

"I should have stunned him earlier," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

"A single Stunner wouldn't have worked," she replied. "I saw him get hit with three and he still got up to fight. I didn't have my wand—if McGonagall hadn't found me, I don't know where he'd have taken me."

"This was all my fault."
"Hermione didn't deny it. "You've got to find a way to make them believe you."

"Did McGonagall tell you anything else?" Draco asked. "About this… plan?"

"No. She told me to keep you here until they arrive."

"Will they arrest me?" He didn't sound afraid.

"I don't know."

The fire's light filled the dim room, covering everything under a red, fiery glow. Draco opened his hands and stared at the red. Hermione's eyes stung as more tears blurred her eyesight.

"Are my parents alive or dead?" he asked.

Hermione wiped at her eyes. "I don't know. I'm sorry."

"I wish you hadn't brought me here," he said softly. "I should have gone back with them. I wouldn't have cared if I'd got caught eventually. I only did this to save my parents but now I'm stuck here with no way of knowing if it worked."

"If you went with them, would you stay with them?"

"No. I'd take my parents and run." He looked away. "If they're dead, I've done all this for nothing. I ruined my own chances at everything." He scrubbed at his face to dry his tears, and looked at her. His pale eyes were bloodshot.

"I hurt you," he said softly. "I said I wouldn't and I did it anyway."

Hermione's throat was sore. "I told you not to make promises you couldn't keep." She sat up stiffly, rubbing at her forehead.

There was a loud slam downstairs, then the stomp of heavy footfalls. They both went still.

"They're here," she whispered.

They listened as more people entered the building and ran up the stairs, then searching each room. Hermione pulled away from Draco to stand at the door.

When at last someone tried the jamb and it didn't open, she heard Ron's voice call out.

"Harry, over here!"

Another set of footprints joined Ron's, just outside their door.

"Hermione?" she heard Harry ask.

She looked at Draco. He was looking at the door, his expression one of resignation. His jaw was tight. His eyes were distant again, and she had begun to reach for him when Harry called again.

"Hermione, are you there?"

She went to the door. "Harry, are you alright?"

"We're okay. Everyone else is on their way. McGonagall told us you were here." He paused, and his voice took a different tone. "Hermione, where is he."
Hermione held her breath. Draco still had said nothing. He looked at her, however, and nodded.

"He's with me," she said.

"I knew it," she heard Ron mutter angrily, and she jumped back in alarm when he hit the door from the other side. "Malfoy, let her out!"

She felt Draco twitch with annoyance.

"He isn't keeping me here," she said loudly.

Harry's voice came through, commanding and flat; a tone he'd never taken with her before. It made her insides go cold.

"Bring him out, Hermione."

"No."

"You're harboring a murderer in there!" Ron shouted. "You saw what he did, Hermione! Give him to us before he decides he wants to kill you, too!"

Here Draco stepped closer.

"I'm not killing anybody else," he said coldly. "Least of all her."

Somebody struck the door again. Hermione flinched, her eyes growing wet.

"Don't make me use magic to get in," Harry said. "I will blast that door open."

Hermione hurried to grab the uncooperative wand. "Don't you dare."

"OPEN THE DOOR!" she heard Harry yell. "DUMBLEDORE'S DEAD BECAUSE OF YOU TWO!"

Stricken, Hermione stepped further away from the door, wrapping her arms around her middle.

Had she really played a part? She had protected Draco from their attacks. She had allowed him to kill the Headmaster, rather than try to find another way.

But there was nothing else we could do. He was dying. He ordered Draco to do it, didn't he?

Her hands were cold. Draco had looked away from the door.

"McGonagall said not to let anyone in until she arrived," she said through the door. Her voice trembled badly. Draco squeezed her hand.

There was the sound of more people coming upstairs. Voices cut through the pained silence. Hermione shifted closer to the door.

"Where are they?" she heard someone ask.

There was no verbal answer.

"Hermione." Came McGonagall's voice through the door. "We are all here. You may come out."

"Just me?" she asked, looking at Draco.
"Yes."

Heart pounding, Hermione hesitated for a second before she opened the door just wide enough so that she could slip through.

Immediately she was confronted by the sight of half of the Order waiting there, looking as harrowed and exhausted as she felt. Lupin looked more haggard than ever; dark circles around his eyes made him look as if he were one second away from falling asleep where he stood. Tonks's hair was plastered to her face with sweat; it was the dullest color she had ever seen her wear.

Feeling oddly timid, she met Harry's furious gaze. He was pale with grief, eyes red and raw. His hair was wild and mussed, still damp from rain. Ron was in much the same condition. Their faces were hostile. Hermione felt her insides twist.

She jumped as two people almost threw themselves at her and wrapped her in a tight hug. It was Ginny and Pansy.

"Thank Merlin," Ginny said breathlessly. "Bill saw you being dragged off by Greyback and intervened, but he lost sight of you after. We couldn't find you after and panicked."

Hermione looked around, eager to give Bill her thanks. "Where is he?"

Ginny's eyes were watering. "He's hurt, but alive. Mum and dad are with him downstairs."

Mad-Eye had just joined the party. Tonks rushed to his side and hugged him. He patted her back, looking grim, his magical eye spinning wildly in all directions, but froze pointing towards the room Hermione had come from. He frowned, but said nothing.

"So it's true?" Pansy asked, almost in a whisper. "Dumbledore is dead?"

McGonagall nodded.

Tonks went ashen. "I saw a body, I-I didn't think it'd be…"

"Who did it?" Molly asked, as she came into view at the top of the stairs. She held a bloody rag that she twisted nervously between her hands. "Was it You-Know-Who?"

"It was Malfoy," Harry said dully.

Molly frowned. "Lucius?"

"Draco Malfoy, mum," Ron said.

The look of shock on their faces was almost comical.

"But why?" Tonks asked incredulously.

"We will all have to find a bigger room to accommodate us," McGonagall cut in. "There is a great deal that needs to be said. Go downstairs, to the dining room. Gather everyone." She looked at Hermione. "Is he conscious?"

She thought of his vacant, pained gaze.

"Yes."

"Bring him."
As everyone began to head downstairs, Harry and Ron lingered. McGonagall turned to them.

"I understand your anger and confusion. However, I will not tolerate any attacks that have not been authorized by me."

"Professor, he killed Dumbledore," Harry argued. "We should be taking him to the Ministry!"

"I know what he did, Potter," McGonagall said sternly. "The Ministry would be only too glad to have him. They are under Voldemort's thumb, they would only turn him loose without penalty. We must hear from Draco himself his account of what happened and why he did it before taking further action. Now join the others downstairs, and remember that if you let your anger get the better of you I will be forced to restrain you both or send you away. I will not tolerate any more violence tonight."

"Understood?"

"Yes, Professor," Harry said stiffly, and then left the room without even looking at Hermione. It stung.

Hermione went to collect Draco, . He was waiting there already, and left his wand on the bed.

"It's time," she said, and he nodded.

McGonagall met them by the stairs. She looked at Draco sternly.

"Is there any need for me to restrain you?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I won't fight."

Still, he was made to descend the stairs first, and wait when he reached the bottom. Hermione knew McGonagall was only taking precaution, but still couldn't help but feel a twinge of anger at the implication, that she might suspect Draco of pushing them down the stairs.

They entered the large dining room, where everyone had ignored their seats and stood in mingled confusion and grief, still tending to their wounds.

"I must insist for everyone to sit down," McGonagall said loudly. Her voice was a little hoarse.

Everyone sat promptly. All talk, however quiet, fell to utter silence as Hermione and Draco entered the room after McGonagall. She waved her wand and a chair moved across the room to sit at the very front.

"Hang on—why is he here?" Fred Weasley asked loudly, looking furiously at Draco. "Wasn't he arrested?"

"He is here because Albus wanted him to be," McGonagall said. Fred's mouth went slack.

"Minerva, why would Albus want him here?" Arthur Weasley asked, frowning. "He is the son of a Death Eater!"

McGonagall motioned for Draco to sit in the chair, and he did. He placed his hands on the armrests, and was not surprised when leather straps materialized and fixed him to the chair. He faced everyone now, and he looked pale.

"Murderer!" someone hissed.

Draco flinched. His hands were beginning to shake. Hermione, not knowing what to do, stood nearby, not wanting to sit. McGonagall seemed to feel the same—she remained standing beside
Draco. Nearly all of the Order had assembled there. She could feel their curious stares.

"Miss Parkinson, if you would please step forward."

At the mention of her surname there was a rustle among the Order, which grew louder still at the sight of her Slytherin uniform. Pansy, now visibly nervous, made her way to the front and stood beside Draco.

"Parkinson?" she heard George ask. "What, are we hosting all the Death Eater's kids tonight?"

Pansy went red.

"Shut up," Ron said crossly. George looked at him, grinning, as if expecting Ron to reveal he had been joking, but when Ron's glare didn't falter, George's smile slowly faded.

"Did I get clubbed on the head, Fred?" George asked his twin. "Or did I really hear our brother defend a Slytherin?"

"Enough," McGonagall said. "Miss Parkinson is here as a guest."

"A guest?!"

"Yeah," Ginny said loudly. "She's our friend."

"Fancy that," Hermione heard Fred say. "George, I think we managed to stumble upon an alternate universe, after all."

"Shut up," Ron said to his brothers. "This isn't a joke."

"It's true," Harry added, and the twins' grins disappeared in unison once more.

"Pardon me, but...isn't your Father a Death Eater?" Arthur asked Pansy, squinting at her although he was wearing his spectacles.

"Yes," Pansy said, "but I'm not. And I don't want to be one, either."

"How can we be sure?" Tonks asked, looking suspicious. "How do we know you're not lying to us?"

"I'm not," Pansy insisted.

McGonagall turned to Pansy. "I do not need reassurance of what you claim, but for the sake of convincing the others, would you be willing to take Veritaserum? It is not required, but it would be helpful."

"Yes," Pansy said at once.

McGonagall reached into her robes and pulled out a small glass bottle. The liquid inside it was clear.

"I know these conditions are perhaps not as formal or orderly as one could hope for," she said to Pansy and Draco. "But we are pressed for time. It is best to set things straight at once with everyone here, so that there can be no misunderstanding. You do not have to do this if you do not want to."

"I want to," Pansy said. "I don't want there to be any doubt."

McGonagall nodded and passed the potion to Pansy, who took it quickly. The portion was small—
she downed it in one gulp, and shivered.

"Now, what is your name?" McGonagall asked.

"Pansy Parkinson."

"Why are you here?"

Pansy paused. "I don't want to go home. And...I was invited."

"Why don't you want to go home?"

"I don't want to be pressured into becoming a Death Eater," she replied. "Or anything I don't want to do."

McGonagall frowned. "Such as?"

"Marrying young. Acting like I hate Muggleborns and halfbloods."

"And do you?"

Pansy glanced at Hermione. "No. Not anymore."

There was a ripple of surprised murmurs around the table.

"Do you have any schemes of which you are not telling us?" McGonagall asked.

Pansy looked a little shy. "No. I only want to help."

McGonagall frowned. "With what?"

"Taking down Voldemort," Pansy said. "Isn't that what you're all here for?"

"Indeed," McGonagall said. The fire flickered loudly behind her. Her shadow was cast tall over the floor as she paced before it. "Did you have anything to do with the attack today?"

"No," Draco said loudly, at the same time that Pansy said the same thing. "She had nothing to do with this."

"Well, I knew Vo-Voldemort gave him a task," she said, looking guiltily at Draco. "But he refused to tell me more about it."

McGonagall looked at Draco. "Why is that?"

Draco stared at the floor. "She told me she was afraid she would be forced to become a Death Eater, and that she didn't want to. I didn't want her to make the same mistakes I did, or get in trouble just for being associated with me."

"Is this true?" she asked Pansy, who nodded, brushing tears from her eyes.

"He was trying to protect me," Pansy said. "Even though I told him I wanted to help him get out of it."

Rather uncharacteristically, McGonagall approached Pansy and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you, Pansy." She looked to the others. "Will that do?"
There was a pause, until Molly stepped from the table and approached Pansy. She took her hands into her own.

"I'm sorry if we offended you, my dear. I'm sure we are happy to have you join us," she said, smiling, though her face was still red from her cry earlier. "You are very brave, for making this decision."

"It's what I should have done a while ago," Pansy said uncomfortably.

"Very well." McGonagall looked at everyone else. "Does anyone object to her staying?"

No one said anything.

"Thank you," McGonagall said to Pansy. "You may sit down."

Molly led Pansy back to the table. Pansy glanced back at Draco and Hermione. Hermione wished she were sitting there with the rest of them, too, until she remembered Draco was still beside her, strapped to his chair.

McGonagall looked at Draco.

"Will you agree to take Veritaserum? Because of what you have done, you have no choice, but I would rather have your consent."

He nodded.

She withdrew another small bottle from her robes, and Hermione's eyebrows raised. Did McGonagall always carry Veritaserum with her? How had she known to be so prepared? McGonagall waved her wand, and it floated up to his lips and tipped. He drank it. They had given him a stronger dose. Hermione watched as his eye went a little blank under its influence.

"What is your name?" McGonagall asked, clasping her hands tightly before her. She stood erect and calm, and Hermione wondered if she really had seen her crying only hours before.

"Draco Abraxas Malfoy."

"Are you a Death Eater?"

"Yes."

There was a murmur from everyone else.

"When did you join?"

"Nearly one year ago."

Hermione could see everyone's frowns. Sweat beaded along her hairline.

"Why did you join?"

Draco grit his teeth. "It was expected of me. I couldn't refuse if I wanted to. But I wanted to."

"Was there a process to join?"

"Yes. It varies, but I was made to torture and kill a former member."
Hermione looked at Pansy. Her face was pale, her eyes transfixed on Draco.

She hadn't known about it, then.

McGonagall looked sharply at Draco.

"Who did they make you kill?"

"His name was Wells. He kidnapped Muggles for Voldemort's use, but betrayed him by accident because someone from your group tricked him."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"No."

"Do you still want to be a Death Eater?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't support or believe in Voldemort anymore. I'm ashamed of who I used to be."

The twin's mouths had fallen open. Arthur was still squinting. Tonks stared at Draco with wide eyes. Mad-Eye stared at him so intensely, he didn't even twitch when Fleur, sitting beside him, hurried to mop up a fresh stream of blood from one of Bill's wounds.

Harry had an expression of outraged incredulity. Ron was shaking his head.

"How did this happen?"

Draco looked up at Hermione. "She made me question everything I was raised to believe. Then the initiation made me realize this wasn't what I wanted. I was a terrible person in the past—I didn't want to keep on that way."

McGonagall nodded, aware of the surprised looks from the rest of the Order.

"Voldemort gave you a mission," she said. "What was it?"

"I was ordered to kill Dumbledore," he said flatly. "If I failed, or didn't do it, he would kill my parents."

"Merlin," Molly whispered.

McGonagall paused. "Did you want to do it?"

"No. But I had to."

"To save your parents."

"Yes."

"You attempted it twice before tonight, correct?"

"Yes. The first with the cursed necklace. The second with the poisoned wine. I failed both times and two people got hurt."
"Up to this point, you had told no one. Why not?"

"I didn't want to get caught, even if I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to risk getting my parents killed by telling anyone."

"But you told Hermione Granger you are Death Eater."

"Yes. It was the most I could tell her at the time. She was the only person I could trust besides Pansy."

McGonagall hesitated before moving on.

"What was the nature of your relationship with Hermione Granger?"

Hermione looked up, her heart beat faltering.

Draco glanced at her. "I-I treated her badly in the past. I'm ashamed of it. I wanted to remedy that. I wanted to earn her trust."

He had turned red.

Now everyone was looking at her. Hermione blushed, too.

"Did he?" McGonagall asked Hermione.

"Not at first," Hermione admitted. She could feel Ron's suspicious gaze and avoided it. "It took me a long time to believe he was different. I saw how conflicted he was…he was clearly traumatized by something but I didn't know what. He apologized for what he did to me."

"Did you forgive him?"

"Only after I was sure he wasn't lying."

McGonagall nodded.

"Describe what happened tonight and how it began."

Draco swallowed and shifted in his chair. "Voldemort sent me a message late last night. I had to complete my mission today or he would kill me and my parents and infiltrate the castle himself… Over the past several months I managed to fix the Vanishing Cabinet in the Room of Requirement. It allowed me to transport Death Eaters into the castle easily. I tried to hold them back until Dumbledore was in the castle. I wanted to minimize any damage they could do. They were unhappy, and argued with me. They were getting suspicious, I had to let them go, but I instructed them not to kill anyone. I've had Madame Rosmerta under an Imperius for several months. She kept lookout for me for when Dumbledore and Potter were heading back to Hogwarts. I went to the roof and cast the Dark Mark over the school. I ran back downstairs and found Hermione. Dolohov was with me and wanted to attack her but I stopped him by telling him I would do it. She Stunned him and told me I could either turn myself in or I could go help her put a stop to it."

"What did you choose?"

"I went with her." He let his head fall back a little, as if struggling to confront the memory of what had happened only hours ago. "When we got to the tower we found Potter and Dumbledore, returning from wherever they'd been. Weasley came up behind us. Dumbledore told him to barricade the stairs behind us to buy us time. He was weak; he could hardly stand. Potter had to support him
but refused to be taken inside." Draco swallowed again. "Dumbledore said he'd been keeping an eye on me for a while, that he knew what I was going to do. He let me explain myself to him, and said he could help me, but not my parents."

"He asked you to kill him."

Harry and Ron looked up in surprise, wondering how she could have known that when she hadn't been present.

Draco nodded. "He was dying. He told us so himself. He was in pain, hallucinating. He asked me repeatedly to end it." He paused. "I didn't want to. I went up there to turn myself in. I'd decided just then I would rather die, but he was suffering. The Death Eaters were trying to force their way through. Dumbledore told me to make sure they saw it." He looked at everyone assembled in front of him. Most were openly weeping. Harry, Ron, and one of the twins still looked unconvinced.

"I'm sorry," he said to them, knowing full well it wouldn't make a difference.

Lupin was the first to speak.

"Why would Dumbledore agree to help you?" he asked Draco. "Why would he allow this to happen?"

"I don't know," Draco said. "I didn't expect him to."

McGonagall stepped forward.

"Albus knew about this for some months. His first thought was to wait until Draco sought help, but seeing that was a faulty idea, he aimed to talk to him. He learned from Severus that Draco sought Hermione's forgiveness, and after that when we were sure he was not being deceitful, and having a written testimony by Hermione herself, he decided to help him."

"But why?"

"I cannot say for certain," McGonagall said. Hermione sensed she was lying. "But he gave explicit orders to protect the boy and let no harm come to him in this house. You have all heard his account. Albus told Severus and I months ago he would let it happen. He has been ill for some time and decided he would help Draco save his parents." She looked down to Draco.

"Voldemort intended you to fail."

"Yes," Draco replied. "He knew I couldn't do it. He was looking for an excuse to kill us."

"So he didn't murder Dumbledore," Tonks said, her brows lowering.

"But he still killed him!" Harry said, standing from his seat. "He let Death Eaters into Hogwarts!"

"I had no choice," Draco said. "It's a shit excuse, but I was a coward and didn't want to die. Hermione told me I could stop it; that it didn't have to end the way Voldemort wanted it to. I went to the tower to surrender. I wouldn't have killed him if he hadn't asked me to, Potter. You were too blind to see he was half-dead, already even before I found you. I wish it hadn't happened, but at least I didn't try to keep him alive when all he wanted was to die."

Harry looked stricken. Then Ron spoke up.

"How did you get Hermione to believe you?" he asked, looking at him suspiciously. "What lies did
you tell her?"

Draco frowned at him. "I hardly lied to her. I didn't 'get' her to believe me, either—I let her see for herself that I was sorry and then waited for her to decide whether she trusted me or not. I didn't force her into believing me, Weasley."

Ron turned his disbelieving gaze on Hermione. His tone turned more accusatory. "Then why did you stop us from attacking him, back in the tower?"

"Because you would have defied Dumbledore's orders, if you'd succeeded," she said. "He ordered you both to stand down."

"He wasn't in his right mind!" Ron protested. "He was hallucinating! You said so yourself!"

"He was still alert enough to tell Draco the exact moment to do it," she said, her voice faltering. "He wasn't always hallucinating. You heard what he said to us before—" she looked away.

"Well, what now?" Fred asked. His face was paler than normal. He looked at Draco. "What do we do with him?"

"He will remain here for the foreseeable future," McGonagall said. "There is no other option. I believe there is more we may learn from him about the enemy."

Draco's fists had clenched. He sat rigid and uncomfortable in his seat, staring across the room at no one in particular. Hermione eyed the restraints on his chair, wishing she could release him.

"Professor, you can't be serious," Harry said.

"Do not question me, Potter," McGonagall said coldly. "Giving him to the Ministry will do us no good when they are controlled by Voldemort. Perhaps we may gain some leverage in holding him."

Harry clenched his jaw. His eyes met Draco's.

"What about punishment?"

Hermione went pale.

McGonagall sighed. "I believe this is punishment enough, but that may change depending on his behavior. Ultimately, I shall decide." She looked intently at everyone assembled before her. "He is not to be harmed. It was Dumbledore's order that he be protected."

Hermione heard Ron's scoff.

"Minerva," Mad-Eye called. "Word from Flitwick. They need you back at the castle. Parents are arriving at the gate. They want to take their children home."

She rubbed at her temples and nodded. Slowly, everyone stood and gathered in a worried huddle to talk, frequently looking back towards Draco.

"Professor?" Hermione asked.

McGonagall turned, and seeing Hermione approach Draco, tapped her wand on the chair. The restraints rolled away from his arms and legs and coiled back at the base of the chair.

Hermione touched his shoulder gently, and he started, as if he'd fallen asleep, but he looked up at her and stood.
"You will need to stay close to him," she said to Hermione, "since he trusts you. Make sure he is not hurt and that he does not escape. Restrain him if necessary. I will have the twins help you."

"Yes, Professor," Hermione said. Her head was starting to feel light. She pressed a palm to her forehead.

"Would you rather someone else did it?" McGonagall asked her.

"No. I'll do it. Where will he stay?"

"Wherever you think best, but away from the others, preferably." McGonagall looked at Draco. "You said you wanted to get away from Voldemort. This is a step in that direction. I trust that you will not be foolish enough to attempt to run away."

Pansy had joined them. She hugged Draco.

"Will Hogwarts close, Professor?" she asked.

"The Ministry will insist on it, I'm afraid," McGonagall said, frowning. "I will do everything in my power to ensure it stays open for as long as need be, even after the term ends."

"Is there any word on my parents?" Draco asked suddenly. "I need to know if they're okay."

"Severus is with them now," McGonagall said. "He will bring back whatever information he can."

Both Pansy and Draco looked at her in confusion. "Snape? What do you mean?"

"I'll explain later," Hermione said. She looked around quickly. The room had mostly cleared out, but Tonks and Mad-Eye still lingered. Now and then they'd look back to where she and Draco stood, Mad-Eye's magical eye spinning wildly as he scrutinized Draco.

"Thank you for cooperating," McGonagall said to Pansy and Draco. "They have the truth now—it may take them some time to adjust. There is still more to be done." She gave Draco a particular look. "None of this will be easy."

"Professor," Draco asked, "why would Dumbledore want to protect me? I don't understand it."

McGonagall looked at Hermione, then at him.

"Get rest, all of you," McGonagall said. "I still need to speak with some of you. I will be back soon."

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"Ginny's sharing her room with me," Pansy said. "I don't think I can sleep alone tonight." She hesitated and grabbed Draco's arm. "I'm so glad you're okay." Her voice shook. "I'm so sorry all this happened."

Draco nodded. "So am I."

She hugged him, then Hermione, giving both of them a kiss on the cheek. Hermione noticed Mrs. Weasley at the end of the corridor, looking at them curiously. Mr. Weasley was beside her, pretending not to notice.

"Goodnight."

When she had gone upstairs, Hermione led Draco back to the staircase to begin the climb, but stopped short at seeing Bill seated alone at the kitchen table, where he had listened to the
confessions. The light was off but she recognized him by his long hair and the earring he wore in one ear. His face was bandaged and he nursed a cup of a drink she suspected belonged to the bottle he'd hidden when she'd stepped inside.

"I've seen you drink before, you know," she said quietly.

He gave a soft laugh. "Thought you were mum." The bottle reappeared on the table.

"Thank you," she said. "For earlier."

"Greyback has a reputation," he said slowly, not meeting her eye. "Don't ever let him get you alone."

Hermione's throat had gone dry. She nodded.

He pulled something from his pocket and held it out to her. "Mad-Eye knew you'd want this back."

"Merlin," she muttered, and rushed forward to retrieve her wand. "I thought I'd never see it again." She held onto it tight, her knees weak with relief.

"Is that him, back there?" he asked, taking a drink and wincing. He gestured to the doorway, where Draco stood almost out of sight.

"Yes."

"You can come in, you know," Bill called to Draco. "I'm not going to attack you. I can't even stand properly without getting dizzy."

Draco entered the room warily. "I wasn't eavesdropping."

"I don't care if you were," Bill said. He took another drink. "I'm sorry you were forced to do that. It's going to affect everyone hard, having Dumbledore gone, but I reckon if he asked you to do it then it would've been worse to say no." He looked at Draco carefully. "It's odd, seeing you here, but I'm glad you want to get away from all that. Your friend, too."

"Thank you." Draco hesitated. "Is anyone else hurt?"

"Neville got the worst of it, I think. Lestrange got to him but he'll be fine. No deaths, aside from..."

Draco looked away. "Right."

"Bill?" Fleur's voice cut through the darkness. "Mon amour?"

"Ici, ange," he answered, and the bottle disappeared again. He drained the last of his drink. "Better get to bed, you two."

"Goodnight," Hermione said, and she and Draco left the kitchen.

When they reached the fourth floor and entered the bedroom from before, they found Harry and Ron waiting for them. Hermione looked at them warily.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," Ron said. "Just wanted to make sure you wouldn't get killed on the way up here."

"Don't be ridiculous," Draco said. "I told you I'm not killing anyone else, Weasley, but you're making me come close."
Harry withdrew his wand. "You're in no position to make threats, Malfoy."

"Is it wise to go against McGonagall's orders?" Draco asked. "First you would defy Dumbledore, now her?"

"Don't you dare say his name."

"I didn't want to kill him," Draco said. "You heard me say it back there. If he hadn't yelled at me to, I wouldn't have done it." He shook his head. "But he asked. And it allowed me to try and save my family." He looked at him, then Ron. "Don't tell me you wouldn't have done it, or even considered it if you were in my position."

Ron looked away.

Harry didn't move. "I wouldn't know," he said coldly.

"If you think I'm not sorry I did it then you can think again," Draco said.

"But why would Dumbledore want to protect you?" Harry asked.

"If you find out, let me know."

"Don't expect forgiveness from me," Harry said as he approached the door. "If you hurt Hermione or anyone else I'll kill you, Malfoy, I swear it. I don't care about any orders. I'll make you pay."

"I'm not going to," Draco replied angrily. "I don't know how many times I need to tell you that."

"Harry," Hermione called, but he had already left.

Ron stood in front of them now.

"There's more than trust between you two, isn't there?" he asked Hermione.

"If I'd told you, you would have called me crazy," she said. "You didn't trust me back in the tower. You thought I was under a spell. Is that why you left me tied up?"

"That was stupid of me," he said quickly. "Bill told me what happened after. That was my fault."

"It was," she said. "I need you to trust me next time."

"Are you coming back downstairs?" he asked. "I don't think Harry should be alone."

"No, I don't think he wants me around right now. I'm going to sleep after this."

"Ok."

When he was gone, Hermione used her wand to relight the fire.

"I suppose this will be your room from now on," she said softly. "The bathroom's behind that door."

"Thank you," he said.

"I don't know if you're comfortable going downstairs to eat," she said, looking down at her wand. "I can bring you your meals, if you like."

"I think that would be best," he said. "I don't know that they'd want me there. But you don't have to do that, I'll get them myself and take them back down."
"No, I don't mind. I think it's best if they don't see much of you for a while," she said.

Draco took off his robe and belt, stepped out of his shoes. He sat on the side of the bed.

"Where is your room?"

"Across the hall," she said. "You can come knock if you need anything."

He nodded.

Hermione shifted from one foot to the other, wrapping her arms around her middle. She rehearsed the words she was about to say in her head for fear of saying it wrong.

"Would you mind if I stayed with you tonight?"

He looked at her, surprised. She blushed.

"I don't want to be alone," she admitted, turning redder. "But if you want to be, that's okay."

He cleared his throat. "I don't."

Hermione approached the bed quickly, before she lost her nerve. The door locked behind her.

"How do you feel?" she asked, sitting beside him.

"Like shit." He sighed, and noticed she had not taken off her robe. "Aren't you warm enough? Should I add another log to the fire?"

"It still feels cold in here," she said. She was shivering slightly.

He reached forward tentatively to feel her forehead with the back of his hand.

"You're burning."

She smiled faintly. "That explains the headache."

He looked worried. "Should I get you some potions? Are there any in the bathroom?"

"I'm not sure."

He went to check, and returned with a Fever Aid potion.

"Here," he said, unstoppering it to hand it to her. Hermione took a drink and winced. The headache went away immediately.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes. Thank you."

"Good," he said. "If you'll lend me a pillow I'll sleep on the floor."

Hermione scooted backwards on the bed so there was more room. "The point of me staying was not to have you sleep on the floor."

He turned a little pink. "Oh."

He sat back down on the bed, settling in carefully beside her. She had already lied down on her side.
facing him. Draco gently brushed her hair away from her face.

"This is all my fault," he murmured. "None of this would have happened if I'd told you."

"This is a terrible situation," she said softly. "I understand why you did it. I don't think they can blame you for Dumbledore if it was his plan. Thankfully, no one else seems to have been seriously injured, or killed, according to Bill."

"I ordered them not to kill anyone," he said. "At the very least, I'd expect them to have obeyed that."

She closed her eyes briefly. "Greyback would have killed me, if he'd…after… He said he had no more promises to keep. Those were his words."

She felt him freeze.

"I never should have let him into the castle."

"No."

"Your friend, in the kitchen…that was because of me."

"Yes," she admitted. "But he's alive."

"And if he'd died?" he asked. "You wouldn't be here right now. You wouldn't even look at me ever again. I'm not sure I understand why you're here now."

His fingers traced the outline of her ear.

"I'm here because I know you're different," she replied after a moment. "I'm here because I know you didn't do this because you wanted to. Maybe I've gone mad, but I still want to help you. And I'm not the only one."

Draco brushed a lock of hair away from her eye. She blinked slowly and gave him a meaningful look. For what felt like the tenth time that day he found himself wondering what reason Dumbledore could possibly have had for helping him. If there was a way of having the answer immediately he would have done it.

"What about Potter and Weasley?" he asked. "Forgive me for noticing, but there seems to be an issue of trust present. I don't want to jeopardize your friendship with them by being here," he said in a low voice.

"They'll have to learn to live with it," she replied. "They are my friends but they don't dictate my life. Besides," she added, "it's not like you've got a choice. You can't leave here."

Draco felt an impossible, invisible weight descend over him until it was hard to breathe. Her breathing was growing steadier and her eyes staying closed a fraction of a second longer with each blink, but he was afraid to sleep.

What would meet me there?

More red.

One more dead man, by my hand.

Where were his parents now? Were they safe? Had the news reached them yet? How would they contact him now? No one had seen McGonagall stun him and then hide him away for Hermione to
transport here, to this old, smelly house. Would Voldemort take that as a failure, too? Did they all think he was dead?

**Will I ever see them again?**

He knew it was foolish to try to run. The Order, as they called themselves, were all here. At least, most of them. The place was likely very well protected as well. But he wanted to.

*If I did, I'd betray their trust...what little there is of it amongst them. They wouldn't hesitate to tie me down again.*

He looked down at Hermione, who had grabbed his free hand and held it tight.

"Am I your prisoner and you my gaoler?" he asked.

She blinked and reached up to wipe a tear from his cheek.

"I'm your friend," she murmured, but he was too aware of the locked door and warded window. He had seen her lock the three wands in a nightstand beside the bed.

She fell asleep shortly after, her damp cheek pressed into the pillows. He retracted his hand from her and rolled onto his side, listening to her breathing.

He was afraid to close his eyes. He knew what would meet him there.
There was the sound of birds singing outside. Somewhere in the tall and narrow house, the pipes were groaning. There was the muffled sound of someone stomping down a staircase. In the midst of this all, Draco found himself in the process of waking. He was so stiff. His entire body ached. He arched his back, fighting the enormous yawn that crept up his throat. When had he even fallen asleep? There was an impulse to open his eyes, but he was too warm and comfortable to wake up just yet. He turned his head to the side and came in contact with something soft and fuzzy.

His eyes opened at the exact moment there was a knock at the door.

He felt a body startle awake in his arms, and realized with a shock that he was holding Hermione to him with one arm, the other bent under his pillow. The arm holding her was wrapped tight around her lower back, disappearing under her long curls. She was on her side, tucked into him, one arm bent underneath her pillow and the other slung around his neck. Her face was inches from his—her hair was everywhere—a lock of it had ended up over his mouth somehow. Their legs were intertwined. Her scent was everywhere.

There was another knock at the door, louder this time.

She jumped again, and withdrew slightly from him, her body stiff. Their widened eyes met. She, too, had just realized their compromising position. They both blushed.

Wordlessly, they sprang apart. She rolled off the bed and pushed her hair from her face, turning pale. She looked at the door.

Draco stood and went to it, still dressed in his Hogwarts uniform. It was wrinkled and torn but it was all he had. He looked at her and she had crouched behind the bed, peering at him with her eyes still wide and arms crossed, a small crease in her forehead. She was also in her uniform, bedraggled and rumpled from a fitful sleep but still captivating in a way that made him want to reach for her and fall back into bed.

She noticed his stare and gestured wildly to the door, mouthing, 'Open it!'

He opened the door uneasily.

A delicious aroma assaulted him, and his stomach threatened to growl.

Fred Weasley stood there. It might have been George. Draco had never been able to tell the difference between the two. It was definitely one or the other. He held a breakfast tray and a slight frown.

"Morning," he said in a flat, amused drawl. He glanced at Draco's shoddy figure, as if taking an odd sort of pleasure in his misery. "Mum sent you this."

He handed the tray over, and Draco took it after a confused pause.

"...Thank you."

Fred/George gave him an odd look. A brief memory of Hermione and Hagrid having the same reaction the first time he had told them thank you resurfaced, and he wondered when that reaction would ever stop. Then again, he hadn't exactly been on polite terms with most of the people here for nearly all the time he'd known them. He supposed they had the right to be put off by it.
Draco looked down at the tray warily. "I'm not about to become a test subject for one of your products, am I?"

Fred or George smiled. "I'd rather not have McGonagall come after me."

He made to leave, but Draco opened the door wider.

"Has there been any news? On my parents?" he asked.

"None that I've heard, no."

"And Hogwarts?"

The twin gave him a slightly cold look. "McGonagall sent word to say no one's seriously hurt."

Draco felt relief sweep through him.

The other twin came into view. He held another tray in his hands.

"Where's Hermione?" he asked.

"I don't know," Draco said, thinking fast. "I think I heard her go downstairs earlier."

"She could be in the bath," one twin said to the other.

"Might be. I've been knocking for five minutes. Guess I'll leave this here," the other twin said, setting the tray down on a small table beside her door. He looked at Draco. "Sorry we were a little hostile last night. We didn't know the whole story."

"I reckon we've got no choice but to believe you, since you took Veritaserum and all, but it's still a shock."

Draco said nothing.

One of the twins reached up to rub at their neck.

"You really want to leave it all behind, then?"

Draco felt a twinge of pain, coming directly from his Mark.

"Yes."

They were both looking at him curiously. Draco shifted on his feet, his arms growing tired underneath his tray.

"That's something to think on, George," said Fred quietly.

"Aye," said his brother. "Didn't think I'd ever see this happen."

There was an awkward pause.

"Well, best get to eating," one of the twins said, and they headed for the stairs. "And see that you do, or mum will give us a hard time about it and think we did spike it or not give it to you at all. Tell Hermione her food's waiting for her, if you see her."

When the door shut behind him, Hermione came out cautiously from behind the bed. She looked at him questioningly.

"That wasn't so bad," she said.
"Mrs. Weasley sent us each a breakfast," he said. It all looked delicious—smelled it, too—but his appetite had gone.

He set it down on the bed.

"You can have it."

She sat down promptly to take a slice of bacon. He could hear her stomach growl loudly. She grimaced.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"I'll eat some later," he said, and pointed to a trunk at the foot of the bed, frowning. "That wasn't there last night."

She squinted at it. "It's yours. It's got your name on it."

"Who brought it here? And when?" he asked. "I was awake for hours. I would have seen when someone brought it in."

Without saying anything, she stood and left the room quickly. Draco stared after her. He heard her cross the hall and enter her own room. She was back within seconds, her face flushed from the sudden movement.

"My trunk is here, too," she said. "They must have sent them all back for whoever's staying here."

She crossed her arms.

That made sense, but it didn't ease Draco's discomfort at all, the possibility that someone had overseen the delivery of his trunk, and encountered him and Hermione in the same bed.

But nothing happened.

She was reaching the same conclusion, he could see it in her expression.

They had spent the night together in the same bed. If anyone had seen it could mean disastrous results, never mind the fact that all they had done was sleep. He remembered the way they had been positioned when they awoke, and imagined what might have happened, had it been Potter or Weasley who had found them that way.

They had only properly kissed once and already crossed one boundary. Nothing felt linear. Would it ever?

"Well," she said, with a sigh of resignation, "we've got a change of clothes now, at least. I was wondering what we'd do about that."

"Are you feeling better?" he asked.

"I should be the one asking you that." She looked a little shy, oddly, pressing her wild hair down from where it was still sticking out. Her eyes were still tired and there was a bright red spot on her cheekbone where her face had been pressed against her arm whilst she had slept. Her robes were all mussed and rumpled and somehow, she'd looked the most beautiful he'd ever seen her. He had to tear his eyes away from her, fighting the blush that suffused his skin, and found himself extremely grateful that he had not woken with an erection, as that would have made things ever more awkward.

"Am I to be kept in here all day?" he asked.
She went to the little nightstand and retrieved the three wands.

"You don't have to stay in here all the time if you don't want to," she said, slipping them into her wand pocket. He watched longingly as his own disappeared with them. "At some point, you'll have to go downstairs and face everyone. They'll have more questions."

"I told you everything I know last night," he said. "I'm not sure how much else I can provide."

She noticed his stare. "I'm sorry," she said. "I have to. They'd be alarmed to see you with it, even after yesterday."

"They just need time," she offered.

He nodded.

"How long am I to be kept here?"

She looked uncertain. "I don't know."

He nodded again and looked away.

"I should go," she said suddenly, and made for the door. Her face was still pink. "I need a change of clothes." She paused, and made her way to him. She touched his cheek. "I'll be back soon."

Draco's lids lowered at her touch, craving more, craving peace. He caught her palm in his hand, pressed it more firmly against his face.

"Do you think I'm a bad person?" he whispered, looking straight into her eyes.

"Did you enjoy what you did?" she asked. "Any of it?"

"No."

"There's your answer."

"No—" he tried again. "Do you think I'm evil?"

"Of course not."

"Be honest," he said, looking intently at her, "are you still afraid of me?"

"No," she said, pulling her hand away. "I think you were misguided, and that led you to make bad decisions. The important thing is you've learned from it and want to get better. I'm not afraid of you, Draco," she said more softly. "I'm afraid for you."

She left the room. The door clicked quietly behind her.

Harry was outside her door when she exited Draco's room. Their eyes locked at once. Hermione's body threatened to freeze at the surprise of it but she forced herself to keep moving, albeit a little jerkily under the weight of his accusing stare.

"We need to talk," he said, when she had reached her door.

"Are you going to yell at me again?" she asked. "I know you're upset, Harry; we all are, but I don't want you to yell at me like you did last night again. It was awful."
His eyes slid away.

"I won't yell," he said. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I—"

She opened her door and let him inside.

It was apparent that she had not slept in her room the night before, but if Harry suspected, he didn't say a word. Hermione suspected he hadn't even noticed. Her untouched trunk stood on one end at the foot of her bed, which was as neat and tucked in as it had been since she had brought Draco to his room.

"Ron told me he saw you with him," he said suddenly, still standing in the middle of the room, looking at her carefully. "He said you were holding his hand."

Hermione swallowed. "What else did he tell you?"

"Nothing else." Harry hesitated, and she could see that he was struggling to keep calm.

"Is there something between you and Malfoy?" he asked at last, his eyes seeking truth, but at the same time she sensed that he was silently pleading for her denial.

She wished she could. She really wanted to. By this point, however, it was dangerous to continue keeping it a secret, considering everything that was happening. It had to be sorted out so that there could be no misunderstanding or accusations later. Draco's reactions to their accusing him of bewitching her were telling enough on how he felt about it. She had to trust that this wouldn't compromise her friendship with them, but that fear was still very real.

"There is."

Harry stared at her, lost. His eyes were red and dry, his hair tangled and unclean. He was also still in his Hogwarts uniform. Like hers, it had blood stains on his shirt, but she saw no visible injury from where the stains could have come from.

"Hermione," he said quietly, "why? How?"

"I don't know," she said, equally lost. Her arms came up to wrap around herself. "He's changed, Harry. He's different. You saw for yourself last night."

Harry's eyes were fixed on the floor, his brows lowered in concentration, as if he were replaying the memories of the past night, playing and rewinding all scenes with Malfoy in them to see if she was right.

She reached up, surprised to find tears on her cheeks.

"Is that why you protected him?" Harry asked. His eyes were on hers; intent, raw, seeking answers. "Is it?"

She nodded. "He told me months ago that he was a Death Eater."

Harry flinched. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"It was a secret," she said guiltily. "I promised I wouldn't tell. He told me that night that he didn't want to be a Death Eater anymore. He's been so ashamed of what he had to do, Harry. Even when he hurt Ron. I know it's hard to believe, but it's the truth."

"But if you told us, we could have stopped this from happening!" he said. "We could have had him
locked up ages ago!"

Hermione stepped towards him.

"He came to me for help," she said. "He knows what he's done is wrong, and he's sorry for it. You heard his testimony last night, Harry. He was forced to do it. I tried to get him to tell you that he needed help but he knew you wouldn't believe him. That's why he came to me."

"What he did to you last year—" he began.

"Has been forgiven," she reminded him, a little sternly. "Really, Harry. You know me better than that. I'll never forget it, but I know he'd never do it again. I didn't walk into this blindly."

Harry shook his head. He sank down onto the floor where he rested with his hands covering his face. Hermione rushed forward to land on her knees in front of him.

"Harry."

"I'm fine," he said numbly.

"I know that was probably the last thing you wanted to hear," she said, crouching beside him. "I'm sorry. But Draco isn't our enemy."

Harry was quiet for a long time. Hermione, afraid to speak again, waited for his answer.

"I know it was Dumbledore's choice to let himself be killed," he said finally, speaking slowly, as if still formulating his response. "I just—wanted it not to be. And the fact that it was Malfoy only made it worse."

"He didn't want to do it," Hermione reminded him gently. "But before it happened, he turned himself in, Harry. Remember that."

He uncovered his face and shook his head, as if still in disbelief. His eyes were so haunted; Hermione felt her heart twist just to see it.

"How is he now?"

Hermione bit her lip. "I had to spell him to go to sleep. He was hysteric for a bit, and couldn't sleep."

Harry turned to look at her. "You were with him last night."

Hermione winced. "I had to make sure he wasn't going to hurt himself."

*Among other reasons…*

He looked at her curiously. "He's hurt himself before?"

"No," she said, "but I'm afraid he might start to." She bit her lip. "I'm certain he's been traumatized by the things he's had to do. Back at Hogwarts, sometimes I was afraid he was losing his mind."

"I don't feel sorry for him," Harry said.

"I'm not asking you to, Harry," she replied softly. "I just need to make sure you know he was forced to do this."

"Do…do you care about him?" he asked.
"I do." She looked down at her lap. "I know how it looks. I must have lost my mind, right? I still think that, sometimes. Of course, it took ages to get to this point, it didn't just happen suddenly. You don't know how many times he's apologized for what he did to me. He's so different now—" She blushed. "Obviously, I don't support what he's done. But I will support him getting away from Voldemort."

"Do you...like him?"

Hermione thought of his pale, sharp face, musseed with exhaustion, how only hours ago his arms had been wrapped so tight around her she could hardly move but she'd never done a thing to object...the way he trusted her with his fate although what he longed for most was miles and miles away...

"Yes."

He winced. "Okay." She knew that it wasn't.

She put her hand on his. "I don't want this to change anything between you or me or Ron."

He shook his head. "It changes everything, Hermione."

And he was right. But what else could she hope for when the world was already upside down?

Harry sighed. The ceiling above them creaked. Hermione could hear the distant sounds of people walking about in the floors below. There was the muffled shriek of a teakettle.

"Before we left the cave last night," he muttered, "Dumbledore said something about learning to forgive old enemies." He passed a hand over his face. "I didn't think anything of it. I see what he meant now."

"I know this is hard," Hermione said. "But it's hard on all of us, too. One thing I think we can be grateful for is that Dumbledore died by his own choice, at least."

They got up slowly.

"I need to talk to him," Harry said as they reached the door.

"Give him some time," Hermione suggested. "I think it's best if we all speak to him in a group, and not until McGonagall comes back."

"When will that be?"

"I don't know."

Harry hesitated before opening the door, and sensing his grief, Hermione flung her arms around him and pressed him close tightly.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," she whispered. "I wish this had all never happened."

He nodded into her shoulder, and after several excruciating seconds of them remaining frozen in a desperate embrace, they parted, and Harry left the room without another word.

After she had taken a long, hot shower and changed into something that was not torn and bloody Hermione found herself standing at the foot of her yet-unused bed, staring down blankly at her trunk. It had been packed with all her belongings. Her books, her robes, her Muggle clothes and spare uniforms. Her schoolbag lay in the center, still crammed with fresh parchment and her favorite quill-
holder, fashioned into the shape of an owl, that she'd gotten on her first trip to Diagon Alley.

She reached down and touched her fingers to the Gryffindor patch on the breast of her spare robe. Her Prefect badge gleamed beside it.

*Will any of us ever go back?*

It was a depressing thought. She had worked so hard for her achievements, for her future career, and it had come to a screeching halt because of Voldemort.

McGonagall had said she would fight to not let Hogwarts be closed. Hermione felt that it would be shut down regardless, by Voldemort's order. If it did, would it ever open again? It would never be the same, and that was an even worse thought.

*What was left for them to do now?*

Without Dumbledore's protection, Harry would be an open target. He would have to go into hiding. Draco, too. Harry had told them everything Dumbledore had shown him about Horcruxes, and had mentioned once that he intended to go track the rest down, but that had been months ago, and she was certain he didn't have a plan. She remained without a doubt that the Order would want to send her and Pansy and Ginny and Ron home for the summer and keep Harry and Draco here for their own good.

*That won't accomplish anything. Voldemort will find a way to get to Harry. He always does. And if he finds Draco…*

They all needed to talk.

She pulled herself away from her trunk at last and shut it firmly, haunted by the sense of finality she got from the sound of the lock clasping.

She left her room, her heart feeling heavy, and walked up to Draco's door. She knocked once.

"It's me."

The door opened soon after. Draco made way for her to come through.

"McGonagall sent word that she'll be here in an hour," she said, and then noted with dismay that he had not showered or dressed. He was still in his tattered robes.

"What's wrong?" she asked immediately. Her hand came up to his forehead to see if he had caught her fever.

"I fell asleep," he said. "I meant to get ready and it just happened. Sorry."

Hermione began to push him gently toward the bathroom. "Get to it, then. You'll feel better, trust me."

He began to walk reluctantly. "If you had thrown me into a cell with rusted bars and a dirt floor I would have preferred that better to this. I don't deserve the luxury of a shower, or this bedroom. It feels perverse, after what I've done."

Hermione stopped. "You're not here to be tortured, Draco. You're here to be helped. Dumbledore believed you're worth saving. Why can't you see that?"

He said nothing, but she could sense the guilt that had frozen him to the ground.
"And for what it's worth," she added, "if they had wanted to throw you in a dungeon I'd have gone and dragged you back out, but we aren't monsters, here."

Draco nodded.

Harry's words had floated back up to Hermione's thought stream, and she bit her lip.

"Draco, did you feel forced to kill Dumbledore?"

"Does it matter?" he asked, looking away. "I already did it."

"It matters," she insisted. "I know you felt pressured to do it. He practically ordered you to, didn't he?"

Draco wouldn't look at her.

"I couldn't refuse," he said quietly.

Hermione grabbed his arm. "We may not know why he did it," she said, "but at least everyone knows it wasn't murder. He wanted to die."

He nodded. Hermione wrapped her arms around him carefully.

How had someone so bitter and cold turned so fragile? It would have been remarkable had it not been so tragic. Draco's hands were pressing into her back, pressing her to him, his head burrowing into her shoulder where Harry's had been only moments prior.

"Thank you," he said. "I owe you my life for what you've done for me."

"You don't owe me anything," she whispered. "I just want to see you get better."

He held her tighter, to the point of it being almost painful, but Hermione found a strange sort of pleasure from it, and held him until he let her go.

"Go on," she said. "You smell."

He let out a surprised huff of laughter at that through his nostrils, and his lips formed a half-smile. He quickly disappeared into the bathroom.

A beat later there was a knock at the door. It caught her off guard so badly she jumped, her hand flying to her mouth to stifle the small gasp that she'd emitted at the sound.

She went to the door and opened it, praying it wouldn't be Harry or Ron.

Ginny and Pansy's expectant faces met her there instead. Hermione felt herself relax instantly.

"Harry told us you might be here," Pansy said. "Go on, let us in quick."

Hermione let them through immediately, just as the shower was turned on in the bathroom.

"Don't worry," Ginny said, "we won't take long."

"What is it?" Hermione asked, glancing at the bathroom door, as if Draco would emerge from it that very instant.

"There's something between you and Draco," Pansy said, looking at her with her eyes half
narrowed, "and you told Ron and Harry before you told us. I don't know about you, Gin, but I'm rather insulted."

Hermione blinked.

"Look-"

"I suppose this explains why you didn't look so happy after Ron kissed you before the battle," Pansy said, looking thoughtful. "I did wonder, after all."

Ginny's eyes went wide. "Ron kissed you?"

"Yes," Hermione said quickly. "He, erm, had romantic feelings towards me—"

"Only you could make it sound that awkward," Ginny said, shaking her head.

"—but I don't feel the same," Hermione concluded, giving her a look. "I told him so a while ago. I think that last kiss was just him getting swept up in the emotion of it all."

"Well, it can't be helped, I guess," Ginny said, looking a little glum. "Although I was rooting for the two of you."

"How are you both?" Hermione asked, trying to change the topic.

"Fine, as you see," Ginny said. "Not a scratch on either of us." Her voice lowered. "Nobody seems to know what to think. Dad's been saying he trusts Dumbledore, and if he ordered Malfoy to kill him, then there shouldn't be punishment, aside from allowing Death Eaters into the school. Even Moody and Tonks are saying the same thing. Fleur thinks it's too dangerous, having him here, though. So does Lupin."

A house divided. Hermione already knew Harry and Ron's opinions. She sighed.

"You don't need to worry, either, neither Harry nor Ron gave you away," Pansy added, "but we overheard them talking to each other when Ron said he saw you two holding hands."

Hermione closed her eyes and cursed under her breath.

"So it's true?"

"Yes, but—"

"That also explains why you stood by his side all last night during the interrogation," Ginny said. "I'm glad we got to hear from both your sides or else I'd be very worried about you, Hermione."

"Oh, ha, ha." She gave them both a serious look. "You don't think I'm mad, do you?"

"No, of course not," Ginny said adamantly. "But the timing could have been better."

"I didn't do this on purpose!" Hermione half-hissed. "It all just…happened."

"We weren't criticizing you," Pansy said. "It's simply the truth."

"Oh."

"He's in there?" Pansy asked, pointing to the bathroom door. "How is he?"
"Not well." She didn't know how else to put it.

"But it is true?" Ginny asked, taking Hermione by the arm. "He's changed?"

"Yes."

"And he's apologized for everything?"

"Yes. All of it is true."

At their blank expressions, she sighed. "I would have told you all earlier but I didn't know how. Harry and Ron had enough trouble believing it—I've tried telling them he was different but they just insisted he was trying to trick me."

"Well, they had a point," Ginny said.

"They did," Hermione agreed, "but they could have at least given me a little credit. I would never have gone this far if I didn't believe Draco was sincere."

Pansy came up to hug her. "Well I trust you, and I trust Draco. I might as well confess now that I've known he had feelings for you for some time, but promised not to tell. As two of my close friends, I wanted you two to resolve your differences, but I didn't dare think this would actually happen." She gave a soft laugh. "What a mess this is."

"I know," Hermione said, sighing. "And at the worst time, too. I was terrified Harry and Ron would see me as a traitor. I'm afraid they still might. But I don't regret it. Any of it."

"I hope this all works out, somehow," Ginny said. "If you believe him, and if this was all Dumbledore's plan, then I believe him."

Pansy nodded.

The shower cut off suddenly, and they immediately went for the door.

"Oh, I forgot to say Mum said McGonagall would come soon," Ginny said. "We've all got to go downstairs when she does for another meeting."

"Good," Hermione said. "And we all need to talk after that. We should meet in Harry and Ron's room."

"Alright," they said, and left. Hermione had just locked the door after them when Draco emerged from the bathroom, a dingy, fraying towel wrapped around his hips. His wet hair fell into his eyes. Drops of water clung to his skin. He did a double-take at finding Hermione still there.

"Is something wrong? I heard the door close."

"Nothing," she said quickly. "I came back too early. Sorry. I'll just go."

She reached for the door handle.

"Hermione," he said, and she turned back around, her cheeks pink, to see him coming towards her. She had seen his bare chest before, but then it had been half-obscured by bandages. She didn't know why it was affecting her so now. His shoulders were wide. There was a birthmark low on his throat that she had never noticed before. His scars were red still, and she wondered absently if they would ever fully fade. A few of them stretched long enough down his midsection, and disappeared beneath his towel. There was a trail of dark hairs below his navel—she caught sight of it and blushed.
"What?" she asked, panic tingling her voice. She cleared her throat.

"I was thinking," he started slowly. "I know we just got into whatever this is. I don't know if it's serious or not. I've never had it happen this way, but when it's with you, I don't mind."

Hermione was having trouble focusing. "But?" she asked.

"But I don't want to put you in any danger by associating with you like this," he said. "I have feelings for you, but I'd rather be alone than see you get hurt by my family or anyone who comes after me. If you want to stop now, tell me."

Hermione crossed her arms. "I won't be intimidated away from something I want," she said. "I can protect myself, and the others will come around eventually. If they don't, then that would be unfortunate, but I don't need their permission." She hesitated, briefly breaking eye-contact. She tucked her hair behind one ear. "I don't know how serious this is, either. I don't even know if it needs defining right now. I only know that I like you."

Draco stepped forward slowly until there was only a sliver of space between them, and cupped her face in his hands.

"Am I allowed to say I'm relieved?" he asked quietly. "I care for your safety, but I'm still selfish. I want you with me, as long as you want to stay."

Hermione wiped a droplet of water from the edge of his nose. "I'm glad to see you're feeling better."

His lips pressed against hers gently, and at first it was pleasing, but she always wanted more. Hermione kissed him back urgently, her hands lowering to cling to his damp shoulders, sliding along his skin. Draco's hands were in her hair, on her back, molding her to him, their lips moving feverishly. She could feel his erection through his towel and turned red but focused more on his lips traveling down from her mouth to her throat, pressing kisses there again in a way that made her legs shake and her mind cloud.

"Gods," she whispered, as he nibbled at her throat. The heat of his tongue made her shudder against him, one palm pressed to his chest for balance, the other clinging to his shoulder.

To be snogging in the midst of everything that had happened...it felt wrong, but she would not refuse comfort when it was presented in such a manner. She could tell by Draco's response, that he needed it, too.

"Every time I've been on the brink of losing my mind, you've been there, bringing me back to reality," he murmured into her skin. "You're like my tether. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you."

He trailed his kisses back up to her mouth for one last, lingering kiss, and pulled away. They were both panting heavily. He readjusted his towel, ears pink, and when she met his eye he seemed rather shy.

"You don't owe me anything," she repeated.

"They would have killed me three times over, up on that tower," he said, a hidden heat behind his eyes. "You stopped them every time, even when you could have gotten hit. You didn't have to do that."

Hermione looked away. He leaned in again to kiss her forehead. Once, twice, three times.

"Thank you." He stepped away, and frowned. "I'm sorry about—," he gestured downwards at his
Hermione let out a nervous, shaky laugh. "You should get dressed. I'll be waiting outside."

Almost everyone was waiting for them when they arrived. Fred and George came bounding from their room and came down the stairs just behind Hermione and Draco, whom they nodded to in greeting after an awkward pause.

Professor McGonagall met them at the entrance to the dining room. Lunch was being served.

"There is much to discuss," she said to them. "We will begin once everyone has eaten."

Draco could feel the stares on him. Despite his interrogation the night before he had expected hostility, but there was less of that now than there had been the night before. Now, everyone seemed more curious, and almost skittish of being near him, as if he carried some disease they were afraid of catching.

The dining room was spacious, and probably grander in earlier days, but had come into neglect. Wallpaper had come down in long strips, the floor was rather greasy and uneven; the drapes were full of holes made by moths and dingy, to boot. Portraits on the wall had been abandoned, or were so dirty you could hardly make out whether they were landscapes or portraits. The brightest light in the room came from the massive fireplace at one end, and he stared into the same fire that he had stared at when he had been under the influence of Veritaserum. The chairs and table in the room were scratched and worn, broken, even. It was really rather unappealing. In comparison, he thought of his home, clean and expensive and better lit. The opposite of this place. His mother would have been distressed at the sight of it all. The thought made his breath catch in his throat.

You are the mercy of former enemies, likely orphaned, and without wand, yet you still think enough of yourself to criticize this place.

The voice had pointed.

"How did you sleep?" came a warm voice to his right.

Draco looked down to find Mrs. Weasley smiling tentatively at him, a ladle in one hand. He remembered all the times he had made fun of her, and felt guilt wash over him.

"Fine, thank you," he said quietly. "Thank you for the breakfast."

He hadn't expected any food at all.

"You're very welcome," she said. "You do look very malnourished, dear. Best to eat up. Have some soup?" She ladled a good portion of vegetable soup into his bowl.

"Thank you," he said, and moved along the table, looking for someplace to sit. Potter and Ginny were sitting side by side, and Weasley and Pansy were sitting together on the opposite side. He approached them cautiously. Hermione caught up to him.

"Come on," she said, motioning for him to follow. "Over here."

"Wotcher," came a distantly familiar voice, and Draco turned to find a rather tall and gangly woman sporting short pink hair, black clothing, and brown eyes had come up beside him. There was an air of familiarity to her that put him at ease, just to be beside her.
"I'm Tonks," she said by way of introduction. "Distant cousin of yours."

"Oh," he said. He hardly remembered her, but knew they had met at least once, years and years ago, perhaps before he had even started going to Hogwarts.

"I know it's been a long time," she said, and when she blinked, he was startled to find her eyes had gone from brown to blue. She noticed his stare, and grinned. "Your mum always hated this." She blinked again and they had gone from blue to the same green as Potter's. "That, and my mum's blood-traitor status."

Oh. That was why he hardly remembered her, then.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It isn't your fault," she said. "I've been hearing stories about you for years, made me think you were going to turn out just like your dad." She rubbed at her nose. "I'm glad you decided you don't want that. It's a shame none of us knew Albus was seriously ill, but at least he isn't suffering anymore. I'm just sorry you had to go through that."

He didn't know what to say. Tonks eyed him carefully.

"Did you ever hear of your other cousin Regulus?" she asked.

"No."

One corner of her mouth lifted. A sad smile. "Of course not. But I feel you and him are pretty similar. We should talk about that sometime. I think you'll be interested in his story."

Draco frowned. "If you think I'll be, I'm interested to hear it."

"Right," she said. "I won't distract you any longer. You need to eat and I've got to talk to Remus."

She patted him firmly on the shoulder, and left.

His mind still fixated on that brief encounter, Draco sat down next to Hermione, and the group went silent. Potter and Weasley gave him cold looks. Ginny and Pansy looked friendly.

A divided table.

He twitched, feeling Hermione's hand on his arm behind the cover of the table.

Pansy turned to him and leaned in close, simulating a hug without using her arms.

"How are you?"

"Present," he muttered, aware of Potter and Weasley blatantly eavesdropping nearby.

"Has there been any news?" she asked, more quietly. "I haven't heard a word."

Draco shook his head.

Hermione leaned in to get the group's attention.

"We all need to talk later," she said seriously. "In Harry's room."

Everyone nodded. Draco caught Weasley's eyes shift towards him then back at the others, as if he
was surprised that Draco had been included in the conversation. He remembered the jealous comments he'd had the misfortune to overhear that one time in Hogsmeade, and his furious glare as he had come running up the steps of the Astronomy tower, when he and Hermione had been holding hands.

_There's no way he doesn't know. Or he's got to suspect, at least._

He felt a prickle of uneasiness stir along the hairs on his arms. He'd known he would have to expect hatred and suspicion, when and if the news about himself and Hermione ever broke. He hadn't thought to add jealousy to that list.

He looked away.

The rest of the meal passed quickly. Draco ate guiltily, discovering that he was famished. Mrs. Weasley had insisted he eat a second serving of soup, and handed him a piece of bread and butter when she saw this his bowl was still half-full. Draco caught the mystified look her son sent her.

Draco looked down the table as he waited for everyone to finish. Tonks caught his eye and sent him a small smile. Her eyes were purple now, but when she winked at him they went back to brown instantly. Not many people were talking, aside from the adults. Mr. Weasley was discussing current events at the Ministry to his wife and Remus Lupin, whom Draco had been startled to see the night before. He looked worse for wear, which was saying something, as he always looked drab, and was devouring a leg of lamb alongside Bill. Draco glanced at Bill's heavily bandaged face and felt his stomach turn. Moody, McGonagall, and Fleur Delacour were mostly silent, sitting together in a small group by the rest of the adults. Fred and George were sitting close together, discussing something privately in hushed tones, a scrap of parchment between them.

The door opened, catching everyone's attention, and Severus strode inside, dripping rain water. Draco almost stood from the table in surprise. Snape caught his eye and shook his head briefly.

_Not now._

Pansy had seen him, too. She looked at Draco, her eyes wide.

Severus went straight to McGonagall and whispered something to her. She said something back, and for all he tried Draco could make none of it. He suspected everyone else had tried, too.

McGonagall stood from the table and everyone forgot about their meal, their attention focused on her.

"Hogwarts has been closed," she announced. He felt Hermione's palm turn into a fist on his arm. "This is my decision. We need time to make repairs and add new protective enchantments around the castle. It was my intention to leave it open for the summer as a sort of haven for students who would prefer to stay there, but the Ministry has made certain threats towards the safety of anyone who stays beyond the term. It is being dealt with, but for the time being, I think it wise to remain close."

Potter was shaking his head in disbelief. Draco concurred.

"When will the funeral be, Minerva?" Moody asked.

"Sunday," McGonagall said. "The time has yet to be arranged." She paused. "He will be buried at Hogwarts."

"And the rest of the students?" Bill asked.
"They have all been taken home by their parents," she responded. "Only the faculty remains."

"How can the Ministry get away with making threats at Hogwarts?" Potter asked angrily. "There's got to be somebody who can investigate that!"

"We're that somebody, Harry," Tonks called. Moody nodded. "But there's only so much we can do when our higher-ups answer to Voldemort's plants. We're doing all we can, we promise."

"Severus," McGonagall called, and he joined her. His eyes landed on Draco and flickered over to Pansy.

"The Dark Lord has been made to believe that you both were killed in the battle last night."

Pansy went pale. Draco felt himself go cold.

"They witnessed the death of Albus Dumbledore at your hand," he continued. Most noticeable was his nonuse of the word 'murder'. "They believe you accomplished your task. Per Dumbledore's order, we must make them believe it was as the Dark Lord wanted." He paused. "They have made demands for your bodies."

Ginny reached across the table to grab Pansy's hands. Pansy was crying quietly.

"And our parents?" he asked. His own voice sounded thousands of miles away.

"Your parents are grieving," Severus said to Pansy. His eyes were emotionless as always. "Yours," he said to Draco, "I have no information on. I have not seen them since the day before yesterday. Voldemort will not reveal where they are or if they are alive."

Draco nodded. It was the only thing he could do. He felt Hermione squeeze his arm gently.

"If he believes I did it," he said slowly, "why would he not release them?"

"I don't know," Severus said, and it was strange and almost terrifying, to hear him say it. "The Dark Lord will say nothing of it, not even to me."

The room had gone quiet. Everyone was staring at him. They looked uneasy, and others looked at him with pity. Draco couldn't stand it. Pansy had leaned further into him. He could feel her tears soaking into his shirt.

McGonagall motioned to the group of students. "I must speak with you all in private."

"Can't we stay in Hogwarts, Professor?" Ron asked, once they had settled into the same tiny study where Hermione had met with Dumbledore only months ago. "We could hide somewhere inside to where they couldn't reach us."

"I will not risk that," McGonagall said sternly. "What would happen if they tore down the entire castle with you all smuggled somewhere inside? It is too dangerous."

"I can't go back to the Dursleys," Potter said. "I'll be seventeen in a few months. They'll want to kick me out, and Voldemort could track me down anywhere."

"I have arranged it with Mrs. Weasley," McGonagall said. "She would be happy to have you for the rest of the summer. Hogwarts will be open again in September, and we will arrange safe transportation for you all to the castle before the beginning of term."
"Where will Draco and I stay, Professor?" Pansy asked.

"You are both welcome to stay here at Grimmauld Place as long as you like," McGonnagall said, folding her hands in front of herself. "But Molly has expressed an interest in hosting the two of you for the summer."

"What?" Weasley asked. "My mum wants him to stay with us?"

"Yes," McGonnagall said, giving him a sharp look. "That was her intent, but not using the same infliction…"

"What's wrong with that?" Pansy asked, frowning. Ron turned red.

"Don't get me wrong, Pansy, I'm happy to have you there any time, it's him I've got a problem with," he said, looking hard at Draco.

"I understand that," Pansy said carefully. "But I won't be comfortable if Draco isn't with me. I don't want you to be alone," she told him.

"Weren't you paying attention at all last night?" Hermione asked Ron waspishly.

"I'll be fine," Draco said, but Hermione didn't believe him, and neither did Pansy.

"I'm sure what my brother means to say is that we'd be happy to have both of you," Ginny said loudly as Ron continued to try and defend himself.

McGonnagall nodded in approval. "Ultimately, it is your decision," she said to Draco and Pansy. "Although if you stay here you may remain alone for long periods of time. Grimmauld Place is haphazardly occupied at times, and at others, nearly deserted. I am sure at the Burrow you will feel less isolated, unless if that is what you wish for." She cleared her throat and began to pace. "There is also the matter of Bill and Fleur's wedding. You have all been invited. Yes, even you," she said in response to Draco and Pansy's confused expressions. "Since there are four of you who will be wanted by one or many parties by that point, you must operate under disguise for any event taking place outside where you will stay."

"Four?" Ginny asked, frowning.

"Harry will be sought after the moment he turns seventeen. Draco and Pansy will be assumed dead or captive, considering how much they believe our reports. And Hermione will be wanted by the Ministry."

"Why?" Hermione asked, her stomach turning in summersaults.

"The Inquiry of Muggleborns and Theft of Magic Act was signed today by the Minister," McGonnagall said. "They will be searching for all Muggleborn witches and wizards who do not respond to their summons."

Draco grabbed Hermione's hand without thinking. She held onto it tight, even after he had realized his mistake. He saw McGonnagall's eyes linger on their hands briefly and then move away, but Weasley and Potter's stares lasted longer and were more suspicious.

"You will all move to your new locations tomorrow," she said, "so it is imperative you make your choice before morning. After the wedding, if you choose to attend, we will split you up into smaller groups to stay better hidden."
Draco glanced at Hermione from the corner of his eye. She looked displeased, in fierce concentration. Whatever she was thinking, he had no doubt they would hear it in their meeting later. He noticed Potter and Weasley glancing at her as well.

"Now," McGonagall continued, oblivious to their intercommunications, "I must speak to Harry, Hermione, and Draco alone."

They all exchanged looks, but after a moment Ginny, Pansy, and Ron left the room silently.

She waited a moment to speak, her sharp eyes flickering from one to the other.

"News has spread about what happened last night," she said, "as it always does. There are several reports circulating, and many of them are obvious fabrications. Even the least erroneous one has made a false distinction."

"What do you mean, Professor?" Harry asked, his voice hoarse.

"You are all familiar with the work of Rita Skeeter, I assume," she said, and they nodded. "She is not the only reporter who uses sensationalism and blatant lies to sell copies. There are others who would have you believe Voldemort himself was at Hogwarts last night, or that you," she said, looking at Draco, "smuggled an army of Inferi into the castle to kill Dumbledore."

Hermione frowned. "Who could honestly believe that?"

"The Ministry is backing some of these claims," McGonagall said seriously. "It would seem Voldemort himself is trying to obscure the truth."

"Why?" Harry asked, his brows knitting together. "Everyone's got to know he was behind it."

"As quickly as he is trying to fill the Ministry with his own allies, there are still a great many friends of Dumbledore and the Order there. I would assume he doesn't want to fuel an uprising," she said.

"What can we do to help?" Hermione asked.

"For now, nothing." At their looks of displeasure, McGonagall held up a hand. "The Ministry is intricate. I know you are all bright students, but it takes years of experience to get under the many layers of the Ministry. I am not merely speaking of infiltrating the building. We have a few groups of Specialized Task Aurors who are working hard to loosen Voldemort's hold."

"Is Scrimgeour working with Voldemort?" Draco asked.

"We are not entirely sure. We have tried to reach him many times, but he is as understanding as Fudge, and is easily swayed." She shook her head. "Either way, it will take time to unravel all that has been twisted. It is best to leave it to those who know how to deal with it. I am not trying to insult or demean you; if any of you students gets caught at the Ministry you will be held there without warrant for arrest, and likely passed on to Voldemort. It is too dangerous to risk," she said looking directly at Harry.

"Then what can we do?" he asked impatiently.

McGonagall gave a flick of her wand, and a strange, crystalline bowl appeared on the desk. It was larger than the average dinner plate and taller; inside it held a strange white liquid that emitted a pale mist. There was a green glow to the contents. It illuminated the small, dingy office like an uneasy dream.
"Are you all familiar with this item?" she asked.

"It's a pensieve," the three of them said simultaneously. They all looked at each other in surprise.

McGonagall blinked. "Indeed." She lowered her wand to it, and stood. They followed suit, and watched as she stirred the mercurial-like contents inside. Each stir produced a new memory—a different flash of something, whether it was a face, an interior of some place—a young woman with long, dark hair in Gryffindor Quidditch robes and a broom hoisted on one shoulder striding confidently through the Quidditch pitch, people already seated in the stands waiting restlessly for the game to begin. The rest of the players were approaching the field alongside her. McGonagall stirred it away and new one resurfaced. Harry's breath caught audibly as they saw a scene inside Dumbledore's office, the man himself standing at his desk, tears in his eyes.

"I think this is something you all need to see," she said quietly, and beckoned them to come in closer. Draco and Harry leaned in cautiously. Hermione, who had never used a pensieve before, but had read about them, hesitated before mirroring their movements.

She felt the mists on her skin and the mysterious green light filtered through her eyelids. When had she closed her eyes? But it was too late, because she was falling through, and a scream rose up in her throat but she bit it down, letting loose only a gasp when she landed on her feet, and felt Draco and Harry land beside her. She opened her eyes and found herself in Dumbledore's office, staring right at him from across his desk. McGonagall was not with them. At least, not the one from the present, because the one they found speaking behind them was dressed as if about to go to bed, and her hair was let down.

"What is this?" she heard Draco mutter.

Harry said nothing, but she saw the strain in his eyes as he looked around the office.

"I'm afraid there isn't much time left," they heard Dumbledore say, and jumped.

"Regarding Draco Malfoy?" she asked, and Albus nodded.

Draco went still beside her.

"How are you certain?"

"The term will end soon. They are likely pressuring him to act as soon as possible. I would not be surprised if he acts before the end of the week."

Draco's face was white. Harry was listening to every word keenly, his brows coming closer together. His eyes had gone hard.

McGonagall shifted in her chair. "We still have no clue if he will manage to do it."

Dumbledore rubbed at his eyes, sighing. "He must, or they will kill him and his family. They will not accept anything less. I have asked Severus to do it if Draco cannot, but that, too, will put him in great peril."

At the mention of Snape, Draco turned to look sharply at Hermione, his expression hungry, demanding answers. She opened her mouth to explain, realizing she had not done it earlier, but the memory played on, and his attention diverted, he stared raptly back at the defunct Headmaster.

They had begun to discuss Dumbledore's failing health. When the Headmaster admitted he was already dying, Harry looked away, his fists clenched. They discussed Snape again, and what he had
done to help alleviate the effects of the curse that ate at the Headmaster.

Hermione put her hand on Draco’s shoulder. He was shaking.

"I have lived long enough," they watched Dumbledore say. "I would rather end my life soon than have his cut too early. I will not see another student of mine lost to those forces."

Because it was McGonagall’s memory, they could feel her grief and helplessness, the pain of losing so close a friend. Hermione wiped at her eyes with her sleeve. She had cried so much already. How did the tears keep coming?

Draco was looking away from them all now. His body was stiff under her hand, but as the memory played out, she knew he was still listening.

Through their grief, Harry and Hermione eyed the interaction between the two Headmasters with great interest. Neither had known the two were such good friends. They had seen them speaking together often, and it was true they always sat together at meals, but everyone had merely assumed it was because she was his second in command. None had ever thought that a great friendship had been there all along, and that only made their hearts sink lower. Hermione thought she understood now why McGonagall had not joined them in her own memory. That, and perhaps she was ashamed at what she had said about Draco.

"Watch after Harry. The coming times will not be easy for anyone, least of all him. He must complete my mission when I am gone."

"I promise," McGonagall replied.

Harry looked at the ceiling and said nothing. Hermione could see tears in his eyes.

When Dumbledore asked McGonagall to protect Draco, she felt his body shake under her palm. Was he crying, too? It was hard to tell, with him having turned his back on them all.

The topic of discussion turned to Hermione’s letter. Upon hearing about what she had written about him, Draco turned slowly to face her, his eyes red and raw, his expression mystified.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, fearing he was angry she had broken her promise not to tell anybody, but he didn't seem to be. At least, not at her. Neither of them noticed Harry watching them closely.

"You see Grindelwald when you look at him, don't you?" McGonagall asked.

Hermione frowned.

They saw Dumbledore nod.

"I see a boy," he said. "A lost boy whose friends and family failed him. I stood by and let Gellert become a threat. I did not intercede when Tom Riddle was my student. I saw what they became. I knew there was a risk. I did not do enough."

"You could not have prevented everything," McGonagall replied.

"I will take my chances and prevent anything I may," Dumbledore said, and the memory began to fade to black. There was an odd rush of sound, and suddenly Hermione, Harry, and Draco felt themselves being pushed backwards by some invisible force, still surrounded by darkness until suddenly there was a pop in their ears and they were back in the tiny study in Grimmauld Place, where the real and present McGonagall stood where she had been when they left, surveying them
with slightly shameful eyes.

There was a brief pause. The three of them were breathing hard in the wake of their exiting the memory, but Draco's anger would wait no longer.

"You knew," he said, his voice blunt and low. "You knew this whole time. Both of you."

"Yes," McGonagall said.

"You knew what I'd done, what Voldemort wanted me to do, and you did nothing."

"What could we have done that would not have put you in more danger?" McGonagall asked, a touch of impatience in her tone. "What would you have done if we pulled you aside and told you we knew? We thought you would have either run or denied it. Expelling you would have guaranteed your death. The best course of action was to let it play out."

"So you were just going to let me terrorize everyone? I injured your students," he said, the agony in his voice almost too much to bear. "I let Death Eaters into your school. I had someone under an Imperius curse for months. I could have killed someone. You should have locked me up." He was on the verge of shouting.

"Severus was always there," McGonagall said, her voice soft. "Your mother was not the only one who asked him to watch over you. Every time you decided to make an attempt he was there to make sure there were no casualties. He made sure Hagrid found Katie Bell. You tried to evade him, but he still found you after your fight with Potter. The one time he was late, Potter was there to save Ron."

"People were still hurt because of me!" Draco hissed.

"Regrettably, yes. There was only so much we could prevent without giving ourselves away." She looked at him sternly over the rims of her spectacles. "Aside from Albus, there have been zero casualties. What we did was not ethical, and it was not fair to you. We believed it was the best path to limit any damage or death that might happen. We could not predict when you would choose to attack, but when Severus told us you did not want to do it we hoped you would come to us, or seek help in some way. We succeeded, but at cost to your own health, and I hope you will forgive us for that. But you must understand that we did it with your best interests in mind, and that you did not murder him."

Draco shook his head. "I still killed him..."

"At his request."

"It was more of an order," Hermione said softly.

Draco went quiet for a moment.

"If someone had just explained to me that you wanted to help me, I would have cooperated. I wouldn't have run."

"We had no way of knowing," McGonagall replied. "Severus saw your interactions with Hermione and suggested you were changing. We didn't know for sure until it was too late."

"I still don't understand why he chose to help me," he said.

"I believe that question was answered more than once in the memory," McGonagall said, raising her brows.
"No. I heard all that. I don't believe that's just it. There's more, isn't there." He gave her a challenging look, daring her to tell him the truth.

The new Headmistress sighed. The sun had begun to set in the window behind her. The light filtering in from the window highlighted the presence of the large amount of dust particles in the room that floated around lazily.

"We never spoke of this directly, but I assume it was his intent," she began slowly. "I believe he thought you could provide us with valuable information about him and his followers. Likely, he hoped you might one day join the Order and defy the traditions of your family."

"So he wanted me to give information in return," he said flatly.

"He wanted to save you, and then work with you to get your family back," she corrected. "We would not have expected or forced you to work with us or give us information. It would have been your choice."

He didn't answer. He seemed restless, still full of anger.

McGonagall looked at Harry and Hermione, who had gone speechless throughout the conversation.

"I will need each of you to provide a copy of your memories of what happened yesterday. With so many differing stories, we will need to preserve the first-hand accounts of those who were directly involved. In the case of there being a trial one day," Draco's jaw clenched, "these memories should be helpful."

"How many memories do you need?" Hermione asked, staring at the basin.

"As many as you think pertinent."

Harry said nothing. He seemed reluctant. Hermione looked at Draco. His lips were clamped shut in a grim line, his eyes narrowed, lowered to the floor.

He's still angry.

And why wouldn't he be? To think that Dumbledore had known all along made her head spin. They had been watched, and she said they, not just he, because they had spent a good deal of time together, whether it was by accident or intent, especially in the past month.

To think that it was Snape who had been watching Draco all this time...he had undoubtedly seen more than he should have. The fact that she didn't know exactly what he had seen made her uneasy. Pansy had just admitted she'd known about Draco's feelings towards her. Had Snape known, too? If he did, he must not have been happy about it at all. Was that why he'd singled her out and made that nasty comment?

And if he's been reporting to Dumbledore, then he probably knew, too.

Her stomach lurched.

Oh, god.

There really were no secrets at Hogwarts.

What a way to find out.

Harry had stepped forward, and was staring into the basin. Hermione stared at him, surprised. She
hadn't expected him to want to help. He stared back at her briefly, then at Draco, who was a step behind her. She thought she saw him nod, and then he looked back at McGonagall.

"Are you ready?" McGonagall asked him.

"Yes."

"This is a waste of time," Draco said suddenly. "None of this is going to help me."

"Draco," Hermione called, but he had already left the room.

When Harry and Hermione finally left the study, they encountered Bill in the corridor by the stairs.

"Have you seen Draco?" Hermione asked.

"Sorry," he said. "Had to step out for an emergency at Gringott's. I got back maybe ten minutes ago. I did see Ginny heading to the kitchen, if that helps at all."

They thanked him, and climbed the stairs slowly.

"You didn't have to do that," Hermione said. "I know you didn't want to help him."

Harry took a long time to respond. In the end, all he said was, "That was before."

Upon entering the room he shared with Ron, they found him, Ginny, and Pansy all seated together on a sofa that sat against one wall, a plate of food that had only been picked at on the table before them.

Ginny was awake, she held an open book in her lap but was not reading it. Her eyes were open but unfocused, staring at the wall across the room. When she saw them enter, she stood at once, went to Harry, and kissed him. Hermione advanced further into the room, exhausted. She hadn't thought depositing memories into a pensieve would be so taxing.

Pansy was asleep, her head on Ron's shoulder. She was wearing one of Ginny's old jumpers. Ron saw Hermione and Harry, and nudged Pansy awake gently. She opened her eyes, pushed her hair from her face, and blinked sleepily.

"You're back? Where's Draco?"

"Right here," they heard him say from the door. Hermione turned to see him enter and stand beside her.

"What happened?" Ron asked.

"McGonagall wanted our memories," Harry said.

Ron frowned. "For what, a pensieve?"

"Yeah."

He nodded, and looked at Harry.

"Well, what now?"

Harry sighed. "I dunno." He looked at Hermione. "You wanted the meeting. What did you want to
"Before we talk of anything else," she said, looking at Draco, "I know you have questions."

"Yeah," he said. "I want to know how Snape is involved. Why is he working for Dumbledore when I know for a fact he's a Death Eater?"

Harry sat down on the edge of his bed and took off his spectacles to wipe them on his shirt.

"I don't know why he's working for Dumbledore," he said. "We've known he's a Death Eater since Fourth year. Dumbledore knew, too. He told me Snape's been working with him for years, now. He trusts him, and from what I gather he passes on any information he gets from Voldemort to Dumbledore, but only enough to keep himself from being found out."

Draco was frowning. "This doesn't make any sense."

"We know," Harry said, a thin smile on his lips. "But Dumbledore trusted him with his life, apparently. I reckon that's enough. I still don't like him, but it's enough."

"So they knew I was a Death Eater from the start."

"Probably."

"And they still let me back in."

Harry looked at him frankly. "Would you rather not have come back?"

Draco gave him a look. "If it meant not putting others in danger, yes."

"Really?" Ron asked, sounding highly dubious.

"I'm not that selfish, Weasley."

"So," Ginny said, after an awkward pause where Draco and Ron were half-glaring at each other, "will you two be staying with us?"

Pansy looked at Draco. "We're not sure."

"There's really no problem if you do," Ginny said, shooting a quick look at Ron. "We have Harry and Hermione over just about every summer. There's plenty of room."

"You don't have to lie," Draco said. "I'd rather not, if you don't want me."

"You can't stay here by yourself," Hermione said. "You're better off with us." She paused. "I don't think it's a good idea for us to split up so soon, either."

"It's settled, then," Ginny said. "I'll go tell mum."

"Wait," Hermione said, before she could get up. "We need to talk about what's going to happen after this."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked. "After we move to the Burrow?"

Hermione fidgeted with her sleeve. "It's very likely that Hogwarts won't reopen next term, and if it does, I don't doubt the Ministry would try placing Umbridge there again, or other plants like her."
"Are you saying we shouldn't bother going back?" Ginny asked.

"I'm saying, if that happens, there are more important things we should be doing."

"You mean—"

"Yes."

"What is it? What are you talking about?" Pansy asked, looking back and forth quickly between Harry and Hermione.

"Is this about the thing Dumbledore said you had to complete for him, in the memory?" Draco asked.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

Harry looked suspiciously at Draco. Clearly, this rankled him.

"Goddamnit, Potter, you can trust me. I fucking laid myself bare in front of all of you and took Veritaserum to prove it. If I were still your enemy I'd have fought the lot of you back at the tower and killed myself before letting you take me here. But I'm not. I'm here at your fucking mercy because I was too weak to stand up for myself. And," he added, less heatedly, "I want to help."

Ron's jaw went slack. Harry assessed Draco carefully. Draco stared back.

"Fine," Harry said. "But if you go with us, you go on our terms. No tricks, no lies. Otherwise you're gone, and you can forget about Dumbledore's protection. You'll be on your own."

"Harry," Pansy said, looking worried, "I don't think that's fair."

"I think it's perfectly fair," Harry replied. Ron nodded. "I'm starting to believe you, but that doesn't mean I have to like you. Either way, I won't take any risks if you come along."

He held out his hand.

Draco stared at it for a second. The irony was not lost to Harry.

Draco reached out, and they shook hands.
It was good to be home again.

Her old mattress lay beneath her back, creaking a little with every movement she made. The sound used to annoy and infuriate her, but now all she felt was relief.

There were her Quidditch posters, photographs from her childhood; her, seated on Fred's shoulders with George making faces behind them, and all of them laughing. There was one of her and Ron, when she couldn't have been more than three years old, and they were grinning wide, impish grins—she, missing several teeth and Ron, with a smear of jam on his cheek. She remembered the day that one had been taken. They had been pinching each other in the arm behind their backs, where the camera could not catch them.

On the floor there was a shaggy rug that her mum had showed her how to make out of old rags when she'd been ten. Her old broom stood upright in the corner. It had once been Charlie's. Her books were all stashed in a broken trunk they'd found in Diagon Alley, once. The lid hung by one hinge and though Percy had promised he'd fix it somehow, he had never got around to it.

_What are the odds he still remembers, or even cares?_

There was a dart of pain in her heart at the memory of Percy. She ignored it and looked away from the trunk.

Pansy was asleep. Ginny half wanted to sit up from her bed and call to her, because as glad as she was to be home it was so quiet, too quiet, and it was making her restless. But she didn't want to disturb her, and Ginny had seen a sort of lost, haunted look on her face the night before just before she had gone to bed.

_At least I'm not alone_, she thought. She would have to be satisfied with that until everyone else woke up. But the silence roared on.

They had moved in the dead of night. Mad-Eye, Bill, Fleur, Tonks and McGonagall had overseen everything to make sure nothing went awry. She had seen in the stiff lines of their shoulders and arms that they almost expected it, but in the end, when the transition to the Burrow had been nearly flawless, that stiffness still had not gone away. She wondered if it ever would.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had joined the other adults outside. The Burrow already had standard protection around it plus a little more, but they had spent almost twenty minutes outside while everyone else had stayed inside gathered silently around the kitchen table. She had sat next to Harry, who kept glancing outside anxiously. Hermione sat with Malfoy on the other side of the table, and
Pansy sandwiched between him and Ron. She had repeatedly thought how strange it was to have Malfoy sitting there with them, in their house. When they had first entered she had automatically glanced at him, almost waiting for him to make a dry, disgusted remark about the untidy state of their home.

He had said nothing at all, to her surprise. She met eyes with Ron and they were slightly wide. He had been watching him, too.

They watched him more closely, afraid that they had missed it somehow.

Malfoy had looked around mutely, no semblance of horror or contempt on his face. Rather, Ginny was almost certain she caught a glimmer of familiarity, as if he had seen it before, or something akin to it.

When they had moved to the table, he and Hermione sat close to each other. His eyes were glued to the wooden surface, and when she followed it she saw he was staring at the spot where Fred, George, and Bill had carved their names into the table years ago. She had almost forgotten it was there.

What was he thinking of? She dearly wanted to know. Was he regretting coming with them? Did he wish he'd never joined them at all?

The adults had finally come in and told them to go to bed. Molly had offered to make some soup, but no one was hungry.

They'd climbed the stairs together. The arrangements were the same as in Grimmauld Place: Harry with Ron. Pansy with Ginny. Ginny had invited Hermione to sleep in her room, as well, but when they’d realized how cramped that would be, they’d hastened to tidy up Percy’s old room for her to stay in.

Malfoy was directed to Fred and George’s room. The twins had gone back to their apartment in Diagon Alley, but would be back the next day for the funeral. Bill and Fleur had to go back home, but would also return often to continue arranging their wedding.

A wedding, in these times…Ginny sighed.

Dumbledore's funeral was only a day away. It would be at Hogwarts. The thought made her want to cry.

The sun had risen and filled the room with its light. They'd forgotten to close the drapes the night before. Her mum had told her it was important for them to keep the windows covered at all times, even if the Burrow was heavily protected and undetectable and invisible to outsiders, she would not take any chances.

"If a Peeping Tom somehow got through and found this window, he'd be delighted!" she'd said, walking across the room to wrestle the drapes shut.

"It's a shame I'm not capable of magic, and therefore defending myself," Ginny had replied dryly.

Her mum had given her a discontented look. "No sass, Ginny. I don't need that now."

Normally, Ginny would have played up the cheek but she had sense a sort of edge and disquiet to her mother’s actions that made her think again.

Finished with the drapes, Mrs. Weasley had turned back to Ginny with her hands on her hips. She
wore an old, faded dress and casual brown robes over it, and over that a stiff, musty apron she'd owned as long as Ginny could remember.

"I want that curtain shut at night, at least," she'd said. "But take care to ward it. Tonks will help you, if you ask her."

"Yes, mum," Ginny had said. Her mother had given her a tight hug and a kiss on the forehead, and then looked around.

"Where is Pansy?"

"I think she went to talk to Malfoy," Ginny had said. "Or Harry and Ron."

Mrs. Weasley nodded slowly, and sighed.

"Make sure they are comfortable," she had said. "The things they must be going through, those poor children…"

Ginny nodded, choosing not to mention that they were all almost adults. She knew her mum wouldn't want to hear that.

Ginny was diverted from her thoughts by a curious wet, snuffling sound. She turned her head to the side and heard it again. It was coming from Pansy.

Her pulse quickened. Was she sick? She got up from her bed instantly and padded over to Pansy's.

She isn't sick. She's crying.

"Hey, hey," Ginny said softly, sitting on the edge of Pansy's bed. She automatically reached up to brush away the curtains of the four poster, and then stopped, remembering she was not in Hogwarts, and this was only an ordinary bed.

Pansy, wrapped in a heavy blanket and turned towards the wall, let out another loud sniff. Her body shook underneath the covers, and Ginny could see that she was still fully dressed.

"Is it absurd for me to miss them?" Pansy asked suddenly, her voice choked with tears.

Ginny frowned.

Oh. Her parents.

"Of course not," she said. "It's not silly at all."

Pansy rolled onto her side to face Ginny. Her face was puffy and her eyes wet and red, cheeks damp with tears. Her hair was wild and spread over her pillow over her head like a cloud of dark thought.

"They try to be good parents. But my dad…he'll never tell me what he does for Vuh-Voldemort, but I've heard stories, and Draco's told me some of it. I know it's bad. I used to try and pretend none of it was true but I can't anymore."

Ginny reached over to grab her hand and hold it tightly.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

"It isn't your fault," Pansy said, shaking her head. She wiped at her eyes. "They chose to do it. If I'd gone back to them they would have married me off to some Pureblood Slytherin and he'd likely be a
Death Eater, and what could I do then?"

"I don't know," Ginny said. She tried to crack a smile. "If they ever tried to force you to marry, though, you could have called us and we'd come get you before they could get a ring on your finger. If it's possible, we could even bring a Boggart as a decoy and leave it there for the groom to find under the veil."

It worked. Pansy smiled briefly, but it wavered and fell again. She sat up, an air of nervousness about her, and held her knees to her chest. She still held onto Ginny's hand.

"Is it bad that despite all that, I still feel bad that I've betrayed them?" she asked.

"No," Ginny said. "Of course not. They raised you to want to follow their footsteps. It was selfish of them to think you would never want something else."

She was crying, now, too. It was in sympathy for Pansy and how heartbreakingly lost she looked. It was also for some mysterious reason she couldn't quite pin down.

"It's better off if they believe I'm dead," Pansy was saying, scrubbing at the last of her tears, but they kept coming. "I know they'd rather have a dead daughter than one who joins their enemies. It's the same for Draco. Worse for Draco. He's a Death Eater. He's betrayed Voldemort. If they ever find us and capture us, my parents will punish me and lock me up, but they'll do worse than kill him."

"We're not going to let them find either of you," Ginny insisted. "I promise, Pansy."

Pansy's eyes closed and her face crumpled. She launched herself forward and wrapped her arms around Ginny gratefully. Ginny held on, blinking back tears, unaware of Pansy's thoughts. On the surface, Pansy was thinking how glad she was to have made such good, selfless friends, but at the same time she couldn't help but feel she was dooming them with her presence, hers and Draco's, that all these wards could only hold for so long, because one way or another Voldemort would find them, and all her worst fears would come true.

Draco opened the door and found Potter, Weasley, and Hermione outside his door. He relaxed upon seeing Hermione but still felt a little wary at the presence of the other two. He let them in cautiously.

"You didn't come down for supper," Hermione said.

"I wasn't hungry."

"Mum sent this," Ron said, a little stiffly, and handed him a bowl of steaming fish and rice. Draco took it from him and stared down at it, feeling no spark in appetite.

"Thanks."

Harry sat down on Fred's old bed. Draco had slept in George's. Ron followed suit. Hermione sat beside Draco.

"Are the others coming?" Draco asked.

"In a bit," Ron said, just as the door opened and Ginny and Pansy entered quickly. There was no trace their earlier cry on their faces. They nodded their hellos; Ginny went to sit in a spare chair beside Fred's bed and Ginny sat down on a table in front of the window between the two beds.
"So, what's the plan?" Ron asked.

"We've got to do it as soon as possible," Harry said, his eyes urgent and serious. "In a few weeks, maybe."

"Do what?" Draco asked.

Hermione shook her head. "We'd need to prepare, first," she said. "We can't just leave like that, Harry, we'd be going in circles without a plan."

"Besides," Ron added, "Mum and Fleur would kill us if we left before the wedding. If anything happened to us, I'd feel better having that as my last happy memory before being thrown in Azkaban, or worse."

Harry didn't seem pleased, but acquiesced.

"What are you lot talking about? Why do we need to run away?" Draco asked. "Can they" he motioned to the door, "not help us?"

"No," Harry said. "If too many people know about this it'll mean trouble. We can't risk any more than just us. If Voldemort knows we're onto him, and he gets his hands on anyone of us, then all our chances of stopping him fall apart."

Draco felt a shiver crawl up his back.

"Then what is it?" he asked quickly. "How are you going to stop him?"

There was a pause. Hermine turned to him.

"Do you know what Horcruxes are?"

Draco leaned forward, his elbows perched on his knees. His whole body felt stiff, drawn too tightly together.

"You're saying he made seven."

Harry nodded. Draco winced.

"Merlin. No wonder..." he shook his head. "And there's five others still out there."

"We hope so, yeah."

Draco looked slowly from Harry, to Ron, to Hermione. Ginny and Pansy mirrored his movements. Neither of them had heard the information before either, and remained gravely silent, almost sick with the morbidity of the information.

"And you know where they are."

Harry's hands shifted in his lap.

"I have an idea where some of them might be."

Draco stared at him, his eyes a little wide. Then he began to laugh.
"An idea isn't good enough," he said. "You've got to know for sure, Potter, or else you're wasting all our time."

"An idea is all I've got," Harry replied angrily. "It's the best we have, and it's better than nothing."

Draco rubbed at his forehead. "Dumbledore...he was sure of this?"

Harry's voice had turned acidic. "Positive. He showed me proof."

"And what was that?"

Harry frowned. "The first one was Riddle's diary from back when he was a student at Hogwarts. It was the one your dad snuck into Ginny's cauldron that caused her to become possessed. The other was the ring that cursed his arm. It belonged to Voldemort's mother."

What sort of woman was she? Draco found himself thinking. Voldemort's family was not something he'd ever thought about. He had always been an insidious, independent character. Now he wondered if he was like anything like the poor woman who had birthed him...if he had even been born like a normal human person, which he wasn't.

Ginny's face went blank. She looked sharply at Harry. "Why did no one ever tell me that damned diary was a bloody horcrux?"

"I don't know," Harry said, looking guilty. "I only just found out, and that was because Dumbledore told me. He doesn't—didn't want anyone to know."

"But why?"

"Think about it," Ron said. "If Voldemort finds out we know about his Horcruxes, he'll take them all back and put them somewhere else, and we'll have to start from scratch." He looked around at the rest of them. "That, or he'll come and kill us before we can find even one."

"What do we do if we find them all?" Pansy asked. Inwardly, she was thinking, what are the odds of that happening?

"Destroy them," Harry said simply.

"How?"

"Dumbledore used the sword of Gryffindor to destroy the ring," Harry said, and gave a dull laugh. "We could break into the school to get it."

Ron looked excited at the thought.

"How are we going to do that?" Pansy asked.

Ginny was frowning, her palm cupping her chin, tapping it thoughtfully with her fingers. Draco sighed.

"It's impossible."

"Wait," Hermione said, and when he looked at her there was a sort of distant look to her eyes. "Basilisk venom."

They stared at her.
"Er, gesundheit," Ron said. Ginny let out a surprised huff of laughter.

"No," Hermione said, frowning a little, "Basilisk venom can be used to destroy Horcruxes. I read that somewhere once."

"At Hogwarts?" Draco asked, and she nodded.

"In the Restricted Section."

They all winced. Their chances of getting into the Restricted Section were slimmer than somehow successfully sneaking back into Hogwarts.

"Harry, did they ever clean the Chamber of Secrets after you killed the Basilisk?" Hermione asked.

"Not that I know of. Maybe. I dunno.

"Then the skeleton should still be there," she said quickly. "That might work, if there's still dried venom on the fangs."

Draco looked at Harry, brows raised in surprise. "There actually was a Basilisk?"

"Well, yeah," Harry said slowly.

"And you killed it. At twelve years old."

Harry looked a little uncomfortable, but he nodded. "Either that, or let it kill me."

Draco let out another strange laugh. "Oh, of course."

They had tried to keep the story of what really happened that year quiet, but the rumors had floated around anyhow. Draco had thought it was all a lie. He'd thought Potter was only making up stories to make himself appear even bigger a hero.

Ron and Hermione exchanged slightly confused glances. Pansy, who'd already learned all this from Hermione, was nodding along.

"Well," Ginny said. "How are we going to get back into Hogwarts? And when, for that matter?"

"Search me," Harry replied, a little absently. "I reckon we could ask McGonagall—"

"Too risky, isn't it?" Ron asked. "She'd want to know why we want to go back. I bet if we even mention the sword or the chamber of secrets, she'll send us back here in a wink."

"What about during the funeral tomorrow?" Draco asked. "We can try and slip in while everyone else is busy. Or so it doesn't look too suspicious, we could go in a smaller group."

At the mention of the funeral, the room went quiet. Even Draco had not liked saying it aloud. His ears burned.

"We can try," Potter said, after a short pause. He held a steady gaze on Draco's, as if waiting for Draco to slip and reveal that he was planning some sort of trap.

"What happens if it doesn't work?" Pansy asked nervously.

Harry sighed. "Then we find another way." He looked at Hermione. "Where did you read about Horcruxes?"
"It was just in passing, in an old book on Dark Magic," she said. "Madame Pince insists on accompanying whoever goes inside the Restricted Section, but last time I went, Dumbledore entered the library after me and said he had to ask her a few questions…she said she trusted me, and sent me through…" she looked at them, wide-eyed, and they all reached the same realization.

"What else did the book say?" Ron asked.

"Nothing. It was just a reference," she said, looking glum. "There was a bit on Basilisk venom and it said it was strong enough to destroy Horcruxes. It'd been on my mind because Harry had just told us about the Horcruxes that week, I think. I went in for a book for my Potions assignment and I found it, but the one with the Horcrux mention was missing its chain, and I thought it was odd so I opened it and took a look inside." She looked at Harry. "You said Slughorn and Dumbledore told you that all books about or books that have mentions of Horcruxes were destroyed or taken from the library. I must have forgotten that, because I didn't remember it until now."

"I bet you could have taken the book, if it was missing its chain," Draco said to her.

Hermione winced. "Damn it. I didn't even think about that. I was so afraid of Madame Pince coming in by surprise I just left quickly."

"If it had only the one sentence on Horcruxes, we're better off without it," Draco said. "It's a good thing you remembered it, though."

Neither of them noticed the rest of the group watching them avidly, almost uneasily. The mere act of talking to Malfoy civilly was something they were wholly unused to, and after Hermione's confession the day before, made them all the more aware of how he interacted with her.

"Listen—" Ron said suddenly.

There was a loud CRACK and everyone jumped as Fred and George appeared before them.

"Fucking hell, you do this every time!" Ron shouted, clutching at his heart. "Is privacy too much to ask for?"

"Well now," George said, pretending to look hurt. Fred was doubled over, laughing silently. "We were only checking in to see how you're doing. We just got here and Mum says it's almost time for dinner."

"Oh." Ron was still scowling. "Tell her we'll be down soon."

"Tell her yourself," Fred said, grinning, and then looked around. "Blimey, George, we've stumbled into a meeting. What's this about, then?"

"Hullo, you two," Ginny said, standing up to hug her older brothers. "Where's Bill?"

"On his way, hopefully. Phlegm, too."

"Eugh."

"There's still a lot to be done for the wedding," George said, and looked at Draco and Pansy. "Don't think you're safe because you're guests. Mum'll probably make you join in on the preparations, too."

Draco balked. Every day that passed, things only got stranger. "Erm—"

"I don't mind," Pansy said, shrugging. She looked almost eager. "A distraction's a distraction."
"We're only joking," Fred said. "But you're welcome to help, if you like."

"I'd like to." Pansy smiled.

"More fool you," George said, and winked. "Who's sleeping in our old room?"

"I am," Draco said. "If you want it back, I'll sleep downstairs."

"No, you're welcome to it," Fred said, grinning. "We're much too busy at our shop to be sleeping here anymore, though Mum insists we visit as often as possible. I think she's still sore over Perce… Keep in mind, though: there's a load of faulty tester products in those boxes over there," he pointed to a small pile of cardboard boxes in one corner of the room. "Poor Hermione discovered that a while ago, but if you find anything that you like, you can keep it, though you're much better off coming to our shop directly and getting the newer version. Two: don't go into the attic—that's the ghoul's domain, and he gets rather cross when a stranger comes in."

"A ghoul?" Pansy asked. "Why haven't you gotten rid of it?"

"We like to think he adds character to the place," George replied seriously, as if he hadn't grown up in a house that already had an excess of character.

"Get to the kitchen, you lot, before Mum starts realizing you're planning something."

The twins Apparated away with another loud CRACK.

Ron rolled his eyes. "They think they've got to make a show out of everything."

"I don't know," Pansy said, "I think they're fun. They've always made me wish I had older brothers. Even back at Hogwarts."

"If you'd grown up with them putting bugs in your soup and using you as their guinea pig for all their products, you'd be wishing for the opposite," Ron said darkly, but he let out a small laugh.

They all stood up and began to file from the room. Ginny, Ron, and Harry all left together, but Ginny glanced over her shoulder curiously at the remaining two before she left.

Draco hung back as Hermione brushed off lint from her jeans.

"What did he mean, about you and faulty products?" he asked her.

Hermione grimaced. "Remember back at the start of Fifth Year, when I showed up with a black eye? The one you wanted to send flowers to whoever had given it to me?"

Draco remembered it instantly as a cold wave of shame slammed into him; the disgusting glee and satisfaction he'd felt on seeing that huge bruise over her face. He remembered wishing he'd seen it happen.

"Right," was all he could manage to say. He could tell by the way she briefly looked away, that she knew his feelings, but strangely, her mouth formed a slight smile, and she turned to face him again.

"Don't worry," she said, "there've been many times I've wished the same on you."

"That doesn't make it any less okay," he said. "I shouldn't have said that. It was vulgar."

Hermione sighed and gave him a sad smile. "I appreciate that, Draco. But it happened years ago, and your comment didn't hurt me." She paused. "You don't have to apologize every time, either."
Whatever we have between us…could turn out very unbalanced if you let your guilt take over you. You don't have to constantly be proving you're sorry. You've apologized for your past self already and I've forgiven you. Don't linger over it."

Her hands were on his chest, over his heart.

Draco stared at her solemnly. Her capacity for forgiveness was enormous, considering the many years' worth of bullying and mean-spirited remarks he'd made at her since the day they'd met. No matter what she'd said, he was still constantly saddled with the overwhelming feeling that he wasn't worth it.

Voices floated up from downstairs. They'd heard the front door open again and could hear Mrs. Weasley eagerly welcoming her son and soon to be daughter-in-law.

Draco let out a sigh through his nose. Hermione's eyes took him in. They were so gentle, those eyes, so kind and warm. As he looked into them he thought he could see glimpses of the past flash over her present eyes—all the negative emotions he'd ever made her feel: annoyance, mild hurt, hate, suspicion, pain, and that one memory that still made his spine go cold as ice, the one time he had seen the life fading from them.

_I was ready to kill before I'd even taken the Dark Mark_, he thought ruefully. _Where would we be if I'd actually done it?_

She would be lying in a coffin somewhere, perhaps buried in the Muggle world, where she'd been born and raised. He, expelled, arrested, rotting in Azkaban. Or with his parent's influence, transferring to another school without a scratch.

Dumbledore hadn't been there, then. Umbridge had been on his side. She was allies with his father. They would have helped quiet the matter.

_And then, to me, it wouldn't have mattered, would it?_

He would have bested the Mudblood at last. With her gone, there would have been no one to make him feel inferior at everything, because that was just what she had done, when he'd been insecure and pathetic enough to be enraged over the fact that she was lower than him and yet the cleverest person he'd ever known. There would have been no one to outsmart him whenever their shadows crossed, there would have been no one to haunt his dreams, because he'd never allowed himself to acknowledge it until now, that he'd been dreaming about her from the start, and it was never the kind of dream he expected.

To think that he had come that close, filled him with disquiet and unease. A life without her, whether as an acquaintance or something more, was unimaginable. He had been too arrogant, puffed up on his own bigotry to see that he had never been higher than her, not from the day they'd met.

_Blood means nothing._

His parents had driven the opposite of that into his head all his life, and where had that gotten him? If he had never stopped believing, they would all have died, and Hermione would have been unfortunately dragged into the body count as well, all because of his temper, prejudice, and entitlement.

Draco shook his head, a small motion meant more for himself than to her, but she caught onto it, and her grave stare pinned him.

She might be over it, but he wasn't. One day, he might be able to look at her without a twinge of pain
in his heart, of to kiss her without being as gentle as he could until she made it known she wanted
more, because that fear of hurting her was like to remain for a long time. He knew she wanted him; it
was unmistakable in the way she clutched him close, the way her head fell back every time he kissed
her neck, the hungry way she kissed him back. He wanted her, to press her as close as the limits of
their bodies allowed, and closer still, wanted to kiss further down her neck and further still, wanted to
make her smile in that way that left him a little speechless because more often than not, when she
looked at him, her face was grave, or pinched with worry or sadness, and that weighted his tongue
down with words he knew were true, despite her kisses saying other wise.

_Unworthy._

_Killer._

_Liability._

And perhaps most troubling of them all,

_Unstable._

The guilt would always find its mark, but if she was speaking true, he would obey. Clearly, she
thought he was worth more than he felt, and how often was Hermione Granger wrong? He only
hoped that soon he might be able to believe it, himself. She had brought up a good point about the
constant apologizing.

"I'll try not to," he said at last, forcing himself to speak honestly. "That's the best I can promise,
Hermione. I was a nasty little prick for so long, sometimes I think the guilt will never go away."

Hermione grabbed one of his hands and kissed it softly. "It will. Perhaps never completely, but it
will."

Draco, unable to resist any longer, backed her into the wall carefully. His own hands settled on her
waist. Her cheeks were already pink though he hadn't kissed her yet—he brushed a knuckle over one
—she leaned into his touch. Their gaze was steady. She was thinking how he must have been able to
hear her racing heartbeat, not knowing his thoughts were the same.

He thought of the way he had kissed her for the first time, pinning her against that half-frozen tree,
wrenching a kiss from her lips that she had never offered. There was an air of innocence about her,
but just as present was an allure that evaded him every time he tried to pin it down. She was
beautiful, there was no denying—the curves of her soft, full lips, the fluctuation of intensity in her
eye from sharpness to softness, the slope of eyelid fringed with dark, heavy lashes, the sweep of dark
hair that contrasted against her pale skin. But before he had come to recognize that beauty, he'd been
pulled in by that allure. He remembered how often he had felt himself drawn to her, before all this
had happened. Something told him it had all been in her eyes. Even now, he found himself staring
deeper into them. She stared back evenly, studying his eyes as much as he studied her own.

What was she thinking of?

"Are you finished?" she tried to ask teasingly, but she sounded more nervous than flirty.

Draco bent his neck and closed in until his lips brushed against her forehead.

"Hermione Granger, I don't deserve you."

He pulled back to gauge her reaction.
"I think we're evenly matched," she said quietly. "More than you realize, if you look over your guilt."

Draco leaned in and kissed her, a blistering need growing inside him. Like yesterday, he could feel his body reacting to her eager proximity and the feel of her trapped against him. Merlin, she undid him so simply. It was almost frightening. She ran her hands up his neck to pull him in closer to her, running her fingers through his hair, her lips yielding deliciously to his.

"All I know is I am continually amazed by you," he muttered as they broke apart for air. She was flushed, eyes bright, her smile a mix of desire and embarrassment. He tipped her chin upwards with his hand and pressed his lips to hers again, lingering there, reluctant to leave her inviting warmth. Hermione's hands stroked his neck.

Never in all his days had he ever thought that he would be snogging Hermione Granger, in the Weasley's home, much less. It was surreal.

*And with the funeral of your last victim only hours away...*

Ice shot down his spine. She had pulled back from the kiss and watched him, a frown marring her glowing cheeks.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The funeral."

She reached over to grab his hand. "You'll be in disguise the whole time. No one will know it's you."

"I can't go—I can't look at him—" Panic was growing like weeds inside of him. His breaths were getting shorter. Hermione placed both hands on his cheeks and made him look at her.

"Draco," she said calmly. "Breathe."

He looked at her for a second, and when her word had sunk in, he breathed.

In,

Out,

In,

Out.

And so on.

She waited there patiently until the panic had subsided, and he let out his let breath and closed his eyes.

"Thank you."

"You have to go tomorrow."

He nodded. He had to face Dumbledore one last time. He was not that big of a coward that he could not face what he had done.

*And...I owe him thanks.*
"I'll go," he said.

She kissed him. "I'll be with you."

"So, this is where you are," came a voice from behind them, and they jumped violently. Hermione whirled around, heart pounding, to find Professor Snape at the top of the stairs, staring at them both with his beetle-black eyes, looking at Draco and Hermione with slightly narrowed eyes.

"Professor," Hermione began. Her face was beet red. Draco's heart was only just sliding back down his esophagus. She trailed off weakly, not know what to say.

"Excuse my interruption," the Professor said tonelessly. There was no expression on his face but both Draco and Hermione fought the urge to cringe, as though he had just shouted at them. "I must speak with Draco."

"Of course," Hermione said, and went for the stairs at once, glancing over her shoulder at Draco, a small crease between her brows.

The second she had gone out of sight, Snape gave Draco a stern look.

"This is very unwise."

Draco found it hard to look at him. "I know."

"Then why continue? You don't seem to realize the danger you put the both of yourselves in."

"We're well aware of it," Draco snapped.

"Then the consequences that will fall on you both will be entirely of your own doing," Snape retorted. "They can put you under as many disguises as they can or feed you Polyjuice by the minute, but mark my words, the Dark Lord will find out you are alive, and if you aren't careful, they'll find out about her, too. It is not a matter of if but when, and when it happens, you'll wish that you had heeded my word more carefully from the beginning."

Draco looked at him warily and said nothing, his stomach churning. Cold sweat beaded along his hairline.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Snape glanced down the stairs briefly, as if checking for eavesdroppers. "Your parents are alive."

He blinked, feeling his legs go rubbery with relief. An immense sigh tore itself from his lungs, and passed a hand over his face.

*Thank Merlin.*

"You've seen them?" he asked hurriedly, stepping forward. "How are they? Have they been hurt?"

"They are well and in the Dark Lord's good graces," Snape replied. "I have told them that I saw you captured by the Order after killing the Headmaster, and that it is very likely you have been executed. They are grieving your loss heavily."

Draco's eyes began to sting. It took great effort not to break down just then.

"And?" he asked.
"That is all I know," Snape said. "I have not been able to speak privately with them, and you know by now that it would be extremely foolish to try to contact them in any way, much less let anyone outside this place know you are still alive."

"Of course I do," Draco said, scowling.

"I am merely reminding you, since you have a knack for ignoring my advice," Snape said, giving Draco a pointed look. "If you love them, love them from afar. You've made your choice to come here and help these people—stick to it, and don't put more lives at risk. Let everyone else believe you are dead."

Draco looked away.

"What…what did my father say?" he asked, hating himself for asking.

"No words that I remember coming from him, but he seemed proud to have had a faithful son," Snape said.

Draco felt resentment rise in his throat like bile. How quickly the relief had fled. "Of course. Doesn't matter if I die as long as I did what they wanted me to."

"Are you surprised by this?" Snape sounded genuinely curious.

Draco smiled bitterly. "No."

After a second's silence, Draco squared his shoulders.

"You're working with them?" He gestured downstairs.

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Many years, now. Since before you came to Hogwarts."

That was a surprise. Draco's eyebrows raised. Snape looked at him coolly.

"If you ask me why, I will not answer."

"I wasn't going to."

Snape gave him a long stare, and it was really quite incredible, how little his face said, but Draco knew what he was thinking.

Yes, you were.

The Burrow was quiet that evening. Even with Fred and George's presence, and Fleur and Mrs. Weasley's wedding planning, and the small, cluttered kitchen being crammed with people and the crickets chirping loudly outside, there was a heavy atmosphere throughout the house. Dinner had been eaten quickly, and they had sat drinking coffee for a time afterward, occasionally starting up conversations that didn't last long. Mrs. Weasley's battered, beloved radio was on but the volume dial turned almost all the way down, so that now and then they could hear a brief pulse of tinny music, but no one paid it any mind. Ginny and Harry sat together by the window. Pansy stood by the rear
kitchen door, which was propped open to let in a slight breeze, staring out into the darkened garden. Ron sat with the twins, holding his cup of coffee in both hands, his eyes tired and blank. The twins, too, were oddly quiet. They sat side by side, their identical faces lost in thought, every now and then frowning at exactly the same moment at some unknown thought no one else was privy to. Mr. Weasley sat at the head of the table, chin propped in one hand, tea held in the other, dozing off there in front of everyone. That day's *Prophet* was spread out on the table before him, and though he'd tried to hide it when he'd begun to read it, as he had fallen asleep his arm had moved from over the headline, so it blared out at them in thick black ink.

*UNDESIRABLE No. 1,* it read. *Wanted for questioning about the death of Albus Dumbledore.* Beneath it was a picture of Harry, the same they'd used in the article about the Triwizard Tournament, years prior. A hefty reward was listed at the bottom: five-thousand galleons.

On the opposite page, in a small block of print:

*MUGGLEBORN INQUIRIES TO BEGIN TOMORROW; UMBRIDGE CONFIDENT ABOUT RESULTS*

And tucked between the next two pages: A free pamphlet!

Ron had caught sight of it poking out from the *Prophet* and pulled it out. Mr. Weasley had slept on, unaware.

Ron read the pamphlet's title, and scowled. He didn't even bother reading it, but tossed it into the middle of the table with utter disgust, for everyone else to see.

*MUDBLOODS & THE DANGER THEY POSE TO THE PERFECT PURE-BLOOD SOCIETY*

They all looked down at it without saying a word.

"Utter rubbish," Draco said, frowning at it.

Everyone but Hermione looked at him with wide eyes for a fraction of a second, before catching themselves and masking their expressions.

Hermione's eyes lingered on the pamphlet. She reached out and tapped it with her wand. It crumbled to ash as they watched.

"I'm going to bed," she said, and departed.

They watched her go. Draco itched to follow, but not wanting to seem too obvious in front of everyone, decided to stay a moment longer.

Mr. Weasley awoke then, his spectacles slipping halfway down the bridge of his nose.

"That reminds me," he said, pushing his spectacles back up. "Harry, Hermione, Draco, you'll be going in disguise to the funeral tomorrow, so be sure to wake up early enough so Tonks and Mad-Eye can sort you out."

He didn't seem to have noticed Hermione had left. Draco and Harry nodded. Mrs. Weasley came in from entered the kitchen and shooed them off to bed. They scattered quickly, but Draco remembered the ash on the table and swept it off and into a bin.

"Thank you, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, smiling at him. Draco bid her and Mr. Weasley a quiet
goodnight, and then faltered.

"Thank you for allowing me to stay here," he said.

Mrs. Weasley beamed. "Of course, dear, it was nothing. Grimmauld place is good for gathering, but no place to stay in alone."

Mr. Weasley gave him a tired smile. "I'll confess your father and I have never gotten along," he said, "but you're very welcome here. I'm glad to see you're nothing like him."

Not knowing how to reply, Draco inclined his head, and left the room, a strange, tight feeling in his chest.

"He reminds me of Harry, somehow," Molly remarked to her husband later, as they sat in their bed. "So polite, so quiet." She shook her head. "I haven't heard one rude word from him since he came in. All I could think of were all the stories the boys and Ginny have told us about him."

Arthur took off his glasses and squinted at the ceiling. "I met him once or twice at the Ministry, when he was with Lucius. Really, just a dreadful boy. They treated just about everyone like an inferior, and when that business with the Hippogriff came out, I wasn't surprised at all."

"To think, he'll never see his family again," Mrs. Weasley said, shaking her head. "It breaks my heart."

Arthur nodded, and tapped the lamp beside the bed with his wand. "At least he's out. I can't imagine the sort of childhood he had that normalized everything You-Know-Who's done. Better for him to recognize the reality of it now and face the consequences before he got himself in too deep."

"Perhaps being here will do him good," Molly said, fighting back a yawn.

"Hopefully, yes," Arthur said, and even though as he drifted off into sleep and the Burrow creaked and groaned around them all, he hadn't been able to help the feeling of foreboding that had wrapped its hand around his wrist. Whatever it meant, he wasn't sure, but knew that it involved Draco Malfoy, at least.

Was it a risk to hide him here? Of course, but no more dangerous than it was to have Harry, too, and they'd managed that successfully for many years already.

Harry wasn't a wanted fugitive then, a voice told him. Now you're harboring him and a former Death Eater. Hermione will be considered a fugitive, too, if—when they summon her and she doesn't appear. What happens if you're all found out?

He didn't know, and that unsettled him. They would have to evacuate the Burrow. They had a safe house, but Bill and Fleur already lived there and there was only so much room they could provide, even with magical enhancements. Plus, relocating there would only add to the danger.

No, they had to find someplace else. Grimmauld Place would do, ideally. But what if it was also somehow breached?

Perhaps he was turning too paranoid. But he would feel better with an extra precaution, and better still if he never had to use either. Too many new faces had shown up at the Ministry, poking into matters that they had no qualifications for, looking at him with friendly smiles but calculating eyes,
and he knew it was only a matter of time before he was replaced, or investigated.

*Or both.*

When Draco entered his room he found Hermione on his bed, curled under the covers, her face hidden.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice muffled. "If you want me to go, I'll go."

"No," he said, taking off his shoes. "Stay as long as you want."

He went into the bathroom to change and brush his teeth, and when he emerged, she had uncovered her face. She had not cried, and he had not expected her to. She stared at him sleepily as he approached the bed.

"What's your favorite color?" he asked her suddenly.

She blinked slowly, chasing the tiredness from her eyes. It still lingered there. He wanted to kiss her eyelids and tuck her into him.

"Red," she replied softly. She was so tired her voice almost had a dreamy quality to it. He lied down beside her, on his side, and propped his head up on his arm. "And green."

"You must love Christmas, then."

She grinned sleepily. "I do, actually. I love the snow, and the warmth. My parents and I used to go ice skating at a pond near our house." She shifted her head against the pillow. "Once, I fell in because I'd wandered off. They panicked, called the police for help. It took them twenty minutes to get there. My dad was in the frozen water, looking for me, screaming himself hoarse. He found me and pulled me out, then came out after me. They tried to dry me off, but I was completely dry and only a little cold."

Draco smiled.

"What's your favorite color?" she asked, pulling her hand forth to extend a finger and trace it down the bridge of his nose.

Draco deliberated. "Purple, I think. I always thought it was soothing to look at."

Her finger had trailed down to his lips. "Why did you ask?"

Draco took her hand in his free one and ran his thumb over its back.

"We know so little about each other," he said softly.

"That's not entirely true," she said, yawning, settling in closer to him. "I know you're competitive. You eat a lot of apples." He let out a small laugh at that. "You like to keep to yourself most of the time and take long walks to clear your mind. And you have a sweet tooth."

"Is that all?" he asked.
"Oh, there's more," she said, "but it's all the more obvious things. Tell me about your parents."

Draco raised a brow. "The less you know about them, the better. How did you know I have a sweet tooth?"

"Your mum used to send you boxes of sweets very often," she said. "And once, during potions, a chocolate bar fell from your pocket and Seamus nicked it."

Draco laughed.

"Now tell me about them," she said more firmly, knowing he'd tried to deflect the conversation.

Draco winced. "It's not pleasant. Any of it."

She sat up in the bed beside him. Her bottoms were flannel. She wore an over-sized, worn out t-shirt with a hole on the shoulder. As she adjusted her position on the bed, her hair shifted forward to cover it. She reached up to scratch at her nose, and he caught a glimpse of the scar he had helped put there. "I think I'm used to unpleasant, by now."

He sat up, too, pulling down his shirt where it had ridden up to expose the scars on his midsection.

"They met at Durmstrang," he began. "And he courted her when they graduated. She said no, because she hadn't liked him at school, but was made to marry him anyway."

Hermione frowned. "Do they love each other?"

"They've grown used to each other," he said, staring at the comforter. "They argue a lot and he—well, he's always been cruel."

"Does he hit her?" Hermione asked, her eyes slightly wide, but he shook his head.

"Whatever he does, it stays between them."

Hermione cupped her elbows with her palms.

"When I was born, they'd already become Death Eaters. My mum wasn't as active because she had to raise me. Sometimes I think she used me as an excuse to distance herself from what they were doing, but I never asked, and she never seemed like she wanted to leave, or really hated it. The only thing she hated was the meetings held at our home, all the times father brought friends over without asking her. My father was one of Voldemort's best, until Potter came along."

His voice was not bitter. Hermione studied him carefully as he spoke.

"My father was a good student when he was young, but kept bad company. He was one of the first to become a Death Eater, if that tells you anything. I don't know how he became friends with Greyback since he didn't go to school, but they've been close for a long time, now."

Hermione frowned. "Why?"

"I don't know—I don't want to know," Draco said. "Greyback is a monster. He doesn't try to hide it. You've met him. He has no empathy."

Hermione shivered. She remembered her encounter with the werewolf all too well. The sick feeling she'd got in her stomach from it had yet to disappear completely.

"The things he does, my father has no problem with. I know he did similar things when he was
young. For all I know, he might still, behind my mother's back. Aunt Bella told me, once, like it was something I should aspire to, like it was expected of me."

The memory of the forced kiss flashed in his mind.

*I almost did it, too. If I'd gone further—*

*But you didn't,* a firmer voice said impatiently. *So shut up.*

Hermione, meanwhile, was reeling from Draco's words.

*'he did similar things'*

Images of those...*things* flashed through her thoughts. Hermione felt her throat dry up.

"Do you love them?" she asked. "Your parents?"

Draco sighed and closed his eyes. "They raised me, and gave me more than I needed. I'm grateful for that, and I only completed my mission to keep them alive. I don't owe them anything beyond that."

Hermione covered his hand with her own.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "They chose their path. I don't think anything could take them from it, now."

"We thought the same about you, once," she said. He snorted, not unkindly.

"They're different," he said. "The things they've had to do, I know they've enjoyed them. I didn't."

Hermione's hands smoothed the comforter around her.

"What would they do, if they knew about you and I?"

He rolled over to lie down on his back. "They would disown me, probably. Or perhaps just punish me somehow, send me to the Dark Lord to be taught a lesson. Lock me in the dungeon, maybe; kill me, at worst. And you…"

"They'd kill me, too," she said quietly.

"Only after they were done with you."

Hermione's breath caught in her throat.

"I told you," he said, his voice flat. "There are worse things than you can imagine happening where the Dark Lord—where Voldemort is concerned. If something happened to you, Hermione—"

She reached over to cover his mouth with her palm. He looked at her with pain in his eyes. She removed it slowly.

"That's why I gave you that chance," he said. "I won't resent you for it. I'd rather have you alive and safe than the opposite."

Hermione scooted closer and sat beside him cross-legged.

"I'm not changing my mind," she said.
Draco sat up, too, and without saying a word, made his way to her on his hands and knees. She stared back solemnly, her eyes sleepy, her cheeks a little pale, but blooming with color under the heat of his stare. He came close until he was almost in her lap and his face was only inches from hers.

"I know," he murmured, and with his hand on her shoulder, he gently added pressure, coming over her until she lay back on the bed with him straddling her.

Almost breathless, Hermione watched him silently, her lips suddenly feeling in need of attention.

That, and other parts of her.

Draco touched his forehead against hers and breathed in the smell of her. She went still, her heartbeat matching the flutter of a Snitch's wings.

It was she who tipped her chin up to meet his mouth, unable to continue waiting. He responded at once, his hands coming up to either sides of her head, thumbs grazing her temples.

He was already hard, aching to press closer, closer. Her knees bent on either side of his hips. Their mouths were loath to part but for air. Their hands roamed over each other feverishly. She tugged at the collar of his shirt. He kept his hands over hers, but his palm found her breast and cupped it gently, afraid to go further, and when she grabbed his hand and pressed it more firmly against her, he allowed himself a good squeeze that made her moan softly. His other hand clutched at her round hip.

They broke apart eventually, gasping for air. Draco, filled with urgency, allowed himself two good breaths before going back down, where she was still panting, her eyes dark and yet glittering; her neck, exposed to him and framed by her long, dark hair, was his target.

He bent lower, pressed his lips to the curve where her shoulder sloped out, and kissed her there, marking up a trail to just underneath her ear. Her hands were on his sides, bunching the fabric of his top into one wrinkled mess; it might have been his imagination but he thought he felt her thighs tremble around him. He was trembling, himself.

He continued his adoration of her throat, expressing his gratitude and attraction through every press of his lips, every small stroke of his tongue, every time he nipped her gently there.

He had just placed a kiss on her pulse point when she grabbed him by the sides of his face and brought him back up for a searing kiss, one that threatened to render him to ash.

Their eyes met after it, and he was struck by a wave of heat by the look in her eyes.

She grabbed his top by the ends began pulling it off. Draco obliged eagerly.

With it gone, she studied his chest with unabashed curiosity, her lips red and tender and slightly open. His hands found her waist.

He was pale and hairless, or at least she thought at first. There was a smattering of light golden hair on his chest, and she reached up to touch it, her other palm coming into contact with his nipple. His chest was broad and his shoulders defined; when he breathed out she could see a trace of abdominal muscles that faded when he breathed back in.

Her hands reached out hesitantly and touched the topmost scar; he felt a thrill run through him. Her other hand had found another. She traced both the jagged, reddened lines gingerly, feeling the raised skin underneath her fingertips. Draco, fighting the urge to moan, watched her, his body still and heated by her proximity.
She bent forward and kissed the first scar; and it was nothing more than a gentle press of her lips, but it shook him, just as it had shaken her the first time he had kissed her throat, but too distracted to make the connection, he stared at her, a shiver ripping down his spine, want needling at his groin, as she kissed the second scar.

He hadn't expected her to go lower. But she repeated the kiss with the third, and then, a little more slowly, she bent low to kiss the one furthest down, closest to the drawstring of his pyjama bottoms. Her hand was on his arm for balance, the other grabbed for his hip as she wobbled briefly, and came into contact with the trail of golden hairs leading down to where he was painfully erect; he jolted, and she met his eye. Her lips pressed against that devious scar and instantly, he pulled her back up, both of them on their knees, and kissed her deeply.

She had not acknowledged his erection though she had seen it, but now, its existence was impossible to avoid (not that she meant to). The noticeable bump in his bottoms rubbed against her as they kissed, and if she had been braver she would have reached down to feel it.

They fell over, back onto the mattress, his mouth still on hers, breaking apart long enough for her to utter a small, shaken laugh.

She was on her back, and he on his side again, one arm holding his head up and the other settled over her abdomen.

She turned to look at him. Her eyes were bright among the darkness of the room. Draco stroked her skin softly where her top had ridden up to reveal part of her stomach.

She took his hand, and guided it underneath her shirt slowly, spanning smooth, soft skin to rest on top of her breast.

Draco held his breath.

Looking a little self-conscious, she took her wand from the bedside table and pressed the tip to the collar of her ratty t-shirt, and then guided it down. The fabric cut cleanly in two, to the hem.

He watched that hand move in slow motion, his heartbeat faltering.

Her stomach rose and fell a little more quickly. She took her arms out of the sleeves and laid there in only her bra and pyjama bottoms, and then, furthering his shock, she sat up a little, and removed her bra, too, exposing her chest to him silently, the trust and blush in her expressions saying all she couldn't say.

When he looked at her for a fraction longer she nodded, a tiny, nervous smile on her lips, prodding him forward.

He obeyed, powerless to say no.

Her breasts were a pleasing, modest size, pale and topped with a small, hard nipple on each. The left had a small birthmark on its side. He'd never seen anything so erotic. He stared at it dumbly.

*I'm staring at Hermione Granger's breasts.*

Now there was a thought he never thought he'd have.

He reached to cup one gently, and it was firm and delicious in his hand. He squeezed it softly, then a little harder at her soft gasp. Her thighs shifted close together. He palmed the other, and kissed it, his teeth nipping at it like he wanted to bite, thumbs brushing over and over against her nipples in slow
circles. She surprised herself with a moan, and he opened his mouth and closed it around her nipple, lavishing attention onto it with his tongue. Hermione's head pressed back into her pillow, her open lips pressing together to stifle a moan as he massaged the other. He licked her with a flat tongue, using enough pressure that her hands came up to grab his head and hold him there eagerly.

Draco ground his hips against her as he worked her nipple, needing friction of his own. He pointed his tongue and circled the bud of her nipple with it, sucking now and then on it, and she grew more restless. He continued stroking her with his tongue until he felt her shudder against him briefly, her legs quivering. Her head went back against her pillow, her eyes shut tight.

He stared at her, wide eyed, as she relaxed, flushed and panting, and looked at him with a glazed look in her eye.

"Did you—?"

She nodded, still in shock, and tried to smile.

Draco almost hit his head on the headboard in his haste to claim her mouth.

The last girl he'd had sex with (a Beauxbaton student he'd encountered one summer), what felt like a lifetime ago, had not been as sensitive as Hermione regarding her breasts. He remembered trying to change that. It had not worked. And here was Hermione, as responsive as he could have hoped for.

She gave a quiet laugh as he pulled back.

Draco nuzzled his nose against her cheek.

"You're beautiful," he murmured. He felt dazed with the taste of her, the heat of her bleeding into his body.

She reached up to brush a strand of hair from her face. Her eyes had gone sleepy again, but he realized with a jolt she was staring at his erection.

"Shall I take care of you?" she asked, and though she'd tried to hide it, he caught the tinge of nervousness in her voice.

Draco kissed her shoulder.

"We should sleep," he said, although his cock was straining for attention. Precum had soaked through the front of his pyjama bottoms and he was grateful for his choice in dark colored sleepwear.

She looked a little skeptical, not taking her eyes from it. "Are you sure?"

He smiled and stood. The clock on the far side of the room read two in the morning.

"Another time," he said, heading for the bathroom.

Once inside he ran the shower, and still reeling from what had just transpired, he alleviated his problem under a spray of hot water with a shaking hand, gritting his teeth to keep his moans silent.

When he emerged, she was already fast asleep, though she wiggled closer when he lied down beside her, letting out a sigh.

Suddenly the night-silence of the Burrow pressed in on him and he froze, replaying everything that had happened earlier, and prayed that they had not been overheard. He was intimately aware of her still-topless body lying next to his, the thrill coursing through his veins, the secret astonishment and
pleasure at what they had just done. As pleasing as it was, however, darker thoughts edged their way in.

Draco brought the blanket over themselves, and closed his eyes, trying not to think about the event that would take place in only a matter of hours.

"What do you think?"

Draco peered in the mirror and resisted the urge to flinch.

Where his own reflection should have met him, there was instead a stranger.

His eyes were brown, hair curly and brown, neatly trimmed and fashionably styled. His skin was not quite so pale, his nose not quite so pointed, and his brows were strong and thick.

There was not much that could be done about his height, but so long as he didn't have his former face, they would have to make do.

"How did you learn to do that so well?" he asked.

"Special training," Tonks said, grinning. Her hair was black and her eyes brown. "I don't need it for myself, of course, but I had to learn, for occasions like this."

Draco raised a hand to run through his new hair. It felt markedly different to the hair he was used to.

"It's weird, I know," Tonks was saying, pulling on her robe. "Imagine how I felt the first time I ever changed my nose—I was staring into the mirror making faces when I was three and next thing I knew, I'd grown a pig's snout. I started bawling and ran to my mum."

Draco smiled faintly. "That must have made for an interesting conversation."

She shrugged. "It's no curse to me. It's frighteningly useful, sometimes."

"I didn't mean to imply—"

She waved her wand. "I know." She went to the door and opened it. "Shall we go meet the others?"

Draco stole one last glance at the mirror. His insides twisted together uneasily.

"Let's go."

They met the group at the bottom of the stairs. They were all dressed for mourning. He scanned his eyes among them, searching for the witch he'd woken up next to. She had been curled up on her side, and when she had woken she'd stretched, moving the covers unconsciously to bare her breasts to the cool morning air.

The image was still burned into his mind.

He saw two strangers among the rest, one whom he supposed must be Potter, who was now red-haired and without spectacles, spattered with freckles and a funny birthmark on the side of his nose. He nodded coolly at Draco as their eyes locked.
The other stranger came forward to hug him. She had lovely dark skin and thick hair coiled into thick braids that fell down her back. She had a scar on her left cheek.

"Good morning," she said. "This is strange, isn't it?"

"Strange doesn't begin to cover it," he said.

"Hermione's just coming in." She pointed to the door where Hermione and Mad-Eye Moody had just come through.

Hermione approached them, adjusting the sleeve of her robe. Her hair had been changed to a golden brown and was shorter, complete with a fringe. Her eyes were the same brown, at least, and it filled him with a strange warmth to look at her and find her looking back, smiling a little self-consciously.

"Merlin, aren't we a funny sight," Pansy said, as the group became complete. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were at the door, holding a package wrapped in brown paper.

"As long as you're not caught," Tonks said, shrugging, as she tucked her wand into her robe.

"All right, then," Mr. Weasley said, looking at them, his brows lowered. "Ministry officials will be there, and I wouldn't be surprised if You-Know-Who's sent a few plants to look around for some of you. Be on your best behavior and don't draw attention to yourselves." This last sentence made Harry and Ron exchange a nervous look, but Mr. Weasley was looking directly at Fred and George, who slipped something from their pocket and tossed it aside after he turned away.

"Minerva sent us some portkeys," he said. "They'll take us directly onto the school grounds. Once it's done, there'll be no lingering. We'll go in three groups—no more than four in each. On, you go."

There was a slight shuffling around the room as everyone separated and then formed little clusters. Mr. Weasley handed Mad-Eye and Tonks two wrapped parcels from the package he held.

"We go on my count of three," he said, holding the last parcel. "Once it's over, find your groups immediately and take the portkey home again, and send word back that you've made it." He looked around. "All understood?"

They nodded. Hermione shared a look with Harry and Ron. They both looked glum. Draco didn't look pleased, either. There would be little chance of them stealing back into the castle if Tonks and Mad-Eye would be racing to get them back to the Burrow.

"On the ready," Mr. Weasley said, looking at his old pocket watch.

He, Tonks, and Mad-Eye quickly unwrapped the portkeys and held them out, the items glowing blue in their hands.

"One,"

Hermione sensed Draco's nervousness. She reached down and took his hand. Tonks caught the motion, and looked at their hands in surprise. Her eyes went back up to meet theirs.

"Two,"

Tonk's eyes flit from Draco to Hermione repeatedly. Understand her silent query, Hermione nodded. Tonk's eyebrows raised a fraction, and then she grinned incredulously.

"Three!"
Hermione reached out and grasped the bristle hairbrush in Tonk’s fist. Draco’s hand closed over hers. At once there was a yank behind her belly-button, as if she were about to Apparate, and then felt a rather violent jolt in the pit of her stomach, as if she’d just fallen forty feet on a roller coaster.

One instant later, they were back at Hogwarts.

His heart was beating like it was like a knife trying to punch out of his chest. He couldn’t hear a word of what the Minister was saying, he was only aware of Potter’s rigid body next to him and Hermione’s sniffling on his opposite side. The tomb was tall and white, and he was glad it wasn’t open, because if he’d been able to look into that casket and see that pale, dead face he would have drowned in guilt.

I did this.

There were so many people here. There wasn’t a single empty chair on the lawn; and there were still plenty of people who were content to stand, just to pay their respects. It brought a lump to his throat as he glanced around, seeing the watering eyes and noses being blown. Everywhere he looked he could see his classmates. One in particular stood out. Theodore Nott was among the standing, and twice now Draco had caught him staring intently at the Weasleys, scrutinizing them closely.

He’s looking for Potter and Hermione. There could be no doubt.

He was sure that any second now someone would stand up and point a finger at him, shouting, "Murderer, murderer!"

The casket almost glowed in the daylight. There wasn’t a single cloud in the sky, so they were all drenched under the sunlight’s weight, perspiring and wiping at their foreheads. The Minister droned on. A centaur stood off in the crowd by the front, stiller than a tree trunk. Draco could spot the heads of the Merfolk above the lake’s surface. The Hogwarts faculty was seated in a row by the front, as well. He could plainly see McGonagall’s stiff shoulders and Professor Trelawney hunched over in her seat, sobbing loudly. Flitwick was patting her shoulder comfortingly. Snape was not there. Draco guessed that the Dark Lord would not have wanted him to be.

Perhaps the worst sight of all was Hagrid, taking up three seats by himself, sitting beside McGonagall with his massive shoulders slumped and shaking every now and then. Draco could see his beard tremble, as if he was struggling to contain his sorrow.

The speaking had stopped, and Draco tore his eyes away from Hagrid to look to the front. The Minister stepped away, and the casket was enveloped by flame. There were screams in the crowd, but the flames lasted for only a moment. They died as suddenly as they’d appeared, and when they did there was an inscription chiseled onto the side of the casket. Everyone was craning their heads, trying to see it, and Draco was one of them, wondering what the Headmaster had chosen. Potter and Hermione were also trying to get a glimpse, but people in the row before them had stood to look, and their bodies blocked the view entirely. By the time they sat down and Draco was able to get a full view, the casket was already lowering itself into the ground, into the burial chamber that lay out of sight from where he sat.

This was when Hagrid broke. A terrible howl came from his throat and he began to cry loudly, his shaggy beard damp with tears. McGonagall touched his shoulder and he quieted a little, but continued to sob. Draco made himself look away, his face on fire, heart sinking to the ground.
The casket was deep in the ground now.

Above the sounds of Hagrid's pain, a voice rose. Draco spotted a priest wearing black holy robes beside the hole, his head bowed in prayer.

A sudden stillness washed over the area. Draco felt Potter stiffen as it reached him, and then Hermione shudder. Even Hagrid fell quiet.

There was only the sound of the dirt being magically shoveled back into the grave. That, and the priest's voice.

"May your body rest. May your soul walk free. May your magic return to its Maker, and your consciousness find new existence in another realm. May your teachings be never forgotten. May your love and life never be taken for granted. Sleep, and know you were loved."

Draco had never been to a funeral before. Harry hadn't, either. Hermione was used to Muggle funerals. When everyone stood from their seats, they looked around, confused, watching as wands were taken out of pockets or raised from laps and held into the air.

In unison, they scrambled to their feet. The young Weasleys were giving them curious looks, as if they'd forgotten that Potter and Hermione had been raised in the Muggle world. Draco had no excuse other than he simply had never attended a funeral before.

Potter and Hermione already had their wands up in the air. Potter was looking straight ahead, his eyes vacant, but pained. Hermione was crying silently.

Draco couldn't bring himself to do it.

Dumbledore might have planned for his own death. He might have ordered Draco to do it, and therefore given him permission. He might truly have wanted to help.

But.

He had stood by all that time and said nothing. He had never reached out until it was too late. Dumbeldore had lurked in the shadows, letting him think that he was alone, and that he would die. How much sleep had he lost over the past year? How many people had he put in harm's way just to ensure his plan worked?

As bitter as he was, it had worked to both their benefits. The plan had worked, and Draco was alive.

But there was a moment there, back at the tower, where you wanted to die. You're not angry that he knew all along and did nothing. You're angry he took that choice from you when he ordered you to do it. He said he was giving you a choice, but he only took another from you.

Draco ignored the voice. It went silent again in his head, and he knew that it was right.

Hermione's hand brushed against his. He held onto it, and then raised his wand into the air.

Light was emitting like soft vapor from the collective mass of raised wands. It didn't take long to grow stronger. There was a strange sort of frequency, an almost imperceptible vibration in the air, running like a current over them.

The day was already bright, the sun stinging at their eyes, forcing them to squint, but grew brighter, as if it sensed their pain, and wanted more, still.
When all the wands had fallen, silence reigned for several seconds, until a quiet, somber chatter grew among the large crowd.

They began to disperse slowly, blinking the sweat from their eyes. Many people were choosing to leave immediately. A small crowd was forming at the grave. Draco turned to see Nott walking away, his mother beside him.

Potter was still staring at the tomb that had magically been erected over the grave. It was plain white marble, with no carvings and no further inscriptions. A white monolith jutting out from the ground like a shard of ice amidst a sea of grass.

Hermione was saying something to the twins. Tonks and Mad-Eye were in the row behind them, appearing calm, if not a little tired, scanning the crowd carefully for any potential threat.

Mr. Weasley had his arm around his wife, who was covering her face with a portion of her sleeve, which she used to wipe her eyes. Mr. Weasley was speaking softly to her, rubbing her back. Draco turned away.

There was a loud, startling snap of breaking wood and he looked around to find Hagrid getting up from his chair, upon which one of the legs had snapped in two. McGonagall led him by the arm, but approached by someone else, let him go, and Hagrid began to walk alone, wiping at his eyes with a handkerchief that had seen better days.

"I'll be right back," Draco said to Hermione, and before she could reply, he moved the chair blocking his way and dove into the crowd, stumbling over uneven patches of grass, his throat dry and closing in and his hands cold regardless of the heat. He was sweating underneath his robe, enough to make his shirt stick to him and he didn't know what to say but he knew he had to say something. He owed him that, at least.

Everyone had known how devoted Hagrid was to Dumbledore. It was easy enough to discern on one's own, even at eleven years old, for if one was unlucky enough to be caught badmouthing the Headmaster around him, a stern word would be spoken and the eleven-year old would be left quaking in their robe. Draco had seen this happen numerous times, and had made fun of the half-giant for it, among numerous other things.

Hagrid had already reached the castle doors. Draco rushed to catch up.

"Hagrid," he called.

He turned around, blinking puffy, red eyes, looking straight ahead first then down at him.

"Who're you?" he asked, his hand on the half-open door.

Draco glanced back—everybody else was a decent distance away. That settled a little of the dread in his stomach.

"I didn't want to do it," he said, his voice hoarse though he'd hardly spoken at all for hours. "I meant to turn myself in."

Hagrid stared at him for a moment, his brows lowered in confusion. Draco stared back helplessly, not knowing what else to say. His thoughts were in such a mess.

"Yer him, aren't ye," Hagrid asked. "Malfoy."
Draco nodded.

Hagrid's hand contracted on the door—Draco thought he heard the wood creak perilously. He was glaring at Draco now, looking so hurt and furious Draco took a step back.

"Why did ye do it?" Hagrid asked.

"Because he asked me to," Draco said quickly. "I swear."

A huge hand shot out to grip him by the shoulder, and Draco froze at once, fearing that his bones would do more than just creak under Hagrid's grip.

"Don' lie to me," he said, eyes narrowed. "Don' yeh lie to me, boy. When I heard the Order had yeh wit' them, I was glad. I though', they'll lock him up. How did yeh get out?"

"They brought me here," Draco said. "I didn't escape, I—"

Hagrid reached inside his hairy coat and pulled out a pink umbrella. Draco stared at it dumbly. Hagrid pointed the end at him, and Draco recognized a wand cleverly disguised as the tip.

"Yeh killed a great man," Hagrid said in a low voice. A warning voice. Draco had never heard him take this tone before, and combined with the fact that he was a good three feet taller than him, made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. "A good man. Yeh being here's an insul' to his memory. Tell me what yeh're doin' here or I'll—"

"He wasn't lying," came a voice from behind them, and Draco looked around to find Potter standing there in the doorway, half in and out of the castle.

At Hagrid's confused stare, Harry stepped in.

"It's me, Hagrid. I'm Harry."

"Call Mad-Eye; someone," Hagrid said quickly, gesturing at Draco. "I've got Malfoy righ' here. Go, Harry, now!"

"I can't," Harry said flatly. "He was telling the truth, Hagrid. Dumbledore ordered him to kill him. I saw it happen."

The huge hand wrapped around his shoulder let him go at once. Draco winced.

"What do yeh mean?"

"It was Albus's plan," said McGonagall, stepping in behind Potter. The door shut behind her.

Hagrid's eyes were full of hurt. "Why din't anyone tell me?"

"The less people know, the better," she said. She appeared older than she had been the last time Draco had seen her. Perhaps it was grief. She wore ornate, if not dated black robes, and her hair was pulled back in a severe bun.

Hagrid looked from Draco, to Potter, to McGonagall.

"I knew yeh captured him," he said, "Evr'yone's bin saying he's dead. Why's he here?"

McGonagall pointed her wand at nothing in particular and a silvery-blue stream shot out from her wand in the ghostly shape of a cat. They looked at each other for a moment and then it shot off,
"Professor?" Potter asked.

"I'm sending word to Arthur that I will take you back to the Burrow," she said, then looked at Hagrid. "Albus allowed himself to be killed to protect Draco, Rubeus. It was his last wish."

Hagrid's bloodshot eyes widened filled with tears, and he looked at Draco, frowning in disbelief.

"Can I ask why?"

McGonagall shook her head. "This is critical information. If it falls into the wrong hands…"

Hagrid turned a bright red. "I'd never," he said. "Never, Minerva. But yer righ'. I wouldn' trus' myself with a secret like that, either. Me an' my big mouth..."

He sighed and passed a hand over his face, smearing his tears along his face and into his beard.

"Forgive me," McGonagall said softly, stepping forward to place her hand on his arm. "I know you would never betray us or Albus willingly. I must take precaution."

"Don' worry," Hagrid said. "I understand Minerva. I do." He looked down to Draco. "I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "I—"

"I understand," Draco said.

"Well," Hagrid said, "if it was Dumbledore's plan, I'm sure it's for the best. I never doubted him, and I won' start now."

After Hagrid had left, and Draco, Potter, and McGonagall remained. She looked at them both shrewdly.

"Come with me," she said.

They wound up in her office. Although she now occupied the role of Headmistress, she had not yet moved into the Headmaster's office, and Draco found himself certain that if they went into Dumbledore's former office that instant, it would have been untouched. She invited them to sit but they remained standing.

"I hope you two are getting along as well as you can," she said.

"We've decided to work together," Potter said.

McGonagall's eyebrows raised. "I'm glad to hear it. I hope this doesn't mean you're all planning something foolish."

Potter's eyes darted away from the sword of Gryffindor, which was encased in glass on the highest shelf behind her desk.

"I know I cannot force you to follow my advice," she said. "I only want you to know that should you need a place to hide, or certain resources, Hogwarts will always be open to you as long as I am here."
Draco caught Potter's eye. His expression was a baffled as Draco felt.

Did she know?

"Thank you, Professor," they said.

She nodded, and withdrew a wrapped parcel from her pocket and held it out, tapping it with her wand, and it began to glow blue. It was a broken pocket watch.

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When they landed back at the Burrow, McGonagall took leave quickly, declining Mrs. Weasley's invitation to stay for supper. Tonks was sitting at the table, narrowing her eyes briefly at them in a joking manner before waving them forward. Bill was at the table, too. He nodded at them. Mrs. Weasley offered soup, but Draco was not hungry, only eager to get to bed and wrap Hermione in his arms.

"I'm glad Minerva found you," Mrs. Weasley said. "We were about to panic."

"Sorry," Potter said, but she patted his shoulder as she passed by.

They trudged up the stairs.

"Thank you," Draco said, to break the silence, and Potter turned to look at him for a moment before walking away again, but Draco had understood the unspoken message in his eyes.

_You'd better be worth all this trouble._

He hoped so, too.

They'd all been made to wake up so early in the morning, most everyone else had gone back to sleep, except for Mr. Weasley and Fred and George, who had to go to work.

Potter paused at his door.

"You're welcome," he said, and went in.

Draco lingered there for a moment before continuing up the stairs to his room. He took off his robe, belt, and shoes and climbed in next to Hermione, who was already asleep. She stirred, but didn't wake as he slung an arm over her and curled himself around her, already falling into an uneasy slumber.
The Pink Letter

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the wait! I've been very unmotivated about writing lately. Maybe it was the length of the last chapter that drained me or school starting back up again so I decided I needed a little break from writing. I usually loathe taking hiatuses during the development of stories (and some of you know I rarely ever have had a hiatus) but I felt if I'd forced myself to write I'd have burned out even more quickly. I've also been struggling with lack of reviews for chapters lately and felt like suddenly there was nobody who was either reading or cared, but received some wonderful encouraging messages that told me otherwise. If you're reading this now, I just want to say thank you again. I'm trying to start writing at the rate I used to again, but it's hard since school is taking up most of my time.

With that being said, enjoy the chapter!

She was gone when he awoke. The bed was empty, and he stretched, reaching for a warmth that evaded him. He'd opened his eyes to find nothing but a dented pillow and a long hair lying forlornly amidst the blankets.

He was hard, aching for contact, his mind a little cobwebbed from sleep. Draco had wiped the last of it from his eyes and went to the shower, where he quelled his arousal, just as the night before, the still-fresh memory of her moan ringing in his ears as the water ran.

When he emerged from the bathroom, sated, but unsatisfied, the smell of eggs and bacon had wafted up to his nose. He supposed she must have been downstairs, either alone or with the others. He pictured her the way she'd looked only hours before, just before he'd fallen asleep. She'd looked almost frozen if it hadn't been for the rise and fall of her chest.

He'd pulled on the first things he'd found in his trunk—an old black jumper and some black trousers. Most of his clothing was black. The only color that stood out in his trunk was a red sleeping shirt and the white of his uniform. He eyed the white shirts uneasily, the Slytherin patches on his robes.

By being here he was defying everything his family stood for. The Sorting hat had taken less than a second to place him in Slytherin. He had been so proud, then. So smug. If he met the hat again, would it still say Slytherin?

_Cowards don't belong in Slytherin_, he'd been told once. Had it been his father? He couldn't remember.

Draco shook the thought from his head. He could hear voices downstairs. He would have been content to crawl into bed again and wait for Hermione to come back up, but his stomach was protesting its emptiness loudly, so he did as it bade and went down the stairs.

He found them all seated at the kitchen table. Hermione was the first to look up, and their eyes locked. The others looked up, too, but he didn't notice.
There was no greeting, no bidding of a good morning, but Pansy had smiled and waved him over, and there was an empty seat beside Hermione that he knew she had saved for him.

Her eyes slid away from his at last, a deep blush spreading over her cheeks, but she continued to eat her porridge as though nothing was wrong. Nobody else seemed to notice. Draco felt his own heat burn stronger, concentrated away from his face. He sat down without a word, fighting the awkward air surrounding the table and Pansy pushed an extra plate to him that had floated over from the counter. Draco took it silently, nodding his thanks.

Hermione continued to eat, but as he sat beside her he reckoned he could feel a charged current coming from her, as if she was bursting with energy. He had grabbed blindly at his plate and was now chewing on a piece of buttered toast but could taste none of it. He ate mechanically, every inch of his being focused entirely on her. Some of her hair touched his side and he was hyper aware of every strand that grazed against his arm. He swallowed and busied himself with pouring himself some water into a glass, suddenly finding himself rather parched.

Since the funeral (and before it), he'd been afraid of falling asleep, paranoid that the nightmares would return. So far there had been none, and it wasn't until he'd woken this morning that he'd realized how strange that was. He had woken from a deep, satisfying sleep; the kind he had wholly not expected.

Or deserved.

His chewing slowed.

Weasley muttered something that was almost unintelligible, but Ginny seemed to understand, as she pushed the plate of bacon over to him and he helped himself to seconds. Potter took a long drink of pumpkin juice. Pansy seemed to be struggling to stay awake. There was a reddish tinge to her eyes.

Potter ate silently, and Draco knew he was still thinking about the funeral. He looked away.

They were all in their sleepwear. Potter wore a shirt that was much too large for him and Weasley one that was too small. Hermione wore the same top she'd torn the night before, but had mended it.

She turned to him suddenly and caught him staring at her and dropped her knife. It clattered loudly against the ceramic plate and they all jumped. She went red as she picked it back up and uttered an apology. All the while, she smiled as if hiding a secret, and Draco found himself wanting to add another to her list.

"Blimey, give us a warning next time," Weasley said to Hermione, propping his chin in his hand and resting his elbow on the table. His cheek was red and creased where it had been pressed into a pillow, his red hair long and in disarray. There was a hole in his shirt in the collar, which he seemed not to have noticed, or cared about.

"Morning," Mrs. Weasley said as she entered the kitchen. Bill walked in behind her, grinning at them.

They mumbled in response. Ginny got up to refill the kettle.

Mrs. Weasley fussied with the tie of her worn, tattered robe. "We'll be going to get Fleur fitted for her dress today."

Ginny started, turning around so sharply water sloshed out of the teapot onto the floor. "Today? A day after the funeral?"
"Don't use that tone with me, Ginny," Mrs. Weasley said a little sternly. "It was booked months ago and will be near impossible to book again before the wedding. None of us could have known…"

Draco stared at the remnants of his breakfast. He could feel his ears burning with shame.

Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat, her cheeks turning red. "Will you be wanting to come along?" she asked the girls.

"No, thanks," Ginny said before either Pansy or Hermione could answer. "Didn't you want us to degnome the garden, mum?"

"What? Oh, yes," Mrs. Weasley said, "but the wedding isn't until next month. If you do it now, they'll be back by then."

"It's alright, mum," Ron said, "we'll be thorough to make sure they don't come back."

Mrs. Weasley looked suspicious. "I'll hold you to that," she said. Ron nodded nervously.

"Will you be going in disguise?" Pansy asked.

"Yes. Tonks and Mad-Eye are due any minute," Mrs. Weasley said, just as there was a knock at the door. She hurried off to answer it.

Ron stood to take his plate to the sink. He tapped it with his wand, and a sponge rose up from beside the faucet to wash it.

"Are we actually going to degnome the garden?" Harry asked, following suit. He collected Ginny and Pansy's plate as he went.

Hermione took a last drink of her orange juice, ate the last of her bacon, and stood to take her plate away. She reached for Draco's, but he stood quickly and stilled her hand.

"Let me," he said. She nodded and squeezed his hand briefly.

He could feel suspicious stares on his back as he turned his back to them.

"We might as well, for something to do," Ron said to Harry after a pause. "And I wanted to go outside. Mum and Dad don't like us going outside too often recently, but I reckon with all these wards we'll be fine. Ginny, why didn't you want to go?"

"We just went to a funeral yesterday," Ginny said, crossing her arms. "I know Fleur didn't plan it to be that way, but I can't focus on weddings right now, not with all this happening."

Harry stood beside her and rubbed her arm.

"Let's meet outside in ten minutes?"

As Draco changed into something that was more garden-work friendly Hermione sat on the edge of the bed, looking pensive. She'd changed into a loose jumper the color of red wine; nearly the same color as the sheets on his bed and just looking at it reminded him of what they'd done the night before.

"What are you thinking of?"

Hermione took a moment to answer. She fiddled with the cuffs of her sleeves.
"Do you ever think we're moving too quickly?" she asked suddenly. "Do you think this is normal?"

He looked at her carefully. "Do you regret last night?"

She blushed. "No, of course not."

"There's nothing normal about this situation," he said as he pulled a jumper over his head.

She nodded. They were both too aware of it.

"I've never—" she cleared her throat. "I haven't been this far before with someone."

Draco blinked. "Oh."

"Is that a problem?" She met his eye calmly.

"Why should it be?" he asked. "I didn't know, but I'm glad you told me. Is it a problem for you?"

"I don't think so," she said honestly. "I'm just a little nervous—what we did last night was more than I'm used to, but I liked it."

Draco allowed himself a small smile. "I did, too."

She hesitated. "Do you think it was inappropriate for us to do that so soon after the funeral?"

Draco had wondered about this, too.

"I don't know. I think as long as we didn't do it over his coffin no one really cares."

She let out a soft laugh. "It's still so odd, to think where we are now compared to only months ago. It does feel like it happened out of the blue, even though it didn't."

"I'd rather have now," he admitted, and she smiled. "Those months of trying to gain your trust were agony for me."

"I see that, now," she replied. She gathered her hair into a braid.

Draco sat beside her. "Have you been altering my sleep?"

She went still and couldn't meet his eye though she turned to face him.

"I'm sorry. I should have asked. I knew you were afraid about nightmares. That day when we got back from Hogwarts after…after that, I pretended to fall asleep first. When you did, it was four in the morning. You started talking in your sleep; nothing I could understand, but you were in pain. You were crying. I couldn't bear it. I couldn't lie there and do nothing."

Something warm and almost painful tugged at his heart. She looked at him, even amidst her guilt compassion bled through.

"And you've been doing it since then."

She nodded again.

Draco took one of her hands and unraveled it from around the other, drawing it away from her midsection. He lifted it to his lips and kissed its back.

"Thank you," he said.
"You don't want me to keep doing it, do you," she asked. The stillness of the room was like a weight on them both.

It took him a moment to find his voice. "I need to face what I've done. I can't hide from it."

Her eyes were dark and grave. "And when the nightmares come back?"

Draco wet his lips. Dread coiled inside him. "Then I'll deal with them."

Hermione frowned. "Is this your way of punishing yourself?"

"No. I don't know…." He looked away, towards the covered window. "I need you to understand that I'm going to go mad here, if everyone insists on swaddling me like I'm some sort of helpless child. I did terrible things, Hermione, and I'm going to pay for them one way or another, regardless of whether Dumbledore knew all along."

"Don't you think not having your wand is enough, Draco?"

He glanced at the night table, were his wand was still locked. He knew it made Weasley and Potter uneasy, knowing it was so close to him all this time, as if he were about to rip his wand out of there any moment and make a break for freedom.

"Draco?"

He blinked and looked at her.

"It's not enough."

Hermione gripped his hand tighter. "You're here to get better, not worse. I saw what you drove yourself to months ago. You looked half mad, like something was driving the life out of you. Don't put yourself through that again, Draco."

She was right. He remembered too well what it had been like to walk around more than half-asleep, his mind constantly lagging three seconds behind everything that happened, the dry burning in his eyes from lack of sleep. The way people had avoided him on sight. And she had been one of the very few who had helped him, despite their history.

Hermione leaned in to kiss him. He reached up to cup her cheek.

"I'll help you," she promised, after she had pulled away.

Draco, at a loss for words, nodded. His eyes were stinging and wet. She pressed his hand again and stood to go to the bathroom.

The degnoming was always a tedious process, as Hermione, Harry, and Ron were already used to. Draco and Pansy, who'd never done such a thing in their lives, were alarmed at the sight of Weasley swinging a gnome over his head in wide circles and flinging it far away. The wild and fading screams of the gnomes would have been comical if it wasn't so…odd, and even slightly painful to hear.

They reminded Draco of Dobby's miserable life in Malfoy manor. To his surprise, even Hermione said nothing about the harsh treatment. Apparently, this was the way things were done at the Weasley's home, and he wasn't about to ruffle feathers any more than he already had (and how could you add more to the crime of murder?) so he kept silent, but all concerns were wiped away after the
fifth time he'd been bitten on the same hand.

"Merlin. Does it hurt terribly?" Ginny said, looking over at his swollen and stinging hand.

"A bit," Draco said. He'd been healing it repeatedly, but after the fourth bite, had decided not to waste his time.

"We've got gloves, if you need them," she said, jerking her head towards the Burrow. She wiped sweat from her forehead. "They're a bit worn, though."

Draco flexed his hand. "I'll be alright."

She nodded, and went back to work.

Draco wandered off a bit farther, wondering whether Ginny had not mentioned the gloves earlier because of obvious reasons or if he had truly not thought about it until seeing her hand. It was easier to think she'd withheld the information out of dislike, but she had not been hostile toward him since his confession in front of the Order, and seeing how practiced she was in the whole gnome procedure, he suspected it had been a long time since he or her brother had used gloves to complete the task, and he certainly wasn't going to start now. He narrowed his eyes as he inspected the garden, crouching now and then to look for the little burrows in the ground that indicated a gnome's habitat.

"See any?" Weasley came up beside him.

"No." Draco said, squinting downwards at the ground.

Weasley glanced back towards the rest. He wiped at his forehead and hesitated. Draco, sensing he was about to say something serious, kept silent, although his mouth opening out of habit, but found no insult waiting on his tongue. He closed it, feeling rather stupid. It would have been extremely foolish to do so, anyhow, when his own enemy was (grudgingly) harboring him here.

"I can see that you're not as much of an ass anymore," Weasley began, and his voice was both uncertain and resentful, but checked in a way that almost put Draco at ease. "Although a couple of days doesn't really mean shit when you were a shit for years. I don't know what happened between you and Hermione, but she seems to trust you. I won't go that far, but I want to know that you're not playing us all for some trick that'll hurt my family."

Draco fought the urge to roll his eyes. "I'm not."

"You better not be lying to me, Malfoy," Weasley said angrily. "If you are I'm going to make sure you'll regret ever coming here. Hermione can defend herself, but know that if you ever hurt her, I'll deal it back to you tenfold, along with whatever she does to you."

The threat, had it been delivered a year ago, would have made Draco laugh until he cried. But he was finding it harder to laugh, lately, and there was a gravity to Weasley's tone and expression that suggested he would do everything in his power to come through on his promise.

Still, Draco's ire rose and just managed to tamp it down in order to reply. "I'm not going to do anything to harm your family. Or Hermione."

Weasley didn't look appeased. "Or Harry."

Draco almost blushed. "Or Potter. I mean it, Weasley. I don't think McGonagall would have sent me here if she suspected I was a threat to you lot. I don't plan on becoming one, either."
Weasley stared at him without saying anything for a moment.

"My parents let you stay here because they feel sorry for you. But I don't. If it were up to me I'd have sent you back there to face the Ministry and everyone else.

I think you deserve everything that's coming to you."

"I think that's the first time we agree on something," Draco said coolly.

"That's a surprise." Weasley let out a short, bitter laugh. "I guess I'm still used to you skirting consequences for everything you did in the past."

"Well I'm not going to run anymore," Draco snapped.

Weasley looked at him with a new light in his eyes that while still not completely friendly, was slightly more accepting than it had been in the days prior.

"That's a start," he said, and walked away, back to where Hermione stood with her back to them, peeing behind a rose bush.

Nobody else seemed to have noticed their talk. Draco remained standing there, processing what had just happened. Distantly he heard them all talking around him, and the wailing of the gnomes as they flew through the air.

"Nasty ones, these gnomes," he heard Weasley saying to Pansy. "Look at this one. Little shit's looking to bite, best to grab him by the legs—ouch!"

Pansy laughed. "That looks painful. If no one will take those gloves, I will." She rose from the ground, dusted off her knees and went inside with Ginny to look for the gloves.

Hermione had just flung a gnome into the air and watched it go, a grim look on her face. Potter and Weasley were taking a closer look on the garden floor, muttering to each other, pointing to several spots and reaching in now and then, but produced nothing more. They finally rose, just as Pansy and Ginny emerged from the kitchen without the gloves.

"Looks like that's all of them," Weasley said.

"For now," Ginny said, grinning.

"Right."

Weasley looked over at Draco. "Did you ever degnome a garden before today, Malfoy?"

Draco tapped his wand to his hand to heal it, and flexed it again. The swelling had thankfully gone down at once. "Not once. We usually had a gardener for this sort of thing."

"Oh, naturally," Ginny said, grinning, but in a way that was friendly and not too teasing. "What do you think?"

"It's…interesting," he replied. "But I don't mind it. Isn't there an easier way to do it, though? Shoot some spells at them to send them on their way?"

"Probably, yeah," Weasley said, shrugging. "Percy used to do it like that. This is how Fred and George taught me how to do it, though."

"What're you lot up to?" came Tonk's voice from the back kitchen door. She entered the garden.
shortly after. They all waved.

"Tidying up the garden," Hermione said, smiling. There was a smear of dirt along her forehead, just over the scar from the laceration she'd gotten during the battle. It had yet to heal.

"Need a hand?"

"Thanks, we've just finished."

"Lucky me," Tonks said, shoving her hands in her pockets. "Molly sent me to say they might take longer than expected. There was a problem with the dress and it's urgent, apparently. I'm to watch over you all and help make dinner."

"We've been on our own before," Ginny scoffed. "We're not children."

"I'm sure she knows that," Tonks said, winking at her. "I think she just wanted someone here in case something went wrong."

"Why?" Pansy asked at once. "Has something happened?"

"Not exactly. Let's go inside. You really shouldn't spend too much time outside, anyway."

"We've got the wards up," Ron said, frowning. "They can't see or hear us."

The kitchen door slammed behind them as they all filtered back in.

"They can't," Tonks agreed. "But they still know where you live." She looked over her shoulder to the narrow hall, as if expecting company. "There's Death Eaters hiding out around here, waiting for the wards to falter, or for someone to accidentally step out of bounds to make a move. Grimmauld Place, too. They're watching, and they're not going away."

Pansy grabbed Draco's hand. She looked stricken.

"Do they know we're here?" she asked.

"As far as we all know, and we know all this through Severus, they all do believe you're dead." She averted her eyes a little. "I don't know how he proved it, but they seem convinced. Neither of your bodies were found. There was a fire in the Great Hall—Bellatrix used Fiendfyre. When she heard you were in the Tower, she abandoned it, and it got out of control. No one died, thank Merlin, but we're adding two imaginary casualties. It's better than what Severus suggested."

"What?" Hermione asked.

"There were several unconscious and bound Death Eaters lying around," Tonks said slowly. "He wanted to take two of them, feed them some Polyjuice and pass them off as you two."

"Oh," Pansy said. She had gone pale.

"The fire story is more convenient," Tonks said. "That stuff leaves nothing behind, not even ash. Easier to explain."

Ron came back, having looted the refrigerator. They all pulled their elbows from the table and he set down several tomatoes, mushrooms, onions, and various other legumes. There was already broth set to boil on the stove. He set down a pile of knives in the center.

"Might as well get started," he said, and took one before he sat down.
"I didn't know you could cook," Harry said bemusedly.

"Mum's been teaching me," Ron shrugged. "Says we can't always rely on magic."

Draco shared in Harry's slight bewilderment but said nothing.

"She's right," Tonks nodded.

"Soup is all he knows how to cook," Ginny said, snickering. "That, and eggs."

"Hey, shut it," Ron said.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," Draco said. "The point is that you're learning."

Hermione smiled at him from across the table. Tonks nodded.

Ron's ears had turned red. "Yeah, well, get dicing, all of you, or the broth will burn before we're done."

Tonks took a knife from the pile and gathered the onions, peeling them swiftly before setting them back down.

"You don't have cutting boards?" she asked. "I don't want to fuck up your table."

"It's already fucked up," Ron said, shrugging. "Just look at it. Another couple marks will blend right in."

"Mum's going to notice, anyway," Ginny said. She had already started chopping.

Draco grabbed the tomatoes and began to chop them. It had been a long time since he'd cooked anything for himself but he remembered enough to not make a fool of himself, thankfully. He remembered hating the cooking lessons his mother had given him as a boy, and his frequent protests that cooking was a House Elf's job and not a wizard's but found himself silently thankful that he had done it anyway, and that his mother had cared enough to do it.

"So you said they're watching us," Potter said suddenly, pausing his chopping of the potatoes. "But not because of Pansy and Malfoy."

Tonks nodded. "They know you're here," she said, looking at him first, then Hermione. "But that's no surprise because you two usually spend part of your summers here."

They nodded.

"We've sent someone to check and we haven't got word back yet, but it's likely Voldemort's got Death Eaters set up around your Aunt and Uncle's house, too."

Potter frowned. "Do you think they'll try anything if I don't show up?"

"We're not sure," Tonks said. "We got Aurors posing as temporary neighbors, just in case they do." She looked at Hermione. "Same goes for your family."

Hermione had gone so pale Draco automatically reached for her shoulder to steady her.

"I'm alright," she told him, then turned to Tonks. "Can I go see them?"

Tonks grimaced. "It's too risky, Hermione. I'm sorry. I know you're worried, but they're being
supervised, 'round the clock. We're not going to let anything happen to them. I promise."

She cleaned off her hands and reached into her robe, a tight set to her expression that made
Hermione's anxiety spike. She pulled out two envelopes.

"These arrived for you today."

Hermione took them, her insides twisting into a knot. The envelopes were a hideously familiar shade
of pink. They were hand-lettered, and addressed from the Ministry of Magic, Department of Magic
Theft and Protection.

"The others are usually printed," she said softly, and Hermione nodded.

*Of course* Umbridge would hold a grudge. Hermione would have expected no less from the foul
witch.

*But she isn't the only one who's still angry.*

Her scar had begun to ache and smart. She stared at it, numb, disbelieving. There was a faint ringing
in her ears. She blinked rapidly. She hadn't expected this to affect her so much. She thought she'd
been prepared. She'd known this was coming.

She glanced at her pained scar as she began to open the envelope.

*Is this what Harry feels?*

Draco hovered beside her, but she didn't want to see his expression. She could already sense his
anger.

Inside was the summons for her to appear at the Ministry for an interview and inspection of her
wand. Hermione didn't bother reading it, but Draco took it and scanned the letter, hate already
simmering inside him.

"They're fast," Hermione said calmly. She looked to the other one, which Harry and Ron had taken
and torn open, and were now reading angrily. "One for my parent's house, and one for here. Did
they see it?"

"Yes," Tonks replied. "But we assured them that you're safe and won't be going for this interview."

"When is it for?" Hermione asked them.

"August 5th," Draco said.

"That's two months from now," Harry said. "Why so late?"

"That old toad's probably collected a hundred wands by now," Ron said in disgust, crumpling the
letter. Pansy smacked him on the hand and took it from him. She and Ginny scanned through it as
quickly as their eyes would allow.

"I don't know about that," Tonks said. "Everyone's trying to put up a good fight. The woman's
devious, but those interviews take a long time. She probably goes through five a day."

"Why so slow?" Ginny asked.

"Because she enjoys it," Draco said. "It's probably like Christmas for her, every day."
Hermione took the letter from him, put it back in its envelope, and tucked it into her pocket.

"What will happen when I don't show up?" she asked.

"They'll probably send another letter," Tonks said, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I hear the limit is three. Then the Aurors come knocking. There hasn't been a case of that yet, but it's only just begun. Everyone's too confused and frightened to ignore it."

Hermione nodded. Draco squeezed her shoulder gently.

Slowly, they resumed their chopping. Ron got up periodically to check on the broth and urge them to work just a little faster. He added chicken to the broth as it began to boil, and they got up quickly to add their contributions to the soup.

They lounged in the kitchen with grumbling stomachs, waiting for the soup to finish. Ron stayed by the stove to stir now and then. The air in the kitchen grew warm and fragrant. It would have felt more comfortable and pleasant had it not been for Tonks' troubling news.

She looked at Harry. "Have you told Draco about Regulus?" she asked.

"No."

"You should," she said, and then to Draco: "I think you'd benefit from hearing it."

"Soup's ready," Ron called.

"Thank Merlin, Ginny sighed. She got up to collect some bowls.

Potter looked a little uncomfortable, but to his credit, waited until everyone had been served and seated before telling the story. Draco waited impatiently, not daring to touch his soup, which although looked and smelled delicious, felt hot enough to render his taste buds useless for the rest of his life. Everyone else was waiting to eat, too, stirring theirs, and perhaps he should have, too, to speed it along, but he found he couldn't concentrate very well when important information was about to be shared.

Tonks had got up to fetch the bread and cheese, which she set down onto the table with a definitive clunk. She sat, and motioned to Harry.

He began his story

"So, he defected."

Potter nodded.

"Why?"

"I'm not sure," Potter said, but Draco knew at once that he was lying. Was it to keep more information secret? And from whom: him, or Tonks? There had to be more to the story.

Hermione caught his eye and gave a miniscule shake of her head, as if to tell him not to worry.

"We think he just had enough," Tonks said, stretching. "All the awful things he had to do must have taken a toll on him. He didn't want any more, and wanted to leave, but Voldemort never allows anyone to go just like that."
"So he killed him."

"Had him killed," Weasley corrected.

Draco shook his head. "I already know he'll come after me if he finds out I'm still alive. I don't see the point in this story."

"The point is," Tonks said gently, "that you're not the first to defect. It might seem like that, but you shouldn't feel alone. Maybe Regulus couldn't save himself, but we can help you. If it's what you truly want."

"He'll find me anyway," Draco said, thinking back to what Snape had told him the day before. Pansy looked a little green. His own hands had gone cold and clammy. "They'll find us both."

"We're going to make sure that doesn't happen," Tonks replied. "You're not going to end up like Regulus."

Their conversation with Tonks thankfully took a lighter note before dinner ended, but Draco remained nearly silent through most of it. They complimented Ron on the soup and set the dishes to be washed. Mrs. Weasley arrived just as Tonks was leaving, and they stayed outside for a moment to talk, which normally wouldn't have set off the suspicions of the young adults inside the kitchen had they not used a noise barrier to prevent them from eavesdropping, which of course, they had immediately tried to do.

"Damn it," Ginny said, reeling back in the Extendable Ear along the floor. "Can't hear a thing."

"What do you think they could be talking about?" Pansy asked.

"Search me." Ginny shook her head. "I don't like that they're trying to hide things from us."

"I don't either," Harry said, just as Mrs. Weasley came in. None of them had heard the front door shut, or her approach, so they started when she entered the room. Ginny jammed the Extendable Ear back into her pocket.

"Your Father's due in an hour. Tonks told me you made the soup, Ron," Mrs. Weasley said after greeting them. "How did it go?"

"It was alright," he said, turning red.

"Don't be so modest, it was delicious," Pansy said, nudging him on the arm. Mrs. Weasley beamed proudly at her son.

"How was the fitting?" Ginny asked.

"Slow," Mrs. Weasley admitted, sinking down into a chair. "Fleur found some problems with the dress and we had to have them fixed there since soon it's likely to be harder to travel anywhere."

At this morsel of information the group looked at each other through the corners of their eyes, skin prickling with alarm, unsure if she had truly meant to share it with them. But it was too late.

Shortly after, they excused themselves quickly from the room.

She was sitting cross-legged in bed, holding the pink letter in her lap, reading it over and over. Draco sat by the fire, warming his hands and watching her anxiously, knowing she was thinking hard, but not knowing if he should interrupt.
When several minutes had passed without a word between them, he couldn't bear it any longer and spoke up.

"What are you thinking of?"

She finally tore her gaze away from the letter, and looked around the room, blinking, as if she'd forgotten she was not alone. She found him by the fire, and moved closer to the edge of the bed.

"I need to see my parents," she said, folding the letter back up. She was avoiding his eye.

Draco hesitated. "You heard what she said…"

Hermione's shoulders straightened. "I can't just leave them there," she said. "I can't."

"Are you going to warn them?" he asked.

She nodded, but he'd caught the brief pause she'd taken before doing so. Draco frowned, and went to her.

She was cold when he wrapped his arms around her. A tear escaped her eye when she turned to look at him. Her face went red and she wiped it away. It was strange how after everything, she still felt embarrassed to cry in front of him, even now, when knowing things were different.

"If something happens to them I'd never be able to forgive myself for it," she whispered.

Draco understood too well.

"The Death Eaters…"

"I'll find a way around them," she insisted. "I don't want to leave my family in danger, not knowing what's happened to me…not after what we're going to do."

"When do you want to do it?" he asked.

Hermione wiped at her eyes. "As soon as possible. I've got a terrible feeling."

Draco wrapped his arms around her more tightly. Hermione clung to him, sniffing, her head buried into his chest.

"I'll help you," he promised. "You won't do it alone."

"They won't like it," Hermione said. "What if they don't want to help?"

Draco stroked the back of her head with one hand and her back with the other.

"They love you," he reminded her. "They would do anything for you."

She nodded, and wiped the last of the tears from her eyes. She withdrew from him a little, and Draco let his hands fall from her.

"Thank you."

Hermione went to talk to Pansy and Ginny for a while, which allowed Draco to bathe and ready for bed. He could hear Mr. Weasley speaking to someone downstairs, and a clatter in the kitchen that suggested someone might be preparing tea.
Hermione knocked on his door an hour later, already in her pyjamas. He could smell her toothpaste on her.

Neither had said anything the whole day about if they would sleep together that night. She always asked in fear of becoming an inconvenience, and he always agreed, not able to bear being alone. But with their discussion earlier, they hadn't brought it up again.

Hermione had figured that he might want to sleep alone so she wouldn't see what his night terrors consisted of. She didn't want him to feel embarrassed around her, much less resent her for insisting on staying. She had knocked on the door, her "goodnight" already on her lips, but there had been fear in his eyes when he answered, and it made her fall quiet.

"Will you stay?" he asked.

They fell asleep facing each other. He had made himself stay awake as long as possible, so that she would be asleep when or if the nightmares started and therefore miss most, if not all of it, but he had succumbed not long after.

When they awoke the next morning, Draco was cautiously relieved to realize he had not dreamt at all. The trend continued for the next several days—there was nothing much to do around the Burrow but to help Mrs. Weasley cook and clean in preparation for the wedding, which was rapidly approaching, so they busied themselves in their work (with Fred and George's occasional help) and tried not to think too much on what was looming over them. They settled into a clumsy routine, and when there was nothing to do they sat together and Hermione, Weasley and Potter would tell him and Pansy more stories of the things they'd done and seen. Snape didn't visit again, and little news of the outside world trickled in past the front of back door, to their frustration. The pink letter had been locked away in the bedside table drawer where Draco's wand still lay. Draco felt himself slowly growing more at ease around Potter and Weasley, but not much overall. Hermione taught Pansy and Ginny to knit, and Weasley showed him and Potter the ghoul in the attic, who was just as cantankerous as the twins had promised. Potter told him the pieces of Regulus's story that he had kept from Tonks, about the note, the cave, and the missing locket. Tonks visited them every few days, if they had to be left alone in the house, and Draco could sense a tension building in the house that nobody else seemed able to detect. He thought at first he was imagining it. But it continued to build, and the deceptively calm nights where he and Hermione did nothing more than sleep continued to pass until it swelled and burst in his face.
He was dreaming, and he didn't know what he was looking at.

It was like a fog; like seeing through dirtied and warped glass. He couldn't make out anything on the other side no matter how much he squinted or tried to step closer.

There was a sense of dread in him that refused to be made small again; it crept like vines around his insides until they wrapped around his heart; he was short of breath, as though he'd been sprinting for minutes on end. The air around him was frigid, tense. It stiffened his limbs and set his heart to pounding.

A voice started up on the other side, and at once, his nerves jumped at its familiarity, but try as he might he couldn't match the voice to the mental picture of whom it belonged to, even though it was so easy so easy i know you I know who you are. who are you?

Dread climbed.

It was saying something, calling to him, but the words were so distinct and yet so muffled it might have been saying anything at all. He stood still, silent, ears and concentration straining to make sense of any of it.

And climbed.

There was an urge to run inside him, growing stronger by the second. He tried to ignore it, focusing on the voice instead. It seemed imperative that he find out who it was above all else.

The voice was growing distant, and he blindly sought it ought, following that compulsion within him that urged him to find it, nearly tripping over himself in his haste.

i know you i know you i should know you but who are you?

He was in a wood. Vague forms of trees stood all around him, and he could fear and feel the sound of bramble breaking beneath his steps, but the fog was so deep he saw nothing distinctive.

and then, as if a switch had been flipped, the voice turned to screams instantaneously, without so much as a pause. It made his knees buckle.

Terror and pain mixed into the voice. Dread wrapped its cold fingers around his throat and his heart stopped cold for a full second before his legs finally obeyed his body and he began to run at last, straight towards the screams.

The fog would not lift. His legs moved slowly, as if chained to something heavy that lay behind him. He could see nothing and hear nothing but the screams, which only seemed to grow louder and now came from all around him rather than one direction.
And now it was growing distant. He pumped his legs faster.

*wait*

*wait!*

Something tripped him then, wrapping around his legs so quick he flailed and began to fall backwards, disappointment filling his lungs. The screams stopped at once, just before he hit the ground—

and woke up, sprawled on his back, breathing like a horse after a high-stakes race, sweat drenching him from head to toe, in the garden of the Burrow.

It took several seconds for it to sink in. He rolled onto his side, panting, eyes wide and wild, half-dazed with the nightmare, scanning the inky sky that lay above him.

The night was clear. There was no fog. There were no screams.

*How did I get here?*

There was the sound of someone taking a step, just beside him.

"*Get up,*" came a cold voice.

He automatically obeyed, his mind still reeling.

He found Potter there, waiting with his wand drawn and aimed at him. Draco met his eye and found nothing but suspicion and contempt there. He was still in his pyjamas.

*We both are,* he realized, looking down.

Potter muttered something, and Draco's hands were forced together, as if bound by cuffs.

Sweat rolled down his temples. It was still night, he thought, looking wildly around. Or early dawn. He didn't know. The night was still as a crypt.

"What were you doing?" Potter asked.

Draco held up his hands, and was startled to find a wand clutched in one fist. So startled, in fact, that he dropped it and it fell to the ground.

Potter's gaze followed it, then their eyes met.

Draco swore internally.

This had to look bad. Very, very bad.

How had he got hold of a wand? And had he been sleepwalking?

"*Accio.*" The dropped wand flew into Potter's waiting hand. He scanned it quickly.

"How did you get this?" he asked.

Draco floundered. "I don't know."

"*Liar.*"
"I said I don't know, Potter," he hissed. "I don't even know what the fuck I'm doing out here. I woke up from a dream and that's all I know."

"You expect me to believe that?" Potter asked, his eyes narrowed. "How did you get your wand back? Were you going to disable the wards?"

"What?" Draco asked. He was only now just starting to catch his breath. "Why would I do that?"

"Because I found you with a wand pointing straight at them."

Draco looked behind him. The space behind him was open and clear, but they were farther away from the house and garden, far enough to suggest that the wards would indeed start here.

"Were you going to call them?" Potter asked, edging closer, his wand never breaking aim from Draco's face. "Answer me."

"I'm not lying to you, Potter," Draco said. "I had a dream, and I woke up here. I don't know how I got my damn wand, and I wouldn't go breaking those wards, either."

Potter appeared unconvinced. Draco couldn't blame him.

"If you even try anything right now, I'll wake the whole house up," Potter said. "They wouldn't hesitate to throw you out."

His heart beat to rival the flutter of a hummingbird's wings. "Listen to me, Potter. I don't know what I'm doing here. I already told Weasley that I'm not going to do anything to compromise any of you and I fucking meant it. I know how this looks, but I meant it, and I'm not lying."

Potter's wand lowered only a small fraction, but the suspicion didn't leave his eyes.

"What was your dream?" he asked.

Draco shook his head, sighed. "I was running…someone was screaming. I was trying to find them."

"You don't remember coming here at all."

"No, I told you."

Potter stood there for a bit longer, scrutinizing Draco with those green eyes that often put him on edge.

"I'm not lying," Draco said one last time, aware of how pathetic he must sound.

Potter nodded, finally. But he held onto Draco's wand.

"You're not getting this back," he said, following Draco's stare.

"I didn't expect to. I don't even know how I got it."

"Hermione was holding it," Potter said.

Draco paled, remembering the little night table. Had he done something to her?

Potter saw his reaction.

"If you did anything to her—"
Draco was already on the move, walking as fast as his legs would allow into the Burrow, where once inside, he only just remembered to quiet his footfalls or risk waking everyone. Potter close on his heels, they rushed to his room, and Draco twisted and pushed open the door.

He realized belatedly that he should have made Potter wait outside, as Hermione likely wouldn't appreciate being rushed in upon like this, especially seeing as they were sharing a bed, and Potter probably didn't know.

In the end, he hadn't needed to worry. The room was empty. He scanned the room with wild eyes, dreading that he might find her crumpled in one corner. All he found was the open drawer of the night table, and the sheets shoved to the foot of the bed in such hurry that they were half pooled on the floor.

"Where is she?" Potter asked behind him. "Malfoy, what did you do?"

"There you are—"

Draco stumbled as he and Potter were pushed into the room by someone pushing on their backs. He turned quickly, and found Hermione there, shutting the door behind herself as she followed them inside.

She looked as though she'd just woken up, and he wouldn't have been surprised if she hadn't.

"What's happened?" she asked in a whisper. "I woke up and couldn't find you anywhere."

"I'm sorry," Draco said. "I had an odd dream. I think I was sleepwalking."

She frowned. "What?"

"I found him outside, with this," Potter said, holding up Draco's wand. Hermione's eyes widened. She looked at Draco, demanding explanation.

"I don't know," was all he could offer. "I dreamt I was running, and I woke up outside, at the end of the wards." He shook his head again. "I don't even know how I got the wand—I thought I did something to you to get it."

"I think I just slept through it," she said, blushing. Her hand had gone up to partially cover her mouth. "I only just woke up, I didn't even know you'd stepped out. I thought you'd gone to the loo. How did it happen?" she turned to stare at the night table.

"I don't know. I'd tell you if I could remember."

"I put a protection spell on it," she said, "not that I don't trust you. I just—"

Potter was staring at them strangely again, and Hermione only just remembered to tear her eyes away from Draco's.

"Can you do wandless magic?" Potter asked him.

Draco frowned. "Well, yes, but I don't think I've ever dismantled a protection spell before, much less without a wand."

"It wasn't exactly a simple one, either," Hermione added. She touched Draco's arm.

"You're sure you don't remember anything else? Think hard."
He did, but nothing came forth, aside from the troublesome memory of the dream and dread that had yet to lift from his mind.

"Nothing," he admitted.

Hermione sighed. "Okay." She turned to Potter. "Can you hold his wand for now?"

Potter nodded. He looked at Draco curiously. "Have you ever sleepwalked before tonight?"

Draco thought back to months ago, where so many nights had been spent wandering the castle at all hours of the night, sometimes so tired he wasn't sure he'd really been fully conscious.

"I might have, but it's never been like this before."

Potter and Hermione traded a worried look. Though neither said a single word, a conversation seemed to be happening there in complete silence. Draco tried to catch it all and decipher it, but fell short. Hermione nodded at last, and Potter went to the door.

"If anything else happens, let me know," he said. "Hermione…"

"I know," she said, and Potter nodded, closing the door behind him.

Left alone together, Draco looked at Hermione.

"Know what?"

Hermione sighed again and sat on the edge of the bed.

"If you sleepwalk again I'll have to restrain you," she said. "And tell the others."

He had suspected as much.

"Tie me down if you have to," he said plainly. "I don't want to risk the safety of anyone in this house because of something I can't explain."

Hermione frowned.

"Was it a bad dream?"

"Yes."

"Why did you run?"

"I heard someone screaming. Someone I knew. I had to help them."

She nodded, pushing her hair off her shoulder.

"Could it have been one of your parents?"

Draco paused. "It could have been."

"You've been under so much stress, with the things you've done…I think it was bound to manifest in some way," she said slowly. "I thought the nightmares were the end of it. Although I still can't get past the fact that you managed to break the enchantment on the table and take your wand wandlessly."

"I can't figure it out, either," he said. "I've been able to do wandless magic for a year or two now, but
it's never been very strong. I feel—" he faltered, and tried again. "I feel like someone else is at play here. It sounds mad, but there's no way I could have done it myself."

Her eyes went serious. "Who, then?"

"I don't know," and he realized now, that the dread had not gone away, because he had subconsciously realized this the moment they'd come into the room. Something felt off. Had she felt it, too? He scanned the room, feigning calm, not wanting to alarm her, but she sensed his unease and followed his gaze.

Had someone come in while they were both asleep and broken out his wand? Had they enchanted him, still asleep, to walk outside so stealthily that no one had noticed until it was almost too late?

Or had it really been him all along?

The dread ran a finger down the length of his spine slowly.

There was nothing amiss. She even went to the window to check it, but it was shut tight and covered so that not a bit of light came through from the outside.

She took her wand from the bedside table and cast a protective enchantment around it, one on the nighttable, and then one around the door. When she had finished, she stood there a moment longer, and Draco could sense her quiet doubt, as if she were gauging whether she had done it correctly.

Before he could say anything, she turned, and put her wand away, back into the drawer. It closed with a soft click.

"I don't know what to do," she said, her voice soft. "I don't know if it's enough. I want to trust you."

Draco couldn't meet her eye. He struggled to find words.

"Do whatever you think you have to."

They sat on a broken wooden table just outside the kitchen door. Hermione and Weasley sat on the other side. Potter sat between himself and Hermione. They had told no one else of what had occurred early that morning, and although he should have felt relief, Draco found it only put him on edge.

With the wedding drawing nearer, there was still much to do. After breakfast, Mrs. Weasley had dragged Ginny with her to Diagon Alley to look for proper decorations for the party. Ginny had protested heartily, but had been ignored. Her brother had been overly pleased that he had not been made to go along until Mrs. Weasley had ordered him to clean the attic. He had argued that nobody would even see their attic, but Mrs. Weasley and Ginny had gone by then. Having nothing else to do, the rest of them had all helped, and it hadn't taken long, thankfully. The attic was messy, but the ghoul was gone, at least, so they'd had an easy time of it. Draco had worked tensely, still caught in what had happened only hours ago, still trying to determine how it had all happened. They hadn't been able to get back to sleep, and chose instead to sit in the living room and wait and doze until the others awoke.

Hermione and Potter had given him the rest of the information on Regulus and the Horcrux locket that they couldn't previously reveal in Tonk's presence, and shaken by it, he'd only just remembered what Snape had revealed to him, that he'd forgotten to tell Pansy. Once she'd woken and joined them, he'd guiltily relayed it to her in front of the others.

Pansy was shaking her head in disbelief.
"So Snape's been working with them all this time?"

Draco traced his fingertip over a crude drawing of a hippogriff carved onto the table. It was so worn that the features of the creature's face were almost indistinguishable. The initials beneath it read CW.

"I don't think he's been working with them from the start. But yes, he's been working for them."

Pansy shook her head and blew out a gust of air. "Doing what? Spying on the Dark Lord?"

"Most likely."

"Lord, and he had us all fooled, didn't he?"

Weasley made a face. "I can't imagine what could have persuaded him to ever turn sides."

Potter frowned, but Draco sensed this was something he also had wondered over many times.

Pansy stared off into the distance, thinking hard, but in the end, as they all knew Snape so little, neither could come up with a satisfactory answer.

"I wonder what's going to happen if Hogwarts opens next term," Hermione said.

"McGonagall will be Headmistress, won't she?"

"Yes."

"I can see the Ministry trying to push their way back into controlling everything," Weasley said bitterly. "As if they didn't learn their lesson last time."

"With Voldemort's puppets running the Ministry, I'd almost expect them to," Potter said, rubbing at his forehead. "It's not worth it to go back. Not like we can, anyway."

The truth of his words hung over them heavily.

"Mum's back," Weasley said after a pause. They could hear the front door open and close rapidly, and loud footsteps in the living room.

"Oi, you lot!" they heard Ginny cry out. "Are you still in the attic?"

Weasley went to the door. "No, we'll be right there."

He stretched widely, and shook dust from his hair. The others also began to rise from the crooked table, and they filed back into the house. Draco hung back briefly to adjust the sleeve of his robe, which had caught on a splinter and was now torn. He sighed, absently wishing he had his wand to fix it. He stood on the stoop leading back into the house and glared at the sky.

Pansy noticed him, and placed her hand on his arm. "How are you?"

"Able to sleep, at least." He offered her a grim smile. "Fancy that. I've killed two people, I'm not in prison, I'm being fed regularly, and people feel sorry for me." He gave a dry, humorless laugh. "Me, the Deatheater."

"Circumstances were different, Draco," Pansy said firmly. "You need to remember that. Wells, whoever he was, at least he deserved it. And Dumbledore...well..."

"It doesn't make it any easier," he whispered. "I'd rather not have done it at all, regardless of whether
they deserved or wanted it. It's all I can think of. It's going to drive me mad, if it hasn't already."

Pansy gripped his hand and leaned in.

"You're going to be okay."

Draco met her eye, wanting so badly to believe her, that she had no doubt in her mind that what she said was true. Believing was easier to do when someone else was doing the work, after all.

But there was a slight waver in her brow, and her voice had caught.

Draco covered her hand with his own, and because he didn't know what else to say, nodded.

Pansy's gaze was diverted and fixed on something behind him. Abruptly, her face went void of color and she went absolutely still. A prickle of fear ran up his spine.

"Pansy?" he whipped around, scanning the garden for whatever had caught her attention. He found it just beyond the gate, a little ways farther than the end of the wards.

A tall, cloaked figure stood there in broad daylight. The person, undiscernible through their heavy black hood, stood still but for the fluttering of their robe in the mild wind.

Vomit rushed up his esophagus. He was only just able to swallow it back down, wincing as it burned his throat, but the cold fear that wrapped itself around him was enough to distract from the awful taste.

"Do you have your wand?" he asked as quietly as he could, not daring to move.

"Yes." The terror in her voice was enough to set him to shake. She gripped his hand tighter.

They could hear the others talking in the front of the house cheerfully, as if they had forgotten them.

The figure was staring straight at them—or so it seemed. Draco only just remembered that the wards were still active, and so that meant that the mystery Death Eater couldn't see them.

The thought wasn't as comforting as he'd have liked it to be. His body had locked itself, frozen on the ground beside Pansy. His heart galloped like a frantic horse being whipped by its rider.

"There you are! I was wondering where the two of you'd gone off to," came a pleasant voice from behind them, and they jumped violently, turning so quickly there was a collective crack of their necks. Pansy had uttered a small scream, and pressed her hand to her heart upon finding Mrs. Weasley behind them. Not wanting to take her eyes off the enemy, however, she stared back towards it, terrified that she might just have given herself and Draco away.

Mrs. Weasley had smiled, perplexed at their reaction, but sensed their fear at once and frowned. She followed their stares to the eerie source, and her frown turned grave. She grabbed each of them by the shoulder, her grip tight.

"Get inside."

Neither of them knew Mrs. Weasley very well, but knew her to be the sort who rarely used so serious a tone of voice. Draco helped Pansy up, and they rushed back into the Burrow, looking over their shoulders repeatedly.

The Death Eater hadn't noticed them at all. By now the others had noticed something was wrong, and had rushed into the kitchen and gathered at the steps of the back entrance, looking at them with their
eyes wide. Pansy rushed past them and straight into the kitchen, but Draco lingered, his heart beating hollowly, and looked back one last time at the Deatheater.

"Get all the way inside!" Mrs. Weasley hissed at them. Potter was looking at him suspiciously. Weasley was frowning, his jaw set, staring intently at his mother as she walked closer to the end of the wards. Someone grabbed his wrist and pulled him deeper into the kitchen—he stumbled, and found Hermione, white-faced, but serious, her wide eyes scanning his face, as if checking for injury.

Mrs. Weasley had her wand out, and was approaching the stranger carefully, her shoulders tense as a wooden board. As Draco watched, she raised his wand slightly, as if trying to determine what to do, but froze for a half-beat when the Deatheater raised their arm, wandless, and reached for their face, as if about to pull off their hood. Her wand arm snapped up, ready to fire.

Draco leaned in closer, almost squinting to see better, and watched, in growing suspense, as the Deatheater began to pick their nose.

The Order was fully present at dinner. The air was tense, and hardly anyone spoke. Tonk's usual jokes and quips were gone. Lupin sat at the other end of the table, nursing a cup of tea, a new, deep claw mark vivid on his neck, just above his collar. Mad-Eye sat silent and staring at his empty bowl of soup. The twins sat together, as always, poring over a scrap of parchment, scratching something out now and then. Bill sat at the table though he'd already eaten. Ginny sat next to him, fiddling with her wand. Hermione sat opposite Draco, her arms crossed and placed on the table, her hair piled neatly atop her head in a bun, her eyes distant and on the bare surface of the table. Draco could feel Potter's stare on him now and then, and though it was brief, he knew Potter was still gauging whether he had made a mistake in not alerting everyone to the possible flight risk he posed.

The trouble was, he didn't even want to run away. And he certainly wouldn't have gone without saying goodbye to Pansy. Or Hermione, for that matter.

The only thing that could have made him attempt something so foolish was his parents being in danger, of which currently they were not, according to Snape. They were in the Dark Lord's good graces again, and he had to believe that, even if doubt still kept its cold fingers carefully pressed on his windpipe. Nothing good would come of him going back home.

But I didn't even want to, he reminded himself. I wasn't trying to go home. I was trying to find that voice.

A sharp pain registered on his temple. He brought his hand to it and rubbed.

It was nothing but a dream. It doesn't mean anything.

Even the dream itself was fading. All he remembered was running and panic and that there had been screaming, not the sound of the screams themselves. It was troubling, but he supposed it was for the best.

Mr. Weasley had just come home, and approached the busy table, taking off his robe and scarf, his coat beneath it. His spectacles were fogged and behind them, his forehead creased as he frowned and took in his peers.

Mrs. Weasley joined him at the head of the table, her gloved hands holding a pot full of soup.

"From now on, no one goes outside without one of us there," Mrs. Weasley announced. She gestured to Mr. Weasley to sit, and placed the large pot in the middle of the table, and waved her wand. Everyone's bowls were filled with steaming, fragrant soup, but the only ones who began to eat
"But he couldn't even see us," Ginny said, frowning.

"That doesn't matter," Mr. Weasley said, wiping at the lens of his spectacles. "They know we are here and will likely continue to keep a presence outside our wards. We need to be careful," he said, looking intently at each of them.

"We are careful, dad," Ron said. "How were we supposed to know they'd start a watch party here?"

"Then we've got to be more careful," Mr. Weasley replied calmly. "We can't risk giving them anything. They may know we're here but they can't come inside." He looked to Draco and Pansy. "I know you're both worried, but remember that if they knew you two specifically are here, they would have attacked first, rather than stand outside waiting for a glimpse. This is why we need to be careful."

"We'll be coming in more frequently to make sure things go smoothly, Arthur," Mad-Eye said.

"Can't we just attack them?" Ginny asked. "It's only one Death Eater, after all."

"It's two now," Arthur said.

"Two?!"

"Not one step outside without supervision, am I clear?" Mrs. Weasley asked. Her eyes were narrowed.

Weasley stood up from his seat. "So we're supposed to stay in here all day and night until they leave?"

"If they leave. And yes."

"I know it's not fun, Ron, but would you rather be safe or have them attack your home and everyone in it?" Tonks asked.

Ron, still in denial, shook his head. His mouth was set in a grim line. "Of course I want everyone to be safe," he muttered, but his gaze lingered a little on Draco, like he was choosing right then and there who he could live without. It stung, but Draco had expected it.

He sat back down.

"What about the wedding?" Potter asked.

"It'll still be here," Bill said. "We're just going to have some extra precautions to make sure nothing goes wrong."

"But won't it be weird with them just standing there?"

"We have a solution for that. Plus, they're not always there," Bill replied. "They have to eat and use the loo, too. But it's not a set schedule. They do it erratically, to keep us on our toes. They know we're watching them, same as they're watching us. We have the advantage, though, since they can't see us."

"I never got a clear answer," Ginny said, after a short pause. "Can't we just attack them?"

Mad-Eye drew everyone's focus by rising from his seat and walking to the window, the thunk of his
wooden leg like the ringing of an ominous bell. He went to the kitchen window and peeled back the tightly drawn curtain just so slightly.

"If we attack them," he began. "Voldemort will know. He'll think we're hiding something, or someone. He'll send two more. And maybe two more. We are hiding things, but if we let them know, they'll turn like rabid hippogriffs and keep coming, and meanwhile, we'll be stuck here, with little chance to flee because they'll have the place surrounded, and eventually they'll find a way to break in."

"...oh."

The rest of the night passed quietly. Draco scalded his tongue on the soup but continued to eat it eagerly. He excused himself from the table and went to the living room.

All the curtains were drawn, there, too. Their floral pattern was ugly but charming in a strange way; he stared absently at it for a while without realizing it as his thoughts tried to arrange themselves.

"Minerva's informed me you didn't take the Apparition course," someone said from behind him. Draco started, and turned to find Mad-Eye Moody at the doorway. He held a chicken leg bone in his hand, which he had apparently just finished eating. As Draco watched, he tucked it into his pocket.

"Not because I didn't want to," Draco answered. "I was...ill."

Moody's magical eye was fixated on his chest, and Draco realized belatedly he was wearing a thin grey shirt that must not have been too difficult for a magical eye to see through. His skin threatened to crawl. His scars began to itch under the weight of that eyes' stare, and he realized suddenly why Moody was such an effective Auror. His stare was not unfriendly—more inquisitive, but it was enough to further Draco's sense of uneasiness as he wondered how often Moody used that ability.

_Dumbledore trusted him. The order trusts him_, he thought. He could better see Barty Crouch Jr. using that for sinister purposes under disguise rather than the man himself.

"Well I've been asked to teach you," Mad-Eye said, unfazed by the long pause. "We start tomorrow. Be ready early. Get your rest."

"Er—thanks."

Mad-Eye nodded and left.

Potter caught up with him as he was climbing the stairs. He beckoned to Draco to look out the window. The Death Eater stood there still.

Potter let the curtains fall back. His eyes were slightly narrowed as he looked at Draco.

"Show me your mark."

Draco blinked. "Er, alright."

He rolled up his sleeve. The mark rippled slowly on his skin. Potter stared at it, frowning.

"I thought maybe you'd summoned them by accident," he muttered.

"The Dark Lord can summon us through it," Draco said. "And we can summon him. But we can't summon each other. That's what Floo and Apparating are for."
"Do you think you might have touched it by accident?" Potter asked.

"We can't just summon each other every time we accidentally touch the mark, Potter," Draco said. "You need to do it with intent."

"But you always keep it covered," Potter pointed out.

"Well I don't like seeing it anymore than you lot do."

Potter gave him a strange look, and after a moment, nodded.

"Thanks," he said. Draco recognized that mildly confounded look, the same that Hermione, and Hagrid, and Fred and George, and even Neville Longbottom had worn on their faces when they had discovered he was different.

He was starting to hate that look. And that word.

Hermione was letting her hair down when he entered the room. He was in the act of closing the door behind him but caught her movement, and finding her there, slowed and stopped as he watched her run her hands through her hair and massage her temples, wincing. She hadn't noticed him yet.

Draco snapped back to himself and shut the door, a tinge on his cheeks. She turned to him, a tired smile on her face.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes," she said. "I just had a headache from having my hair up all day."

Draco raised his brows. "That happens?"

"Unfortunately." She paused. "I think I need to start sleeping in my own room."

"I've been thinking about that, too," he said. "If I continue to sleepwalk and somehow use magic, I don't want anything to happen to you."

"I'll keep my wand with me," she said. "And, I know this might be uncomfortable for you, but I'll have to lock your door from the outside, too."

He nodded. "It doesn't matter what I think. If it keeps you all safe, I'll do it."

She sighed. She had changed into her sleepwear—sweatpants and the same holey t-shirt that reappeared in his dreams since the last time she had worn it.

"Are you going to sleep now?" he asked.

"No," she admitted, pulling her sleeves over her hands. "I just wanted to talk to you."

Draco took off his shoes and let himself fall onto the bed beside her. Hermione propped herself up on her elbow. Her eyes were sleepy, but there was a tilt to her lip that made him want to trace it with his finger.

"About what?"

"Anything. We don't even have to talk. We can just lie here," she said. "Or you could tell me something about you I don't know."
Draco thought for a moment.

"My father always wanted me to go to Durmstrang," he said. "My mother wouldn't hear it. She hated the thought of me being too far from them. I always wonder what it'd have been like if she'd allowed me to go."

Hermione thought instantly of Krum and all his furs, the Durmstrang students' amazement at the warmth and coziness of Hogwarts.

"You'd have needed thicker robes, for starters," she said, and he cracked a smile. "And more blankets."

"What about you?" he asked. He reached forward to play with her arm. He found a birthmark there, by her wrist. He stroked her skin softly.

Hermione pursed her lips. She was cold, and wanted to cover herself with the blanket but they were lying atop it, so she decided to move in closer to Draco. He shifted his arm to accommodate her better.

"Before I learned I was a witch I used to think I had telepathic powers," she said with a half-smile that Draco found incredibly attractive, "I could make objects come to me or move on their own. I was afraid, at first, but after I got my letter I wasn't anymore. It made sense. I tried to look up anything I could on magic but there wasn't much that wasn't for stage tricks."

Draco let out a quiet laugh. She smiled, watching as he ran his hand down the length of her forearm, tickling the hair there, then back up, exploring the feel of her soft skin.

"There's a Muggle children's book about a little girl with telepathic powers," she said, that wry little smile still tugging at her lips. Draco stared at it. "I thought I was her. She also loved books, you see."

"Oh, of course." He moved on to explore her hand next; smaller than his but strong, her tapered fingers, a torn fingernail. Her fingers curled slightly over his. From below they could hear someone drop something at the stairs and curse loudly. The ghoul, returned from its mysterious disappearance, groaned pitifully in the attic.

"Did you ever try to scare anyone with your powers?" he asked.

Her eyes shifted to the right. Her smile grew. "There were some boys who made fun of me at school. They were teasing me once, because I'd won a prize for reading the most books in our form. They wouldn't stop, and I was upset. A broom came up behind them and whacked them all and they got scared and took off running. They thought it was a ghost." She snickered. "It wasn't intentional, but it was helpful, now and then."

Draco was shaking his head, grinning. "I wish I'd seen it."

"Tell me another," she said.

He paused, his smile falling.

"After you punched me in third year," he said slowly, "I was embarrassed. But not because of the punch. I was angry and in denial that it turned me on."

Hermione's mouth went slack and an incredulous laugh escaped her quickly. She covered her mouth, blushing.
"Really?"

"I found out right then and there that I like assertive girls," he said, shrugging. "And you've never been one to back down. I admire that about you."

There was that openness in his expression again that made him look so vulnerable. She had seen it before, but it still felt new. It made her heart beat a little faster, and she found herself rather frightened of the thought.

She looked down. "Thank you."

"It's your turn, I think," he said.

Hermione pulled back to sit on the bed with her legs crossed. She crossed her arms, too, and frowned as she tried to think of something to share. The slight crease in her brow caught Draco's fascination—the way she held her arms tight to her body, the pensive purse to her lips, everything.

"I miss the Muggle world, sometimes."

Draco frowned. "Why?"

"I have friends there, and family," she said. Her eyes had gone distant. "I used to deny it, but it's essentially a separate life. There, I can see my parents every day, and go to shops I can't find here…" she sighed. "It's dangerous here. I was excited to see what it was like here, at first, and learn magic, and live a different life. But it's dangerous. Bad things keep happening. There's more risk, here, I think sometimes. I know the Muggle world has its own set of dangers, but here, it's more constant, and growing worse. I guess things are simpler back home—and they're not, but it feels that way. I miss it."

"I understand," he said, although he was struggling with the idea of not wanting to stay in the wizarding world. "Do you think you'll go back to it soon?" he asked. "For the summer, I mean."

"No," she said quietly. "If they're already being watched, I won't risk anything. I want to see them badly, but I can't stay with them. It's better to stay here, especially if we're going to help Harry, although we don't know when exactly that is."

Draco pinched a section of the blanket between his fingers. "I'm sorry," he said.

"It's not your fault."

They lapsed into a brief silence.

"I remember in second or third year, I think, hearing that you had a sort of breakdown after our final exams," he said. "You saw a boggart, I think, and it told you you'd failed."

Hermione put her head in her hands. "Oh, gods. I had nightmares for weeks after."

"You don't like failure. Or not knowing things."

Hermione brought her knees to her chest. She prodded at her bare toes.

"It makes me anxious. I don't like not having a plan for anything."

"With Potter and Weasley as your friends, I imagine that's why you get cross at them often."

She cracked a small smile and met his eye. "You've noticed, have you?"
"Once or twice," he admitted. Their connected gaze lingered.

Hermione, acting on a sudden burst of courage, moved herself closer to straddle him until he was on his back. Draco's expression was full of quiet surprise. She bent down to kiss him, and he responded at once, his hands settling on her hips. Beneath her clothes, her skin broke out in gooseflesh. Draco pressed harder against her, relishing the feel of her soft lips against his.

"You are delicious," he said to her between kisses. Her hands were around his neck. Her hair brushed against his skin, tantalizing him.

"And what are you?" she asked teasingly, her breaths coming fast.

"Lucky," he said, breathlessly. "And ravenous."

He rolled them over so that she was underneath him; she was giggling, cheeks rosy and eyes bright and mischievous. Draco was powerless to resist. Their lips met again, again, again, the heat between them growing. Her hands ran over his back and gripped his arms. Draco licked her bottom lip and sucked on it lightly.

They broke apart again, gasping for air. Draco's vision was clouded with desire, his lids heavy. He cupped her cheeks and kissed her slowly, feeling warmth surge inside him. Her hips pushed against him. Draco responded in kind, grinding against her. Hermione bit her lip, blushing. She reached up and brushed his collar away, and kissed his neck, licking a delicate trail down to his clavicle with her tongue. Draco shuddered. He was hard, aching for more contact. Her hips pushed against him again and he mimicked her, groaning.

Hermione sucked briefly on the skin of his neck. She bit him gently, but with enough pressure that it sent a jolt of pleasure straight down to his groin. He felt himself twitch through his boxers.

"Gods—" Draco jerked his hips a little more roughly against her.

Her breath hitched. He could feel her wicked smile against his shoulder. Her tongue trailed over his skin again, experimental first, then deliberate, trailing back up his neck. She nipped him again, and he hissed.

"Hermione," he warned. Somehow, he was losing control faster than he was used to. Was he out of practice? Or was it because it was her?

_Could always be both._

"What is it?" she asked innocently, as her hand not-so-innocently travelled down the length of his abdomen to brush against his hips, and lower still. Draco's eyes shut.

Her hand came into contact with his erect penis, and she went crimson (not that he could see), but her hand cupped it and began to stroke slowly over his boxers, secretly marveling at its size.

"Is this good?" she asked. She was a little breathless.

"Yes," he said, through a moan. "Just like that."

Her grip firmed. Her strokes turned more confident. Hermione sat up carefully, pushing him backward until he was lying on his back. Her hands were shaking slightly out of nerves, over the daunting thought of crossing new territory.

At the same time, it was exhilarating.
He watched her, his eyes heavy-lidded, glazed with lust that made her stomach coil with anticipation. Nobody had ever looked at her that way before. Well, perhaps Cormac, but she had not welcomed it the way she did now, with Draco.

She knelt closer to him, and hooking her fingers, began to lower his pyjama bottoms and boxers. The more of his body she revealed, the more her hands shook. There was his pale skin, all over, and the dark scars that slashed across his abdomen, the small thatch of wiry blonde curls at the base of his penis, the slight indication of an Adonis's belt at his hips. As he breathed in and out, she could see traces of muscles that had been better defined when he had been healthier. She ran her hands over it all, feeling him breathe under her palm, the shift of flesh and muscle under her touch. It was more difficult than she'd anticipated to remove his pants. She gave a soft laugh as Draco aided her, and when they were off he touched her arm and met her eyes to ask a silent question.

*Are you sure?*

Hermione didn't nod or smile, but looked down towards his hips where his penis stood, unexplored and intimidating. She'd never seen one so close before. She reached out and touched it, watching in amazement as it jumped slightly at her touch, and Draco's sharp intake of breath after.

She traced its length with her fingertips, feeling the veins that stood out along it, the shaft, the heat of it. Despite its stiffness, it was smooth to the touch. It made her head swim, and she was only too aware of the heat blooming on her own end.

Her hand wrapped around it and began to stroke. Draco groaned. His hips pushed up. His hands clenched. She knelt as close as possible without being on him, bent down, and took him in her mouth.

When morning came, and the smell of eggs and bacon was too much to resist, Hermione regretfully got out of her bed and showered and dressed, her empty stomach complaining all the while. She washed her face and brushed her teeth meticulously, as always, but her thoughts were flung into what had happened the night before, the things she and Draco had done.

Unused to the act, and his size, her jaw was still a little sore, but it was not painful. Hermione bit her lip, feeling heat overtake her face.

He had moaned her name more than once, and as they replayed in her head, she was convinced she'd never heard anything more erotic. He had all but begged her to keep going, and it had made her dizzy and pleased and powerful, to have him at her mercy like that. She had fought the strange shyness that had almost prevented her from doing it, and had met his stare during it, watching with growing fascination as a red flush crept up his neck, how his eyes went half-closed again and his lips parted to whisper encouragement. Gods, that feeling. He had warned her when he was close to finishing, and studious as ever, she'd taken note of the small twitches and pulses of his member in her mouth just before he'd come. She had wanted to taste him, so she'd continued, and looked up to let him know he could go ahead. He had been grateful afterwards, and offered to return the favor, but that was a new tier that Hermione found herself nervous of crossing, so she neglected, even though between her legs she was sure that a single touch of his finger (or hers, for that matter) would have made her come immediately.

She was surprised (but shouldn't have been) to find that the more she explored with Draco, the more she wanted. It was exciting and secretive, that only they knew what had happened, and so, so intimate. She wanted to talk to Pansy and Ginny about it, and see if they had any advice, but didn't dare for fear of their reactions.
After she had dressed and dried her hair with her wand, she left her room and crossed the hall to reach his, and knocked on the door. She heard his voice within, faintly, and a dart of nervousness ran through her.

"Are you awake?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to open the door," she said, already undoing the extra locking spells she'd put on it. "There."

The door opened, and her stomach did a flip to see him standing there, watching her as carefully as she watched him.

"Morning," she said, fighting back a smile. The intensity of his stare was like to make her melt.

He stepped forward without a word, cupped her head in his hands, and backed her into the wall. Their lips connected, moving feverishly, spreading fire.

Hermione gasped, clenching at his shoulder with one hand, bringing him closer. The other was occupied at the nape of his neck, grabbing a handful of his hair. His mouth was like the sear of a brand—everywhere it touched was like being enveloped with heat after standing outside for hours.

"Morning," he breathed, his voice like silk, his breath rushing over the skin of her neck. Hermione shuddered. She could sense his grin. His hand gripped her waist, holding her close to him. The other was caught in the hair at the back of her head, gently stroking it with his thumb. He pressed another kiss to her mouth, let it linger there. He was learning quickly that to kiss Hermione was one of his favorite things.

A voice came from the stairs.

"Ah, so they are awake, Georgie."

Hermione's eyes snapped open. She and Draco froze.

Fred and George stood there, grinning wickedly, though looking slightly shocked.

Red flooded her face. She released Draco at once, and he let his hands fall from her, but still hovered protectively near, as if waiting for the twins to accuse her of something.

"Blimey, you'd think we'd caught them trying to steal from Gringott's," Fred said to his brother.

"No need to look like we're going to send you out the window," George said, putting his hands in his pockets. "Nothing wrong with a good snog, though I never thought I'd see it happen with you two."

"Er—good morning," Hermione said, not knowing what else to say. Her heart had not stopped hammering in her chest.

"Morning," they replied in unison. There was that wicked smile again.

_I'll never hear the end of it, later._

"Before this gets awkward," Fred said obliviously, "Mum wanted to know if you'll be coming to breakfast."
"We were on our way," Draco said slowly.

"Right." Fred winked. "I'll tell mum you're only just getting ready. Give you a few minutes."

Now it was Draco's turn to go red.

"Wait-no—we'll be right there!" Hermione said, rushing after them as they went down the stairs.

"Right." Now it was George who winked at them.

"Really, I mean it!" she hissed.

"Riiight." And they continued down the stairs.

Hermione sighed.

"I'm quite put out, Fred," she heard George say as they left. "Everything's gone bizarre around here, and for once, we're not behind it."

After they had made themselves presentable again (not that they had made so big a mess, but paranoia had set in after the encounter with the twins) and gone to breakfast, they'd found the others there. Ron stared at them a little suspiciously and for a moment Hermione feared Fred and George had told him what had happened. She had glanced at George who kept a straight face this time, luckily, but winked, and she took that as his vow of silence.

Ginny and Ron had cooked the breakfast, as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had had to leave rather early for a reason they weren't quite sure, but knew enough that it pertained to Order business. Before they had left they had told Ginny that Tonks would be looking after them, and would arrive sometime around noon.

"So they've got you all on lockdown?" Fred asked, tearing a strip of bacon in half.

"Unfortunately," Ginny replied. "Did you see those Death Eaters outside?"

Fred nodded. His expression darkened. "Just waiting, like a cat at a mouse's hideyhole."

George shook his head. "You lot had better do what mum and dad say, and keep careful."

Ron dropped his fork. This, Hermione decided, was how she knew things were serious. Fred and George were telling them not to rebel.

The others felt it, too. Even Harry looked shocked.

"What's happening out there?" he asked.

"Nothing, yet," George said, looking glum. "But it's in the air. You can feel something's coming. We're getting less and less business. No one's got time for a joke."

"It'll pick up again," Ron insisted. "Everyone's just mourning, still."

"We wish it were only that," Fred said with a sigh. "They're bringing Dementors back into Hogsmeade, did you know? They've got the posters with Harry's face on them. There's a few with Malfoy's on them, too, but the Ministry takes those down every time they're put up. We reckon Voldemort doesn't want any focus to be taken off Harry."
"What about the Muggleborn inquiries?" Hermione asked.

"We heard Colin Creevey got his summons last week. He came into the shop to ask advice. We didn't know what to tell him." A muscle worked in his jaw. "So far, everyone who's gone in has had their wand taken away. They're told to wait a few weeks. We haven't heard what comes after, but the rumor is people are being sent back to the Muggle world."

"That's—that's utter horseshit," Ginny said, looking aghast. "That's completely unfair!"

Draco looked at Hermione. Her face was blank, but he could sense her fury. Her hands were clenched together before her on the table. He put his hand over them, surprised to find how cold hers had turned. She sent him a grateful glance. Ron was looking at them both, obviously displeased, but neither of them noticed.

"What can we do?" Harry asked. "We can't just sit here."

"That's all you can do, for now," George said. "Don't do anything stupid. We're not trying to take the mickey out of you lot—we mean it. Stay here. Stay hidden. Things'll die down soon enough, or there'll be a lull, and we'll see what happens next."

Hermione looked round the table, unsurprised to see that absolutely nobody was pleased with this advice.

"However…" Fred said.

George brought out something from his robes—a tiny cardboard box. Everyone stared at it curiously. He tapped it with his wand.

"Finite Incantatem."

The box grew to its normal size, and in the process of doing so, knocked a glass off the table. It shattered, and they all winced.

"No harm done." Fred pointed his wand at it. "Reparo. Accio." And just like that, the glass was whole and back on the table.

"In case things should go awry, and we hope they don't," George began, "we've brought you some…supplies from our shop. Lots of different things for different scenarios. They ought to come useful—"

"—Hopefully not," Fred cut in.

"But just in case. And make sure to hide them. If Mum sees, she won't be happy."

"There's some our best products in there," Fred pointed at the box. "And some of our newest."

"We would, of course, appreciate feedback after you use them."

"If you've got the time. No rush."

Harry blinked. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it, Harry." Their faces turned serious. "Make sure all of you've got some. If you're ever split up, and find yourselves without a wand, these should work. We've even made sure they work in places that have anti-magic wards, though not all of them do."
There was a sound at the door—someone had arrived.

"Go on, take it upstairs before they see," Fred said quickly. Ron got up at once, took the box and rushed upstairs.

They'd expected Tonks, but were confused to hear a familiar clunk, clunk, clunk approaching from the living room.

Moody finally appeared at the kitchen door, leaning on his walking stick, tugging at the shabby woolen scarf he wore around his neck to loosen it.

"Hullo, Mad-Eye," Ginny said. The rest raised a hand in greeting.

He gave a perfunctory nod.

"Where's Tonks?" Harry asked.

"Sick. You," he said, staring at Draco. "Get your cloak. We start today."

"Start what?" Pany asked.

"I'm going to teach him how to Apparate," Moody said.

Everyone exchanged a look.

"But... are you certified, Professor?" Ron asked, having come back from hiding the box.

"Thanks to Crouch Jr., I was never your Professor. Don't call me that," Moody said. "I may not have a pretty little paper that says I can teach Apparition but I never needed one anyway."

Draco came back, wearing his cloak.

"Good. Let's go." Mad-Eye stomped to the back door and opened it. A cold wind swept through the kitchen.

"You're going outside?" Hermione asked. "But what about—"

"Supervision?" Moody asked. "That'll be me. On we go."

He gave Draco a light push on the shoulder, and Draco, casting back one last look at the others, stepped outside.

Draco bent over and retched, but nothing came out. His vision had gone a little blurry.

"Try it again."

"Give me a minute," he said. He spit on the ground, and straightened.

"It's normal to feel sick at first," Moody said, sitting down on a chair he'd brought from the kitchen. "Your body isn't used to it. It'll take some time. But we don't have time. Now try it again."

Draco's stomach was tying itself into knots. He glanced at the kitchen window, and could see Pansy and Hermione's faces there, watching worriedly. Pansy gave him a thumbs up. Hermione gave him a worried smile.

Moody was flipping open his pocket watch.
"Don't focus on them," he said, sounding almost bored. "Focus on me. Think of your destination."

Right. He was to Apparate a few feet in front of Moody. He could do that.

—if I don't end up leaving half of myself behind, first.

"It helps to not be nervous."

Draco let out a sharp breath through his nostrils by way of laughing. He shook it off, closed his eyes, and turned on his heel.

When he opened them, he was nowhere nearer to Moody than he'd been ten seconds before.

"Keep your eyes open," Moody called. "And focus on your desire to move. Don't forget that."

How many things do I have to keep focus on? Draco thought exasperatedly.

"It'll get easier, in time," Moody replied, sensing Draco's frustration. "Almost like second nature. You won't even have to think."

Draco nodded. He was beginning to sweat.

"Now do it again."

"Alastor?" Mrs. Weasley called. She had just arrived from whatever errands she had been running all day. "You're still here?"

"We're making progress, Molly," Moody replied. "It won't take much longer."

I beg to differ.

Mrs. Weasley didn't look quite so convinced.

"Draco, dear, you look tired. Come inside, I'll make you something to eat."

"He looks fine to me," Moody grumbled.

A slight sense of shame sharpened Draco's resolve.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Weasley. I want to keep going."

The window was empty now.

"Thirty minutes," Mrs. Weasley warned. "That's it, or else you'll both wear yourselves out."

"Right you are, Molly," Moody said. "Thirty minutes, and nothing more." He pointed to Draco. "Now try it again."

Draco waited until Mrs. Weasley had gone back inside, and then turned on his heel.

Nothing happened.

Moody was grinning.

"Try it again," he said.
The Calm Before

Chapter Notes

I've made fanart for this fic! You can find it over at my blog on WordPress. (thewandererswanderingdaughterblog.wordpress.com)

The red was creeping back in. The scene was grey but there was red on the fringes of his vision, and it was dragging itself toward the center, and he couldn't let that happen.

He was afraid to blink, afraid that the second he opened his eyes again, it would be all he would see. He was too aware of his breathing, feeling it cloud around him due to the cold.

The familiar screams were distant, and they filled him with cold terror, almost drowning him, echoing eerily in the forest.

Who?

"Help me," he heard himself muttering. He felt dazed, weak and pained, as if he'd just fallen from a flight of stairs. "Help…"

Through the numbness he was almost frantic. He limped as he walked. An overwhelming urgency pressed him, propelling him forward.

"Help…"

Help her.

He had to help her.

Help who?

He could picture his mother at the end of Voldemort's wand, bleeding, screaming, dying.

His insides twisted.

He walked faster, stumbling over the forest ground. The air was cold, and he wasn't wearing a coat. He was bleeding at several points of his body, but hardly noticed.

He heard a voice distantly, through the screams, but couldn't hear a word of what it said. He stumbled on, craning his neck to look around and between the trees wildly, seeking the source of the screams. It was everywhere all at once, and he had no hope of finding it. The thought filled him with terror and rage.

The voice was growing louder. His head pounded. He was having trouble breathing.

Each second lost was more frightening than the last.

He grasped the trunk of a thick tree to steady himself, went around it, and came to a sudden stop. Red.
It was all over the leaves. The ground was dark with it. He took a step, and the ground squished under his foot.

He was afraid to look farther down, but forced himself to.

Wells lay there, gasping like a fish out of water. His eyes were blank and staring up at the sky, seeing nothing.

Draco stopped breathing.

Blood gurgled from Well's mouth and trickled down to the frozen ground, as thick and slow as molasses. His broken leg jerked feebly on the ground, the exposed bone as white as the frost forming on the forest floor.

Draco fell to his knees and vomited so violently, his throat burned.

At the sound, Well's head turned to face him, and though he was blind, his eyes locked directly onto Draco's.

His mouth moved brokenly as he tried to speak, but all that came out was more blood. It streamed from his mouth with a slick, gurgling sound. He tried to speak a word.

Draco fell onto his backside and scrambled backward, kicking up bits of snow and dead leaves, all stained red.

Wells continued to attempt to speak, his eyes never blinking, and in that dreadful silence Draco finally realized that the screams had stopped, but the voice was growing stronger, and it was calling his name. It began to sync with Well's gaping mouth, and he began to grin with a waterfall of blood falling from his mouth, splattering thickly onto the ground, calling his name over and over and over and—

"Draco!"

He flailed for a moment, feeling cold hands grab him around the arms. He thought of Well's dead, bloated hands and wanted to vomit.

"Draco, stop!"

His eyes opened, struggled to focus. He was breathing hard, and dripping with sweat.

Hermione was there, her eyes wide and full of concern as she looked at him. She saw that he was awake, and gave a shaky sigh. She pressed a hand to his forehead.

"It's alright," she said softly. "It's ok. I'm here."

He blinked, and his vision cleared slightly.

They were in the bedroom. He had kicked all his sheets off. He was cold, and shivering. The door had been flung wide open in her haste to reach him.

She was on her knees beside him, her hand still on his forehead.

"It's okay," she said again. There was a waver in her voice. It filled the room.

He reached out to touch her cheek, afraid that he was still in the dream, and that if he looked over the edge of the bed, he would find Wells still gasping there.
But she was real, and she was warm, and she was there.

He sagged with relief.

"What did you see?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

There was a sound at the door, and they turned quickly, hearts racing, to find Harry and Ron there, staring wordlessly. Harry had cast a Lumos, and its piercing light flooded the room. She, Draco, and Ron squinted. She could clearly see the sheen of sweat on Draco's face, the way his hair was wet with it.

"We heard a noise," Potter said. He extinguished his Lumos.

"Is everything alright?" Weasley asked, frowning.

"Everything's fine," Hermione lied, and it was obvious they didn't believe her.

"It doesn't look fine," Potter said pointedly.

Draco ran a hand over his face. He ached all over.

"Nightmare, Potter. It's over, now."

"Clearly," Weasley said.

"Goodnight," Hermione said pointedly to them, and Potter stepped away from the door and back into the hall.

"It's dawn," Weasley replied, almost accusingly, and followed Potter a second after.

She shut the door magically, and in the static silence that ensued, they stared at each other. He knew she was still expecting an answer from her question before the others had come in, but he was unwilling to draw up the mental image of the dream again.

She seemed to sense this, and reached up to brush his hair from his eye.

"Will you stay?" he asked, barely above a whisper.

Her eyes were so dark. They could rival the night alone.

She nodded, and lied down beside him, so close he almost shivered at her heat. She began to cuddle closer, but Draco placed a hand on her arm.

"I want to hold you."

Those dark eyes stared at him again. She held his cheek, and then rolled to face the side. He turned to her, wrapped his arm around her, pressing her close, molding himself around her. Instantly the tension began to drain away, and his eyes were heavy.

She pulled the blanket back over themselves, and let her head lean back to rest against him.

He stayed awake until the sun was high in the sky, feeling her go still in his arms, afraid to fall asleep and dream.
One knee on the ground, one fist pressed to his stomach, Draco heaved quietly, but nothing came out.

"You've almost got it," Moody said, resting both his hands on his walking stick. "Keep going."

"I'm going to be sick," Draco said, gasping. "Fuck."

"Fight through it," Moody insisted, not for the first time. "I can't be coming here every day to teach you. It's been a week, now. You've almost got it. I have work to get back to. You're a fast learner—the sooner you get it, the better. This is a skill you'll be needing for the future—or would you rather not have it?"

Draco grit his teeth and stamped down the nausea that crept up his throat. Moody sat there, waiting. When he had had enough, and Draco's nausea had ebbed, he cleared his throat. He really should have slept the night before, when Hermione had stayed with him, but he couldn't bring himself to. He was paying for that decision, now.

"Ready?"

Draco spat onto the ground. "Yes."

"Go."

Moody beckoned with his hand, and Draco, almost a room's length away, turned on the spot. Halfway through it, he faltered and stumbled over himself, almost falling to the ground in result. He heard Moody's sigh of impatience from several feet away. It stung, although he didn't know the Auror very well. Distant memories of his imposter resurfaced, and he recalled his terror at being turned into a ferret in front of everyone and bounced around like some child's toy. He had to ignore the resentment that accompanied the memory—that had been another man.

_We both were different people._

-although, in his own case, he hadn't been kidnapped and kept as a sort of living storeroom for a Polyjuice Potion, and hid in plain sight while his imposter had terrorized about half the castle.

"Whenever you're ready," came Moody's voice.

A bead of sweat rolled down Draco's temple. He nodded absently to himself, and straightened.

"Are you focused?"

"Yes."

"Go." Again came the beckon. Draco turned on his heel—

And reappeared, a few feet away from Moody, who was smiling as best as he could through his severely scarred face.

"There we go," he said.

"Caught on to the rest of us, have you?" Pansy asked, grinning, as Draco and Moody returned to the kitchen for supper.

"That's the fastest I've heard a student has ever learnt to Apparate," Tonks said, reclining in her chair. Her hair was yellow today, almost neon. Draco found it terribly distracting. "Two weeks has got to
be some sort of record.

"Well with Mad-Eye for an instructor, it's no surprise," Molly said as she left the room, presumably to fetch Ginny and Ron, who could be heard arguing loudly by the stairs.

"Twombly had us all spinning on our toes for about a month before anyone actually got it," Ron said crossly.

"Tell Molly I can't stay," Mad-Eye said, putting aside his walking stick to shrug his coat back on. "I've got pressing matters." He glanced at Draco. "You did well, boy."

"Thanks," Draco said, and Moody, not one for wasting time, left speedily.

"Go on and sit," Pansy said to Draco.

"You're probably exhausted," Tonks said, nodding. "When I was first starting as an Auror, he was my mentor. Taught me just about everything I know. Intense, though. I dreaded his training, but I wouldn't trade him for anyone else."

"He's definitely an interesting wizard," Draco said, and Tonks smiled.

"He's really not that bad," she said. "I wish you'd all gotten to know the real him, not that Barty Crouch Jr. People were wary of him before, but after all the TriWizard business, they mostly stay away from him now, except for us."

Mrs. Weasley returned with Ginny and Ron, who sat at the table without saying a word to each other.

"Where's Harry and Hermione?" Mrs. Weasley asked, just as they appeared at the door. "Oh, good. Draco, dear, have you washed your hands? Where did Alastor go?"

"He said he couldn't stay," Ron explained as Draco got up to wash his hands.

"A busy man, him," Mrs. Weasley said, looking almost cross as she glanced at the door, as if hoping to find him still there. "I wanted to ask him about that ghoul in the attic."

Draco felt Potter's stare and met it, his defenses rising. Potter stared back coolly for a second, and then looked away. He and Weasley had been watching him closely all day, even from inside the house as he had done his Apparition drills. They hadn't said another word about it, but Hermione had peppered him with questions almost instantly after she'd woken, still held tightly in his arms.

He had relayed the nightmare to her, and she had listened, her eyes serious and quiet. When he'd finished she had sat up and felt his forehead again, ran her hand through his hair, inquiring silently how he felt.

He hadn't known how to reply. He caught her hand and kissed it, instead.

After dinner, there was a loud knock at the door. They were still sitting around the table, and went quiet, multiple pairs of eyes scanning the room for anyone who might have slipped out during the meal. Mr. Weasley had joined them just as Tonks had left for the day.

Mr. Weasley stood from the table and leaned towards his wife.

"Were you expecting anyone?"
Her face was pale. "No."

There was the knock, again. Weasley stood up, wand in hand, watching his father anxiously.

"Who could it be?" he asked.

Mr. Weasley, who had begun to exit the room to get the door, turned sharply.

"Stay there, Ron."

He left the room. Ron remained standing.

They heard faint voices coming from the living room, and all unconsciously leaned towards the source to hear it better. Ginny and Harry, too, had drawn out their wands. Pansy looked as if she might cry.

After what felt like an eternity had passed and come again, Mr. Weasley reappeared, to their collective relief. He held a thick envelope and a large bag in his hands, and an expression of puzzlement on his face.

They waited for him to speak.

When he did, he didn't even look up.

"Harry, Ron, Hermione, Draco," he said, staring down at the unidentifiable objects in his hands. "Come with me."

Ron was the first to follow his father. He exited the room and followed him upstairs, beckoning at the others to hurry. Mrs. Weasley was frowning, looking gravely after her husband.

They found Ron and Mr. Weasley in the room Ron shared with Harry. The bag had been laid down on one of the beds, and Mr. Weasley held the envelope in his hands.

"What is it, dad?" Ron asked.

"Sit down, please," Mr. Weasley said, still frowning at the envelope. "We've had a parcel delivered from the Ministry."

The mere mention of the Ministry was enough to put Draco on edge.

"Who delivered it?" he asked.

"One of the last good friends I have left at the Ministry," Mr. Weasley replied, looking back towards the door.

"Who?" Ron asked, but his father wouldn't answer.

"They've begun going over Dumbledore's will," he said. "But it would seem he left some things in someone else's care." He gestured vaguely at the bag on the bed. "And it seems he left items for the four of you."

Hermione looked at Harry, as taken aback as he looked. Even Draco beside her had gone still with confusion.

"Why?" Hermione asked, frowning.
"I believe he was concerned the Ministry would retain the items," Mr. Weasley said. He had opened the letter. "Or that they would attempt to destroy them."

"Won't anybody notice they're gone?" Hermione asked. "Especially if they were mentioned in his will?"

"I think it will be a long time before anybody notices they're gone," Mr. Weasley said, pushing his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. He squinted at the letter. "Decoys have taken their place. Scrimgeour has his hands too full with the other one to deal with this one, currently. Albus has been very generous."

Ron opened his mouth to speak, but Mr. Weasley cut him off.

"Ron," he said, reaching with one hand to pull open the burlap bag and feel around inside, "Dumbledore's left you his Deluminator."

Ron's eyes went wide. "Me? What for?"

"It simply says, 'in case he ever gets lost.'" Mr. Weasley located the little silver item, withdrew it from the bag, and handed it to Ron, who took it, an air of reverence in the way he held it in both hands.

He flipped it open as they watched, and clicked it. The only light source in the room, the tall lamp by the bed, went out.

"Blimey," they heard Ron say, as they sat in the dark.

After a second, they heard Mr. Weasley clear his throat, and then another hasty click. The light was restored.

Mr. Weasley scanned the letter to find where he had lost his place.

"To Hermione," he said, "Dumbledore has left you his personal library, that you might find whatever information you seek there."

Squashed as he, Hermione, and Potter were on the small bed, Draco could feel the goosebumps rippling over her skin.

"In particular," Mr. Weasley continued, "he hopes that you find comfort in this book, which was a favorite of his, once." He found a well-worn hardcover book in the bag, extracted it, and handed it to Hermione, who took it hesitantly.

Draco recognized it at once. It was a children's book. Hermione met his eye, and then turned to look at Harry, perplexed. She looked up at Mr. Weasley.

"Did you say his personal library?" she asked, her voice almost weak.

"Precisely. It says here you may access it anytime. It has been moved from Hogwarts to his private home."

Hermione looked at the book in her laps, traced her hand over its spine. She was frowning.

"Won't I need a key?"

"I believe his brother is looking after the house now," Mr. Weasely said, staring at the letter. "His name is Aberforth."
They all looked at each other again. None of them but Harry had known Dumbledore had a brother.

"Where can I find him?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I don't know," Mr. Weasley said, frowning at the letter as he failed to find the answer there. "I'm sorry."

Seeing that she had no more questions to ask, he moved on.

"To Harry, he has left you the Snitch you caught in your first Quidditch match, and the sword of Godric Gryffindor." His eyes widened as he read it aloud. "Good lord," he muttered quietly. "He says he's positive they will be useful to you, and hold important memories."

Potter's face was blank.

Mr. Weasley abandoned the letter, went to the bag and withdrew the Snitch, and felt around inside some more, but found nothing else.

"How strange," he muttered to himself. "I don't suppose they lost it on the way? Perhaps they couldn't make a convincing decoy. I wonder..."

"It's probably still in his office," Potter said. "That's the last place I saw it."

He took the Snitch as Mr. Weasley held it out to him, and turned it over in his hands. They all watched him, and saw him frown.

"There's something written on it," he said, holding it closer to his eye.

"What is it?" Hermione asked.

"It says, 'I open at the close'."

"What does that mean?" Ron asked. "Did it say that before?"

"I'm sure it didn't."

"I wouldn't be surprised if it's some sort of clue from Dumbledore, Harry," Mr. Weasley said quietly.

"I wish I knew what it meant," Harry replied, still frowning at the golden ball. Its wings fluttered in his hands.

Mr. Weasley picked up the letter again and found where he had left off.

"Ah, here we were," he muttered. Then, more clearly, "to Draco, Dumbledore has left you this knife —" his eyes widened again, "so that in times of danger, when you are without your wand, you may protect yourself, and whatever you consider precious."

Draco felt the room go still.

"What?" he asked stupidly.

"A knife?" Weasley asked, his voice betraying the fact he found this a very bad idea.

Mr. Weasley found it in the bag, and handed it to Draco. It had a solid weight, and its sheath was made of aged, perforated leather. Draco took it, frowning, absolutely sure that a mistake had been made.
"I don't understand," Draco said, shaking his head. "Why me?"

"I'm afraid he doesn't provide a reason," Mr. Weasley said, folding the letter back up. "But I imagine it's no accident. Guard those items well, all of you. Don't tell anyone about them, unless you trust them, very, very well."

"Mum'll want to know," Ron said, raising his brows at his father.

"Well, of course I'll tell your mum," Mr. Weasley said. "But generally, the less people that know, the better."

"I still don't understand," Hermione said. "The Ministry's gone through the will, but how don't they know about this?"

"This is a separate will, according to the person who dropped it off," Mr. Weasley said. "It would seem Dumbledore filed it privately with someone he trusted."

"Arthur," they heard call. Her voice was coming closer to the room. Mr. Weasley rushed outside to meet her.

"Right here, dear," they heard him say. "I'm starving. What's for dinner?"

Potter had stuffed the Snitch into his pocket, as had Weasley. He counted it as luck that the sword had been missing after all, or they would have had to make a mad dash of it to hide the thing before Mrs. Weasley came in.

"Well, what now?" Weasley asked, as they heard his parents go downstairs.

"Nothing changes," Potter said, standing. He had withdrawn the Snitch from his pocket, and stared at it, then looked up at them. "I told him I'd find the other Horcruxes. I'm not backing out. I think somehow, he knew you'd all be going with me. I think this is all to help us with the search."

"The wedding's a week away," Ron said.

"Nothing changes," Potter repeated. "If you want to back out, I won't blame you. Any of you."

Draco felt as though he were addressing him, but it was Weasley's slightly uncertain expression that Potter was staring at. He held the knife loosely, as if it, too, might realize he didn't deserve it, and would jump free from his hands at any moment.

_Why a knife, after what I did?_

"No," Weasley said, after a moment. "I'm still in."

"Let's go downstairs, then," Potter said. "Before your mum starts to wonder."

Dinner was quiet, with the most talking coming from Mrs. Weasley as she relayed to her husband her most recent trip to visit the soon-to-be-married couple, Bill and Fleur. Draco could sense that every now and then her eyes would watch them carefully, as if trying to gauge what had happened earlier just by looking. He wondered if Mr. Weasley had told her, yet.

They excused themselves after dinner, and went upstairs, wordlessly gathering in Harry and Ron's room.

"So," Ginny said as she sat down beside Pansy. "What happened? You all went awfully mute during dinner."
"They're distributing Dumbledore's will," Harry said. "He left us some stuff."

Ginny, sensing he wouldn't elaborate further, frowned. "Oh."

"It's really nothing," Harry said. "He left me the first Snitch I caught, and Ron got his Deluminator, and Hermione some books."

Pansy looked at Draco. "And you?"

Draco took out the knife and showed it to her.

"Oh, merlin," she said, and looked over it appreciatively, at the details in its design. "What's that for?"

"Protection," he muttered. He had a feeling he would need it.

*Now Potter and Weasley have another reason to not trust me. I've got a bloody knife.*

There was a loud CRACK, and they all jumped as Fred and George appeared in the room. Draco hid the knife under his thigh, sandwiched between it and the mattress.

"What're you lot up to?" Fred asked casually.

"Just talking," Weasley said, shrugging.

"You'll have to lie better than that, Ronnie," George said. "But we won't press you."

"Is there any reason you've come without saying hi to mum and dad?" Ginny asked.

"You say that as if we had something to hide," Fred said, pretending to look hurt. "We'll see them in a minute. We just wanted to show you lot this."

He pulled several rolled-up copies of the *Prophet*, and handed them around. They were snapped up quickly. None of them had seen a copy of the Prophet in several days now, and only just realized it.

"Did mum cancel our subscription?" Ginny asked Ron.

"I dunno," he said. "Usually Pig brings it in, but lately all he's brought are letters and bills. Maybe…"

"We thought as much," George said glumly.

Hermione was staring at the front page, her eyes hard like flint. Draco craned his neck to read it.

**NEW CURFEW SET INTO MOTION: ALL FOLK TO BE INSIDE NO LATER THAN 10PM EVERYDAY**

"What the hell's the purpose of a curfew?" Weasley asked angrily. "Are we all children now?"

"In the eyes of the Ministry, yes, apparently," Fred replied. "It starts tonight."

"Lucky for us, then, that we're already used to curfews in here," Potter said with a wry twist of his mouth.

"What happens if you're caught out past ten?" Pansy asked.

"Taken to the Ministry for questioning, if their activity is considered suspicious," Hermione
answered, pointing to a line in the article. "Or given a heavy fine."

"Does this apply only to Hogsmeade?"

"No, Diagon Alley, too."

Ron swore. "I guess they don't want anyone getting in their way."

"Well, we've got to remember they've brought back the Dementors," Fred said, pulling an orange from his pocket and beginning to peel it. "All the shopkeepers are furious. Including us. We're all already seeing less sales, and those gaunt, eyeless, floating freaks don't make it any better. They're doing the best they can to keep everyone contained."

"Look at this," Hermione said. She had finished the article and gone to a latter page. She pointed to a tiny square of text, surrounded by obnoxiously flashy ads.

"What is it?" Potter asked.

She had to squint to read it.

"'Werewolf attack claims five victims,'" she read. "'As of yet, none of the remains have been able to be identified due to the nature of their injuries. All citizens warned to be on their guard and learn defensive magic, or travel in groups.'"

Ron snorted. "Fat lot of good that did them. Great advice."

"Oh, no." Pansy looked a little green.

Draco would have bet his entire inheritance that Greyback had done it. He had absolutely no doubt. He could even hear Greyback's raspy voice, smug, laughing, recounting every grisly detail of how he'd done it. Perhaps he'd even had friends with him, but that was rare. He always hunted alone.

"That's how bad things are," George said. "The Ministry doesn't give a shit about a slaughter and would rather enforce their pathetic curfew."

"I just don't understand why mum and dad would keep all this news from us," Ron said angrily. "Sure, it's grim, but I know we'd all rather hear it, anyway. If we must be kept here, then it shouldn't be too hard to let us read the ruddy news."

"Tell you what," Fred said around a mouthful of orange. He offered some to the group as he spoke, but there were no takers. He gave half of it to George, who took it with a nod. "We'll bring you the paper every morning quiet as can be, so mum won't notice. With the wedding being so close, she'll be wanting us to come often anyway for preparations and the like, so she'll be glad to see us. But don't you lot go confronting her or dad over the paper thing. We know you're mad, but it's a bad idea."

"Why?" Ginny asked, scowling. "They're keeping important information from us!"

"Just like you're doing to them," George said, and accidentally squirted a little bit of orange juice from his mouth onto Potter. "Whoops. Sorry, Harry." He wiped his mouth.

"What he means is, you're keeping secrets from them, too," Fred continued for George as George nodded. "Don't let them know you're onto them. Do what you're told, and let them think you're not up to anything, until it's time for you to do whatever you've got to."
Hermione looked at Harry. He looked at Fred, a little suspiciously.

"How do you know we're up to something?" he asked.

"You lot always are," George said, grinning. "Just like us. To be honest, I'm a little proud. I feel at least partly responsible for this behavior, don't you, Freddie?"

"Quite right, George." And they smiled those identical smiles.

*Forget Lovegood,* Draco thought. *These two are the strangest people I've ever met.*

"You're not going to ask?" Weasley asked.

"Well, *you* never asked *us,*" Fred replied smoothly, crossing his arms. "But no hard feelings. We've learned a plan works best when fewer people know it. Hell, you all probably already knew *that* on your own."

They heard a crash downstairs.

"We should go see to mum and dad," Fred said. "Get rid of those papers, or hide them. We'll deliver tomorrow's, well, tomorrow." He looked slyly at Draco and Hermione. "Be presentable."

Hermione blushed.

"What was that about?" Pansy asked, the moment they were alone. "Why did Fred look at you two when he said that?"

"Oh—" Hermione unlaced her trainers and slipped them off. "They caught Draco and I snogging yesterday."

"Oh, lord—" Pansy let out a whoop and began to laugh, rocking back into the wall she was leaning against. "I'm sorry, don't give me that look, the mental image is too funny. What happened?"

"Well, we were snogging," Hermione said, turning even redder.

Pansy waited. When Hermione said nothing more, she grabbed her by the arm and shook it lightly.

"And?"

Hermione fixed her sleeve. "And they came up the stairs and found us."

"What did they say?"

"They teased us a little, but left rather quickly." Hermione put her hands on her hips. "Really, it wasn't *that* funny."

Pansy had just winded down from her laughter, and wiped a tear from her eye. She gave Hermione a knowing look.

The corner of Hermione's lip lifted. "Perhaps a little bit. But really, my heart almost gave out."

Pansy nodded. "Understandable." She looked around the hall, as if she thought the twins were hiding somewhere in the room. "They are rather sneaky."

"They used to hide and scare me all the time, when I would stay here over the summer," Hermione
said. "They would jump out with those dumb masks they made and shout bloody murder, I'd scream every time."

"I'm glad they don't still do that," Pansy said. She had wandered to the window.

"Be on the lookout, just in case," Hermione warned her jokingly. "They stopped doing it a while ago, but I still turn corners slowly in here."

Pansy flicked the curtains apart with her finger, so that only a sliver of the outside was viewable. The Deatheater was still there. Or perhaps it was a different one. It was hard to tell when they covered their face so all one could see was their robes. The second Deatheater stood a little distance away, but looking in the wrong direction.

They must be bored.

She would be, too, if all she had to do was stand outside and keep watch.

Then the horrifying thought struck her that her father might be one of them, and she shut the curtains quickly, her stomach lurching.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked. "Is there another one?"

"No," Pansy said. She stepped away from the window. "Hermione, Ginny and I have been thinking…"

"About what?"

Pansy led her into the room she shared with Ginny, where Ginny was already waiting.

"Oh, good, I thought you were still with Harry."

"He's with Ron, now," Ginny replied. She had changed into her pyjamas and sat cross-legged on her bed. She held a bottle of nail varnish in one hand and held her bare foot in the other. "Did she tell you yet?"

"Tell me what?" Hermione sat on the bed opposite Ginny.

"Pansy and I think we shouldn't go on the mission with the rest of you," Ginny said, and unscrewed the bottle of varnish. It was bright blue.

Hermione frowned, and looked from Ginny to Pansy. "Why not?"

"Well, if we all go, that'll be six people total," Ginny said. "I can't imagine we would be able to move stealthily and accomplish what Harry has to if we're such a large group."

"We'll find a way," Hermione said. "If there's six of us, we can all work together to make sure we're careful."

"We don't even know where we'll be staying," Pansy said.

"Ron said he'll nick his father's tent—"

"It's just one tent, Hermione," Ginny interjected gently. She started to paint her large toenail.

"But its got loads of space."
"Barely enough for six people," Ginny added.

Pansy nodded. "I think we're better off staying here and keeping communication with you, in case things get rough. We'll be able to send you resources, food if you've got none, maybe even messages from the Order."

Hermione sat there and contemplated. Outside, she could hear a strong wind blow.

_They're right._

_But I don't want to leave them behind._

"Does Harry know?" Hermione asked. The smell of the nail varnish filled the room.

"He said it's our decision to make," Pansy said.

"We figure it's better for us all to be split into two groups, rather than all together," Pansy said softly. She rubbed at her arm. "That way, if something happens, or we get found, they won't have all of us."

"Plus," Ginny said, moving on to begin painting her other foot. "He hasn't said it yet, but I know Harry doesn't want me to go. I think he's going to break up with me, to keep me safe."

"How do you know?" Pansy asked, looking shocked.

"I can just tell," Ginny said. She stared intently at her toenails as she painted them. "He sort of had this look in his eye like he was secretly relieved I wasn't coming. Like he wanted to talk to me about it, but I beat him to it."

"Are you mad at him?"

"No," Ginny brushed a bit of lint off her foot. "A little. I understand why he's doing it, but I wish he didn't have to. He doesn't want me to get hurt. I think it's bollocks, really, but he's right."

"I'm sorry, Ginny," Hermione said.

"Don't be." Ginny closed the bottle, and wiggled her toes as she surveyed her handiwork. "I'll stay here with Pansy, and do what I can. We won't go with you, but we won't be useless."

"You've never been useless," Hermione said sternly. "Either of you. We wouldn't be here without either of you."

"I was useless, in second year," Ginny said. "I was the one who brought the Basilisk and nearly got you all killed, and didn't even know. I'm never going to let myself be put into that position again."

Pansy hugged her knees to her chest. "You're sweet, Hermione, but the truth is I really haven't done much so far. I want to, though. I'll do whatever I can to help." She took Hermione's hand. "Promise me you'll take care of Draco, though."

"Of course, I will," Hermione said.

"How will that go, with him there, I wonder?" Ginny asked. "I don't want to sound like a droopy Doris but that sounds like it's a disaster waiting to happen."

"I don't know," Hermione said, biting her lip. "As long as they get along without fighting, I'll be happy. So far, things seem alright. I hope I haven't jinxed it, before it's begun."
After Hermione left Ginny and Pansy, she found Harry and Ron just coming down from the attic. Draco was waiting at the landing, standing casually by the window, but relaxed visibly when Harry and Ron appeared.

*He was their lookout.* The realization gave her a little hope that things would go well, indeed.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Ron held an oblong, heavy duffel bag over his shoulder. He brushed a piece of dust off his arm.

"Found the tent," he said.

"Let's go, before someone comes," Harry said.

They rushed into Draco's room.

"So, what now?" Hermione asked, crossing her arms.

"Well, we've got the tent," Ron said, ticking off his fingers. "We've got Harry's broom. I'll get mine, too. Harry's got the cloak. We've got the box of Fred and George's things…"

"I've got some Muggle money," Hermione said. "Just in case."

Clearly, neither Harry nor Ron had thought of this.

"Will we be needing it?" Harry asked.

"I'd rather we have it and not need it than need it and not have it," Hermione said.

"I've got Wizard money," Draco said.

"Yes, we know," Ron said with a roll of his eyes. Hermione elbowed him.

Draco felt his temper prickle, and then caught Weasley's grin. Surprise washed the irritation away.

"How much?" Potter asked.

Draco thought for a moment.

"About four hundred galleons."

Weasley fumbled the bag of the tent, nearly dropping it. "Merlin. What were you holding that much for, a golden cauldron? That's a terrible investment." He snickered over his own joke.

Draco shrugged. "It's the amount I usually carry with me."

"You're alright with us using it?" Hermione asked.

"I don't care," Draco said. "Take it. Spend it all on Drooble's, if you like."

"I don't think Drooble's would help us find Horcruxes," Potter said. There was a slight tilt to the corner of his lip. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Draco said. Hermione took his hand and squeezed it.

"I think we've got some sleeping rolls in the attic, too," Weasley said. "They're ancient, but it's better than sleeping on the mattress frames the tent has."
"I'll help you find them," Hermione said.

"Oh, cheers."

They left the room together.

"First we've got to hide this thing in my room," they could hear Weasley say.

Potter took off his spectacles and wiped the lenses clean.

"This is probably weird for you," he said.

"A bit," Draco conceded. "But things have been weird for so long, I'm almost used to it. I imagine it's no picnic for you either, having me here."

"Weird, but not entirely unwelcome," Potter said, scratching at his arm. He put his spectacles back on. They could hear Ron and Hermione coming back from putting the tent away and going back up to the attic. "You haven't been that big of an arse, and that makes it easier."

Aside from murdering Dumbledore, anyway.

"You don't have to come with us, you know," Potter said suddenly. "I don't know if you're doing it because you feel like you have to, because of what you did. I know I said you should, but if you think it would be better to stay here and stay hidden, I won't judge you for it."

Not much, anyway, Draco thought.

"I want to do it, because you might need whatever information I can provide," Draco said. "I've fucked things up long enough. I want to help fix things for a change. Don't you try to take this from me, Potter."

The threat was merely a wisp of one—he didn't intend to harm Potter if he stood in his way—that would be an incredibly stupid move, considering he was still captive, and surrounded by former enemies.

Potter knew it, too.

"Do what you want," he said. "But once we leave, if you do anything to jeopardize the mission, I'm sending you back in chains."

"Fair enough."

They lapsed into silence. Even though they were in Draco's room, he was about to leave it just to escape that silence, when Potter spoke up again.

"What did you dream about?"

It took Draco a moment to remember.

"I was in a forest, searching for someone. They—she needed help. I didn't know where I was, I just knew I had to keep going."

Potter nodded. Draco had the sense he knew exactly what he was talking about. The thought was comforting, somehow.

Even this feels like a dream. Talking to Potter without malice or threats. I'm sure he feels it, too.
"I found the body of the man I killed."

Potter frowned, and stuck his hands in his pockets. "The Deatheater."

Draco forced the red from his vision. "Yeah."

"That's why you were screaming."

Draco paused. "I didn't know I was screaming."

"It was just for a second. I think Hermione silenced you until you woke up," Potter replied.

That made sense. He wondered why she hadn't told him. He supposed it didn't matter, in the end.

They both started as the door opened, and Hermione appeared. She hadn't expected Harry to still be there, and stopped awkwardly in the act of stepping into the room, as if she'd been caught in a crime.

"Hey," Potter said.

"Is something wrong?" Hermione asked, looking quickly back and forth at them both.

"No," Draco said.

"I'll be going," Potter said. He put his hand on Hermione's shoulder as she passed and pressed it gently. She gave him that soft smile Draco had never seen her give anyone else.

"Goodnight," Potter said as he left.

"What was that?" Hermione asked.

"He wanted to know about the nightmare," Draco said.

"Oh." She wrapped her arms around herself. Draco went to the window and took a peek outside. How quickly the day had gone.

They'd been at the Burrow for nearly two months, now. The wedding had seemed so far away, at first. Now, it was only days until the Burrow would be full almost to capacity, hosting a happy event that seemed almost ludicrous, considering the way things were currently.

Hermione looked as if she was also having the same thought. She looked around herself, then fixedly out the section of the window that remained uncovered.

"Do you think they can tell?" she asked.

The question could have meant a multitude of things.

Could the Deatheaters tell how trapped they felt, inside?

Of course, that's their aim.

Could they tell that soon, there would be a joyous event hosted mere feet from where they stood, and that the targets they sought would be right there with the rest of them?

Could they tell that even now, they were being plotted against, and one of their own had betrayed them?

Could they tell that in the sole remaining lit room of the Burrow, a Muggleborn witch and a
Pureblood wizard were standing so close together, their foreheads nearly touching, thinking of the repercussions their actions would have?

Could they tell that he was kissing her now, to calm his fears, and that she returned it eagerly, intent on doing the same?

Could they tell that in a matter of days, everything was going to change?

*I think we can all feel it*, he thought, as he kissed her slowly. Her hands were on his arms and she leaned into him like her legs were giving out. He broke away from her and they breathed quickly, too aware of the night pressing in around them, invading their privacy. They lied together in bed for an hour or so, in complete silence; him with his arm around her, her with her head nestled into his chest, both wanting to speak, but not saying a word for fear of breaking a somewhat comfortable peace they felt neither would get again for a long while.

They could hear Mr. Weasley get up for his midnight snack, and then Ron for his. They heard the ghoul in the attic knock over a box with a muted *thump*. They heard the wood workings creak around them like the groans of a giant tired of standing still. Outside, the winds began to howl, and it rained heavily for ten minutes, then lightened up for two, then stopped altogether. Hermione could hear Draco's heart beat directly in her ear, like footfalls in a thick layer of snow. His hand brushed over her hair slowly, documenting the feel of her soft hair, the thickness of it. With every stroke she felt herself become more and more relaxed, and it wasn't until another half-hour later that he woke her up and, breaking their silence, reminded her they had agreed to sleep apart. She'd been almost tempted to give in, and sleep there anyway, but knew that would only be tempting fate if he tried to break out again.

She warded his door while he stood in the room with the door open, watching. When she was done, he pressed his palm to the air and met resistance, and they knew it would hold. She, smiling softly, pressed her hand over where his was, and though he couldn't feel a thing through the wards, he thought he could feel her warmth.

She mouthed the word 'goodnight', and then disappeared into her room, shutting her door silently.
"Oi. Your mum's a troll."

They watched intently, half-expecting the Deatheater to move. Nothing happened. A bird chirped sweetly in the background.

The weather was fine for a wedding—the sun was out, which was rare, and only a small breeze posed a threat to the upcoming events. Large white tents had been set up in the backyard, and they had been forced to wake up early to help decorate the tables and set up the tents. Seeing as these were magical tents, there was ample room inside them, and therefore, a lot of ground to cover. This had taken all morning and most of the afternoon, seeing as they had been rather unmotivated about arranging centerpieces in just the right way. After seeing they were nearly done, Mrs. Weasley had shooed them all back inside to get dressed.

The three Weasleys outside in the garden were the first to finish getting dressed.

Fred inched closer, as much as the barriers of the wards allowed. He was almost face to face with the intruder, who stood still as stone, their robe fluttering in the breeze.

"He looks like a petrified Dementor, just standing there," George added, stepping in beside his twin. He fought back a shiver.

"More like the dishrag we've got in the sink," Fred said, chuckling.

The Deatheater, deaf to their taunts, did nothing.

Fred fidgeted with his bow-tie.

"Do you ever see them leave?" he asked his brothers.

"No."

The Deatheater looked sharply to the right suddenly, and they all jumped, stepping back in alarm. Fred raised his wand to point it directly at the Deatheater's face. There was a rustle, and they saw a large rabbit sprint from one bush to another one a short distance away. The Deatheater stared after it for a second or two, relaxed, and then went still once more.

They relaxed slowly, saying nothing for a moment. The Deatheater reached up to scratch at their arm.

Fred lowered his wand.

"D'you reckon they know this is where the wards end?" he asked, turning to look at his brothers. "It can't just be a coincidence that they're right on the edge."

This had not occurred to the others yet. Their expressions of uneasiness were enough answer for Fred. He turned back to look grimly at the Deatheater.
"How do they not get bored? Do they ever eat?" George asked after a short lull. "Hell, do they even piss?"

"If we stay long enough, they might," Ron said. "I don't want to see that, though."

"I reckon that's why mum had us put up the tents," George said, looking back at the tall, connected tents in which the wedding party was to be held later that evening. "Imagine, Bill and Fleur having their first dance, everyone's doing a toast, and then you look over and this fellow's taking a shit over in that bush."

Fred and Ron laughed.

"I don't suppose we could throw something at him," Ron suggested.

"Absolutely not," Tonks said as she peered around the exit flap of the tent, looking at them rather sternly. "If your mum sees the three of you that close to the wards, she'll have heart failure. Get away from there and help with the flowers."

Fred sighed. "Where are the others?"

"They're coming down. I just finished with Draco. I should say Adam, rather."

"Is that his fake name?" Ron asked, frowning.

Tonks nodded.

"Pansy's is Lauren, and Harry's is Rodger. You'd all better do your best to remember them. We can't risk anything today with so many people around."

"What was Hermione's, again?" George asked.

"Oh, I forgot." Tonks set down the last vase onto its corresponding table. "Hers is Ophelia."

"Easy enough," George said, pulling a daisy from the small vase he'd just set down onto a table. "Rodger, Adam, Ophelia, and Lauren."

"I wonder if we'll catch Adam and Ophelia at it, again," Fred said, snickering. George elbowed him, glancing over at Ron through the corner of his eye.

Ron scowled, suspicious. "What are you talking about? What were they doing?"

"Nothing at all," Fred said quickly. George squinted at a tree behind Ron, as if he'd found something fascinating there. "Ahem. I don't think this bow-tie compliments my eyes, George. Help me find another one."

"Why don't we just switch?" George asked, looking down at his own.

Fred tugged him towards the house. "I don't like that color."

Hermione appeared at the door just after they went back into the house. Her hair was blonde, now, and ended just past her shoulders rather than mid-back as it normally did. Her eyes had been changed from deep brown to hazel, and now had a prominent birthmark in the middle of her bottom lip. She wore a pretty, flattering red dress that drew Ron's eyes towards her figure but made himself look away hastily.

She was tucking her hair behind her ear as she stepped out into the garden. She saw him, standing
beside Tonks, and smiled as she came to them. The sun would set soon, and the guests were due to begin arriving at any moment for the ceremony. There was a tinge of energy in the air, despite the heavy presence of the Deatheaters, and he felt buoyant—and on edge.

"I'm rather good at this, aren't I?" Tonks said, grinning as she looked at Hermione. She reached forward and hugged Hermione, touched a strip of her hair that was hanging by her temple. "I almost forgot who you were."

"It always feels strange," Hermione conceded. "I know I look different, but I don't feel different. I still feel like someone's going to see us all through our disguises and alert the Ministry."

"Stay calm, and no one will be the wiser," Tonks said. "It's okay to feel nervous. Just stick to your fake identity and we'll get through the whole thing without any trouble."

"Where's Harry?" Ron asked.

"With Ginny." Hermione replied. "Draco and Pansy are on their way."

"Don't forget the fake names! I'm going back inside," Tonks said, putting her hand on their shoulders. "Think you'll be alright for a few minutes?"

"Well, yeah," Ron said, almost rolling his eyes.

"I know it's a dumb question," Tonks said, grimacing. "But I had to ask, with that peeping tom over there. Plus, your mum might be watching."

She went back inside.

"You look great," Ron said, and she smiled. It was strange and fascinating to see that even through Tonk's handiwork, she'd retained her smile.

"Thank you," she said. Her hand pressed on her stomach. "I'm really nervous about this."

"It'll be fine," he said. "The whole Order will be here, so we'll be prepared if anything goes wrong."

She didn't look comforted at all. "I've got everything prepared, just in case."

"Good." He looked around at the mass of white-blanketed tables, with their cluster of pale blue roses in their centers, the candles at their side that would soon be lit.

"It's weird to see Bill get married," he said. "He hasn't lived with us for a long time but it's just weird. I don't know how to explain it."

She nodded.

"I never thought I'd see Malfoy at a family wedding, either," he muttered.

Hermione smiled and rubbed his arm. "Would you rather have him here as a guest or as an enemy?"

Ron grimaced. "If that git tries to ruin my brother's wedding, I'll knock him outside the wards so his friends out there can deal with him."

At Hermione's disapproving look, he sighed. "It was a joke."

Her frown didn't waver.
"Alright, I'm sorry."

"There you are," Ginny called as she stepped out into the garden, struggling not to trip over her long blue bridesmaid dress. "I already tripped three times coming down the stairs. I'm about to tear this bloody thing off and wear trousers. Who cares about being a bridesmaid?" She swatted a loose strand of hair from her face.

"Fleur does," Ron said plainly. "And she'll go mental if she sees you changed out of the dress she picked for you."

"Yes, well I already reached that point after I landed on my arse at the bottom of the stairs."

"Yeah, well, you'll have to put up with it for a few more hours," Ron said. He himself wore a secondhand set of dark blue robes with a white rose in the lapel. Hermione looked at it, remembered the ancient frilly robes he'd had to wear in Fourth year, and suppressed a laugh.

Ginny put her hands on her hips.

"It's a nice dress, really," she said, sighing. "I'm just in a lousy mood. I don't want to have to deal with a wedding right now." She caught Hermione's eye, and in that brief shared look, Hermione understood that Harry had broken up with her.

Right before the wedding? Her heart constricted with sympathy.

Ginny gave the slightest shrug of her shoulder, but her eyes conveyed a message.

'We'll talk about it later.'

Hermione nodded.

Once the guests began to arrive, Ron was assigned the task of taking everyone's coats and storing them in his and Harry's room. Harry was to lay low and not draw too much attention to himself. Draco had finally joined them in the garden, and was to act as inconspicuous as possible as well. Pansy, who now had straight, longer hair and thicker brows, took it upon herself to help Mrs. Weasley guide everyone to their tables, for which Mrs. Weasley was extremely grateful.

Hermione slipped back inside, smiling politely at anyone who passed, her heart racing, expecting to be found out with every pair of eyes that looked at her.

Stay calm, she could hear Tonks say. There's nothing to be afraid of.

I wish it was that easy.

She looked around stealthily for any familiar face—most of the Order had already converged in the tent. Moody was standing by the post of the largest tent, leaning on his staff, his magical eye whirring and spinning madly in all directions. Tonks had disguised herself to blend in among the crowd. She'd already frightened Ginny once by accident when she'd come up from behind her to tell her Molly was looking for her. Lupin was seated already, calm as ever, but his eyes shifted around the area now and then, feigning interest, but she knew he was also waiting for something to happen.

And what would that be?

She couldn't say.

She vaguely recognized Ron's Aunt Muriel as she tottered past her, a sour look on her face although
she was talking rather animatedly to the unfortunate guest who was walking beside her.

"Should have been a larger wedding, if you ask me," she was saying. "You only get married once, after all. Who's going to remember a party like this?"

"Hush, Muriel," someone said. "A bigger wedding would draw too much attention."

"That's the point!" Muriel cackled. "Weddings used to be so much grander. Now look where we've come."

"I think a small wedding is a lovely idea," someone said. "Much cozier."

Hermione passed them by, faking a smile, wanting nothing more than to escort Aunt Muriel right back to the front door.

She found Bill on the second floor, about to head down. He was dressed in a brand new set of fine black robes, his hair trimmed and handsomely styled. There was a pale blue rose pinned to his lapel.

They smiled at each other.

"Are you ready?"

"Of course," he said, and his smile was so genuine it was contagious. Hers grew bigger, too.

"Thought I heard Aunt Muriel arrive," he said.

"She's already latched herself onto some stranger," she replied.

"Count yourself lucky it wasn't you."

Hermione laughed.

"Congratulations," she said after a pause, not quite knowing what else to say.

He laughed good-naturedly.

"The ceremony hasn't even started, but thanks." He started down the steps. "I'll see you down there."

"Sure."

There was the sound of someone else on the stairs, and she turned to see Draco coming up, giving Bill a congratulatory shake of the hand just before he completely descended.

"Weasley told me you were here," he said.

Tonks had changed his hair to a more common shade of blond, so it was darker than she was used to, and straighter, at that. His eyes were a deeper blue, and his nose broader and with a bend to it that suggested it'd been broken before. His skin, still fair, had a reddish tinge to it, as though he spent lots of time outdoors, and when he came to a stop in front of her, she could detect a number of freckles spanning across his face.

"I look ridiculous," he said flatly.

She tried to smother her laugh. "I was going to say I think you look very handsome."

He looked doubtful but came closer with a gleam in his eye. "Would you rather I stayed this way?"
She tapped her finger on her chin. "I'll have to think on it. Ask me again later."

He gave her a challenging smile. Despite the fact that he wore a stranger's face, she could perfectly picture his true face behind it, bearing that expression, and her heart fluttered.

Draco raised one hand and gently held the side of her head with it, leaning in closer and closer until their breaths mingled. Hermione held hers and stared at him.

Who could have ever guessed that they'd look at each other without dislike, or even hate?

His smile had gone. There was that vulnerability in his eyes. He didn't even try to hide it, and she was touched every time she saw it with the realization and gratitude that he trusted her with it. There was so much that he wasn't saying; if she looked long and hard enough she fancied she could see it all unfurl.

She grabbed him by the sides of his face, not daring to blink for fear of missing any of it.

"You're nervous," she said. She brushed her thumbs over his skin.

"You are, too."

He kissed her. She blinked.

"I don't know what to do," she said. "I know this wedding's important, but I'm not sure I want to sit through a party all night."

Draco kissed her again, and she couldn't shake the feeling, how strange it was to be kissing him through someone else's lips.

"We go anyway," he said softly. "We sit through it and then go to bed. It's a happy occasion. Who knows how many of those we'll have in the near future. We should go enjoy it."

He was right. But Hermione still faced the thought of going back outside with reluctance.

Draco's nose trailed along her neck.

"You still smell the same," he said, and breathed in.

Hermione let her head fall back and he kissed her throat, his tongue darting out to leave a hot trail on her skin.

"I want you now," he said, and her breath caught.

"I didn't know we were there yet," she said, need and nerves dancing together in her belly. "We haven't talked about this."

"We won't do anything you don't want to," he said. "I'll wait."

He pressed another open-mouth kiss to her throat, sucking lightly on her skin. Hermione closed her eyes and tried to steady her breathing. Draco's other hand grabbed her around the waist and pressed her closer.

"I wish I could see you," he muttered into her skin. His hand roamed over her back, the curve of her bum.

More people were coming in. The slamming of the front door broke them apart. Draco sighed.
Hermione put her hands on his shoulders. He looked at her, his eyes gentle, and played with the ends of her hair. His fingers grazed against where his lips had just been, and she shivered.

"Let's go," she said, and smiled.

Draco ran a hand through his hair, mentally composing himself. Hermione could guess at why he was stalling. The bulge at the front of his pants was telling enough. He saw her looking at it, and then caught her eye.

"I'll need a moment," he said.

Hermione shrugged. "Take as long as you need, as long as we don't miss the ceremony."

"I won't take that long," he replied indignantly, but he was smiling. "I really wish I could see you. I know you look beautiful in that dress."

Hermione blushed.

"I want to see you, too."

A moment later, he was ready, and escorted her down the stairs and out into the garden. By now many of the guests were seated, but more remained standing and mingling, flutes of champagne in hand. Hermione watched as a few people turned to look at them, and her nerves reappeared. Music was playing, a soft, charming violin. The sun was beginning to set.

She looked back at a few of the guests, almost expecting them to call out the identity of the wizard beside her.

No one said anything. Their eyes passed over them both and then looked away to something or someone else. Draco squeezed her hand. He had caught sight of Weasley staring at them from across the tent, and he could tell he wasn't pleased although his face was neutral.

The lights in the tent dimmed briefly. He spied Mrs. Weasley and Delacour's mother standing at the front of the tent, with Mme. Delacour holding her wand aloft by the tall candlesticks near the altar. At once, the conversation in the tent ceased.

"Let's find our seats," he said, and he and Hermione hurried to where Pansy and Ginny stood.

The ceremony had been mercifully short. Many people had become emotional, and even Mr. Weasley had repeatedly been dabbing at his eyes with his handkerchief all throughout.

Fleur and Bill were now in the midst of a throng of people giving them congratulations. Mrs. Weasley was weeping happily, speaking through her tears to her husband, eyes shining as she looked after her newly-married son. Something in it struck Draco's heart. He had to turn away before something in his heart gave way.

Hermione was hugging Ginny. Potter and Weasley stood together, speaking to the twins. Pansy approached him and hugged him.

"I love weddings," she sighed happily.

"They're nice enough," he replied. She pulled away and wiped at her eyes.

"You're crying?"
"Oh hush, you," she said, swatting his shoulder. "I don't know that I'll ever get married, but I take notes at every wedding I go to in case I do."

"Who wouldn't want to marry you?" he asked, frowning.

Pansy brushed a bit of lint off her green dress. "Who, indeed! At the risk of sounding like a pompous airhead, I think I'm quite the catch. At the very least, I'll be prepared if the chance ever arises."

"The second I hear of an engagement, I'll be expecting an invitation, then."

"Be sure of it, you'll be the first one to get one."

"Oh, we're all hugging?" came Fred's (or George?) from behind them. "Come here, Ronnie. It's a special occasion, after all."

He wrapped Ron up in a smothering hug. George came up as well and followed suit. Harry stood by and watched, grinning.

"No—*geroff* me, idiots—"

Pansy laughed.

Charlie came up. He had arrived late, and at his mother's insistence he'd taken his earring out and had changed into some of Percy's old dress robes, but they looked tight across his chest, as he was rather fit. He grinned crookedly and crossed his arms. "Well, this is rare."

"It really is," Ginny said, nodding at Pansy's skeptical expression. "Usually if you see them like this they're throwing punches."

Bill, who was walking by, did a double take and came closer.

"What's this?" he asked, looking slightly concerned as he looked to the mass of tall gingers into which Ron had been engulfed.

"Brotherly love," Charlie said, grinning.

"Get in here, you, and accept our love and congratulations," Fred said, grinning wickedly. They could hear Ron's muffled swearing as he tried to push them away.

Bill, looking both resigned and chuffed, walked into the mess with his arms held out. George pulled him in, clapping a hand over his back. When he pulled it away, Harry saw a paper advert for their shop had been magically fixed to the back of Bill's robe. George winked at him.

"Alright!" came Ron's muffled voice. "*Geroff*!"

He managed to yank himself out of his brothers' hold, and emerged, red-faced and mussed hair, glaring at the twins.

George looked at Fred. "That was nice. I feel very loved, don't you?"

"Very wholesome," Fred nodded.

"Piss off, you two," Ron muttered, still glowering. He flattened his hair with his hand.

"Gladly," George replied. "Look, the food's coming. Best get to your table before it's gone cold."
"Luna and her dad are here," Ginny whispered into Hermione's ear after the dinner. Hermione jumped, almost choking on her mouthful of wine. She winced as she swallowed. Draco rubbed her back.

"Where?"

"Over there. They're talking to Bill and Fleur."

Hermione found them instantly. Luna had her long blonde hair down and wore a bright yellow dress that made her hair look almost silver. Her father wore light grey robes with hand-painted designs on them. Hermione could only guess that Luna had done them herself but was too far away to determine what precisely the designs were. Harry had managed to be in their presence and had caught Xenopilius's attention, who was now talking to him rather animatedly.

"Have you talked to her?" Hermione asked. She had never been particularly close to Luna, but seeing her j0win a crowd of mostly unfamiliar people made something in her heart ache.

"Yeah. Couldn't say much before mum came in and asked for help with something. I reckon she thinks somehow we'll let slip that you lot are here."

Hermione stared at Luna and her father, talking amiably to someone she didn't recognize, wondering what their lives had been like since the last time she'd seen them.

Had her father become as overly protective as Mrs. Weasley had of them all? Was she being denied access to news of the outside world like they were?

I doubt it. Her father runs his own paper, after all.

Luna always spoke fondly of her father. Seeing them now, Hermione had no doubt they were close. She doubted he would keep anything from her.

She felt a pang of jealousy, and meant to turn away, but her eyes lingered. Luna was sipping wine, looking peacefully around the party. Xenopilius looked serious as he talked to Harry, who seemed to be clinging to every word he said. Xenopilius pointed to the designs on his robe, and Hermione caught a flash of motion, and looking to the left, found herself locking eyes with Luna from across the tent. Startled, she looked away.

Draco put down his glass of wine and looked around as he came to a stop next to Potter. He was about to move on when he noticed Potter's trouble gaze and followed it. He saw Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sitting huddled together at their table. Mr. Weasley had his arms around his wife, looking troubled and at the note she was holding. Mrs. Weasley was crying again, but this time it was not out of joy, that much he could tell.

"What's wrong?" he asked at once, dreading that something had gone terribly wrong.

Potter hesitated to answer. "They invited Percy to the wedding. He had his secretary send a note."

Draco remembered the third eldest Weasley well. The self-righteous Head Boy had had a penchant for giving him detentions, and he'd always had such a stick up his arse Draco had often wondered how he could walk comfortably.

"He could have just been busy," he offered lamely.

"We all know he wasn't," Potter said. "He's just embarrassed of them."
Once, Draco wouldn't have blamed him.

But now…

Still, the news surprised him a little. The Weasleys seemed like a closely-knit family. He supposed Percy had always been proud, but he'd never imagined him to be the one to turn away from his kin.

"Never liked him, much," he said, and after a moment's pause, Potter nodded his agreement.

Pansy was dancing with a stranger. Ginny had gone to console her mother. Ron was with Fred and George, talking about some new products they hoped to begin developing soon. He had lost sight of Hermione a while ago after the dinner, when she had gone to the loo afterwards. He and Potter remained standing side by side, not saying much. Potter was without his spectacles, and his hair was still black but curly now, and shorter and tidier than normal. His scar was gone, obviously, and his eyes had been changed to brown. Draco kept finding his eyes lingering on Potter's forehead, as if waiting for the scar to appear again suddenly. It was too strange, all of them being in disguise like this. Necessary, sure, but strange.

The music shifted, and more couples joined in the mass already dancing. It was a traditional dance Draco was familiar with. He had heard it many times over the years when played at the manor or other balls he and his family had attended. He had seen his parents dance it often when he was younger, and when he had grown older and their love had cooled they had never danced it again, which he hadn't realized until now. He pushed the memory away and spotted Hermione a short distance away, speaking to a guest at the edge of the tent.

He went to her, dodging bodies in the crowd, nodding in response to attempts from a stranger now and then to start a conversation as he passed, but not replying. As he neared to where she stood, her voice grew louder. She had not noticed his approach until he stood before her and turned to him, expecting a stranger; when she recognized him through his disguise, she smiled.

It stirred his heart. It was the same soft, welcoming smile he had mistakenly received so long ago, when he had cornered her in the library, triumph entwining with his rage.

The guest nodded at him, his eyes cool. Draco had eyes only for Hermione. He held out his hand, and it wasn't until then that it occurred to him she might refuse to stand with him.

Her smile had turned quizzical; her eyes flit from his outstretched hand to his eyes, once, twice.

"Ophelia," he said, barely catching himself in time to keep from calling her by her true name. "Would you honor me with a dance?"

She bit her lip. He could feel Potter watching them closely from where he stood not too far away.

"I'm not familiar with these sorts of dances," she admitted, but lay her hand in his. "I mean, I've danced before, but not like this."

Draco smiled. "They're fairly simple. I'm sure you'll learn quickly. I'll help you."

There was that rare shy, trusting look in her eyes again. It warmed his heart. He led her into the midst of the dance floor. She stood before him, nervous, lovely in her red gown.

"What now?" she asked, as the others moved around them.

The music was merry and upbeat, charming to the ear. Above it, there was the prattling on of conversation all around them. She could clearly hear Aunt Muriel screeching in someone's ear.
Draco bent his left arm at the elbow and placed it behind his back. He held his other bent arm before her with his palm open.

She understood and touched it with hers. Draco stepped close. Her skirts brushed against his front.

She gave a quiet laugh. Draco gave her a questioning look.

"I've spent so much time studying Transfiguration and History, Potions and Charms, I don't think I ever thought to learn more about Wizard culture," she replied. "That should have been the first thing I studied."

Draco laughed. "This must all be strange to you, then."

"It's rather similar, in some respects," she admitted, tucking her hair behind her ear. "But yes, it's still strange. Especially considering this is part of my life."

He bowed to her. She bit back a giggle and curtseyed in turn, looking around at the other couples as they did the same to their respective partners.

"This seems rather archaic," she remarked, as he held out his hand once more.

He began to move, and knowing little but enough about dance, she followed in reverse. They moved in a circle, hands still connected, gazes locked.

"Wizard culture doesn't seem to advance much," he agreed. "We're steeped in tradition. We're rather set in our ways, but I suppose that's how our culture gets some of its charm."

He brought out his arm from behind his back and wrapped it around her waist, bringing her closer. She still appeared nervous, holding onto the hem of her long skirt with one hand, the other still touching his. Draco met her eye, his grip tightening slightly around her body.

"You're doing great," he said.

"I've never danced like this," she said, blushing. "I'm afraid this is one thing I've never really been good at."

Draco, taking hold of her hand, led her in a twirl. He caught her again.

"I'd still rather dance with you than anyone else."

She smiled, embarrassed, but radiant. They touched palms again and stepped in closer to each other, stepped back. Hermione, following cue from the other dancers, swayed gently from side to side, and Draco, his palm still just barely touching hers, stood tall, smiling at her as they moved in a circle, and the longer they danced the more she felt an almost forgotten sort of giddiness take over her. She stumbled now and then. He twirled her, lifted her, to her surprise, and set her back down with an easy smile. Her hands were on his chest. She could hear herself laughing. Her smile grew wider, and she couldn't take her eyes from Draco's. The dancers around them turned faceless-she could only hear the music and the pounding of her heart, feel the gentle pressure of Draco's hands against her. The music had grown louder, a little slower; almost hypnotizing. It was intoxicating.

Draco's eyes were like glue—she always got trapped looking into them. He dipped her carefully, and she let her arm fall back above her head, reaching for some invisible thing. The other couples were so much more practiced and graceful, but Draco wouldn't look away from her, and she was finding a new sort of confidence in his arms.
"Do you ever miss it? Muggle life?" He had been afraid of sounding insensitive but was relieved to see she did not take it as such.

"Sometimes," she said. Draco's arm around her body felt warm and reassuring. They were dancing at a slower pace than the rest of the couples, who moved with fervor, turning in circles, swaying in and out, touching hands, and some even performing bigger lifts, to the applause of onlookers. "I feel like I don't spend enough time there to truly miss it. But I do miss my parents."

Draco dipped her gently, his eyes raking along her throat to her chest briefly before looking away. The scent of her perfume was both heady and calming. She had noticed the heat in his eyes and gave him a cheeky look. It only made his heat intensify, but before he could lean in for a kiss she stepped away and let him twirl her again. When she came back into his arms, the moment had passed, but neither of them minded.

"Do you feel more at home here?" he asked.

She looked uncertain, and that was all the answer he needed.

"I don't know where I fit in," she said quietly as they swayed together. "Harry's the same, too. It isn't easy to go from one place to another but never really be allowed to fully integrate yourself."

"Your parents support this, don't they?"

"They always have," she said, nodding. "They do have reservations, though. They trust me, but since they're not allowed to see much of wizarding culture they want to make sure I'm safe. I tell them about Harry and Ron, but never about what happens to us. If they knew some of the things we've been through, I'm afraid they'd never let me come back. And as frightening as it can be, sometimes, I don't think I can ever live without being part of this world."

He nodded slowly.

They realized with a start that the song had ended, and another was starting up. They looked around, slightly embarrassed, neither having realized that they had been so wrapped up in each other that they had blocked everything else out. No one seemed to have noticed, however.

People were dancing again, and the tent had grown much warmer. There was the clinking of glass and merry laughter, the strings and beating of the music, the warmth of Hermione beside him. He spied Weasley dancing with his mother, and his brother dancing with his new wife, holding each other close, Fleur's head on his shoulder, absorbed in their own bliss.

He offered Hermione his hand and she took it. He led her away from the tent. She was fanning herself, and the chill of the night air as they walked out into the garden was immensely satisfying.

They walked a short distance away, and into the garden.

"I don't think I ever realized how difficult it is for you and Potter, to be part of two worlds," he said.

"It took some getting used to," she replied, shrugging. "But we're used to it, now." She looked in the direction of the Deatheater. There was now a third one, standing a little distance away. She shivered and turned away from it.

"Have you ever been to the Muggle world?" she asked, looking around to see if there was another Deatheater that had popped up over the past few hours.

Draco watched her, her skin like marble in the moonlight.
"Once or twice, as a child. I don't remember it much."

"It's very much the same," she said, turning to him, moving her hair from her face. "The stark
difference being not having magic, of course. I think you'd find it interesting."

"Are you offering to show me?" he asked, raising a brow. Strange, how when in her company, he
felt more like himself than he'd felt in a long, long time. It was a surprising revelation.

Her smile was slight and half-hidden in shadow.

"I think I am."

"When the opportunity comes, I'd love nothing more."

There was the loud pop of another champagne bottle being opened in the tent, and a small cheer. The
music grew louder.

Hermione sat down on the ground, tucking her skirt underneath her. Without hesitation, Draco sat
down beside her. They had been standing by a row of tall hedges and were now completely
concealed by it. Hermione let out a long breath, watching it turn into mist.

She had begun to shake. He stood briefly to take off his robe and draped it over her. She took it
gratefully, wrapping it around herself tightly, shivering.

"Do you want to go back in?"

"No," she said. She leaned against him, her head on his shoulder. "I really enjoyed dancing with
you."

"Thank you for saying yes," he replied. "I enjoyed it, too."

The night sky was cloudless. Stars twinkled. A cold fog rolled over the ground.

"I just wanted to sit in silence for a bit," she said, looking at him almost apologetically. "There's too
much going on in there, and the tent felt like it was getting smaller and smaller."

"I understand," he said, pressing a kiss to her temple.

"You don't have to stay here with me," she replied.

"I want to," he said. "Unless you'd rather be alone."

Hermione nestled her head more firmly onto him and sighed.

"No," she said. "I want you to stay."

He nodded and tried to sit still. They sat in a comfortable silence for a long time, neither feeling
pressed to speak. Hermione tried to fight her exhaustion from the long day but ended up dozing
lightly on his arm. Draco stroked her arm softly, watching the sky, listening to the merry sounds and
music of the ongoing party.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed but it wasn't too long until she awoke, turning to watch
her shift. She rubbed at her eye, yawned.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to fall asleep." She gave a soft laugh. The was the rustling of the
night breeze around them.
"I don't mind," he said. "Really."

Her dark eyes looked him over. She saw that he was missing his robe, and then remembered she was wearing it.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked.

"Not terribly. You're helping me keep warm."

As she had slept, her body had grown warmer, and it had kept him from shivering as she had leaned against him more and more.

"Did you want to go inside?"

"No," he said. "I'd rather be here."

She ran a hand through her hair to push it from her face, forgetting that her appearance was different, and her hair had a shorter length now. She dropped her hand abruptly.

"I feel so comfortable with you," she said, so quietly he had to strain to listen.

"I do, too," he said. They said nothing more for a while. "I feel very strongly for you," he said, and pressed another kiss to her temple. "More than I've felt for anyone."

Another kiss. Hermione was growing warm. Another. She tilted her head up to meet his mouth.

"I feel like I might be in some sort of danger if I continue to let myself care for you," he admitted after they broke apart. "Of feeling something deeper. I think I already do."

There were crickets chirping loudly nearby. Neither of them heard it.

"I told you I care for you, too," she replied, looking down at her hands. "I'm a little afraid of admitting it because it feels so sudden, but it built up so slowly. I...I think I feel the same way you do."

She was blushing, but the moonlight washed out the pink from her face. Draco stared at her intently, his pale eyes hardly blinking.

"I've never felt this way for anyone before," she continued, reaching up to stroke his hair. "I'm a little afraid of admitting it because it feels so sudden, but it built up so slowly. I...I think I feel the same way you do."

Her brow furrowed slightly. Her mouth opened, then closed, then opened again.

"You mean…"

She gestured between themselves, her brow still bent but her eyes wide. Draco, fighting the urge to laugh, smiled.

"Well, yeah," he said.

"You don't think it's too sudden?" she asked, and his spirits lowered just a fraction.
He looked away, his gaze landing on the Deatheaters lingering nearby, oblivious to their presence.

"The way things are going," he said, "I don't know when else would be a good time to ask. If I don't live through this, I'd rather have now than later."

She frowned again at his words but nodded.

*My odds don't look too good, either,* she thought.

"Is that a no, then?" he asked, meeting her eye again. Hermione wished she were an artist, so she could try to capture the peculiar color of his eyes— they were so pale their color seemed to shift whether he was in light or shadow—and now, in the moon's light, they were bright and clear, almost like glass, but with a warmth that comforted her.

"No," she said softly. "My answer is yes." She couldn't help the grin that took over her face.

There was the tinkling of glass coming from inside the tent as the guests chanted for the newlyweds to kiss, then a pause, and then cheers and applause.

Draco smiled, and leaned in to kiss her deeply, plundering her lips. Hermione shifted to wrap her arms around his neck, wrapping him in his robe, too, and leaned back until she was lying on the ground with him on top of her, their mouths hardly separating but to break briefly for air.

His hands were on her neck, cupping her as they kissed. Hermione took one of them and guided it down to her breasts, where he eagerly took up her request, squeezing softly, massaging it in his palm as she shifted underneath him, moaning quietly into his lips.

Fingers slightly shaky, she reached up and pulled the straps of her dress down so that her bra was revealed, and then, withdrawing her wand, cut it in half, exposing her chest.

Draco had paused, staring at her, his eyes slightly wide, hooded with lust. His lips had parted.

"Here?"

She nodded through her blush.

At once he bent back down, his mouth sealing over her nipple, tongue brushing against it with a deliberate pressure that made her bite her lip again to keep a moan at bay.

His tongue rubbed against it, teasing the areola. Hermione's hands grabbed onto his head, pressing him closer against her breast. He was massaging the other with his free hand, his thumb circling the bud of her nipple when she took that hand and guided it down the length of her skirt, and underneath it.

He let out a groan, immediately drawing tighter in his trousers. He was hard, wanting nothing more than to wrap himself inside that heat, and *thrust.*

"Hermione."

She responded by bringing his fingers to her knickers, and he took over from there, almost dizzy with arousal at finding her wet through her knickers, radiating heat. She felt the initial touch and shivered.

She let out a groan of frustration as he trailed his hand away to smooth over the soft skin of her inner thigh and back up again. Hermione waited restlessly, her face pink, feeling the wetness at her core.
Begin to slide down her thighs. Her knickers were beyond damp. She would have been embarrassed if she had cared.

His fingers stroked her inner thigh again. Waiting. Hermione had no patience left. She needed contact. More of it.

"Touch me," she said. "Please, Draco."

He obeyed.

At first contact her head fell back and she moaned. With one finger he traced her cleft over her knickers, feeling her heat. He continued this for a moment longer, feeling her clitoris through the damp fabric and circling around it slowly as his tongue continued to work at her nipple. Beads of sweat dotted her temples and forehead; her eyes were shut, and her head was pressed into the ground; she still wore his robe and her hair was getting messy, but she looked so beautiful he couldn't look away. Draco finally dragged her knickers down with his hand as best as he could and then made direct contact, stroking her methodically, testing her reactions. Eyebrows lifted, she let out a sharp breath as massaged around her clitoris.

"Draco," she whispered. He grinned and sucked on her hard little nipple. Her back arched. She almost squealed as he rubbed her faster, igniting a spark inside her.

"Shh."

She bit her lip, and he continued rubbing at her in just that manner that had her squirming underneath him, her legs restless and quivering.

Her mouth was wrenched open but she was silent now, her brows coming together. Her hand clamped over his and instantly alarmed, he was prepared to stop until she spoke.

"Just like that," she moaned, and he continued working her. "Go, go, go—ah."

He kissed her to cut off her exclamation of release. He could feel her quivering underneath him, and wrapped in lust, he continued rubbing at her, hoping to elicit another such exclamation when something bright caught his eye.

She had seen it, too, and looked in its direction, panting, sweat beading along her temples. An intensely bright blue light was emanating from the tent, casting an eerie glow around the garden. The sounds of the party had gone absolutely quiet.

"The Ministry has fallen," they heard Kingsley's voice say. "The Minister is dead."

Hermione turned to look towards where the Deatheaters were standing. They were closer, now. One of them was only feet away from the tent, a gloved hand pressing against the wards.

"Oh, god," Hermione whispered.

"They're coming. Run."

Then everything exploded into action.

Draco stood, helped her up, smoothing her skirts back down. Her hands were shaking so hard she had trouble pulling the straps of her dress and her knickers back up. Draco helped her, and grabbed her hand, and they ran into the tent.
People were screaming, some in confusion, others in terror. They were running in all directions, scrambling over chairs, Apparating away on the spot. Draco's hand was gripping hers so fiercely it hurt but she didn't dare let go. She scanned the chaos, heart in throat, searching for Harry and Ron.

There were the cracks of Apparition all around them, and she realized with horror people were coming in, rather than out.

Who?

There was no time to tell. She saw Tonks and Lupin with their wands drawn, trying to navigate the chaos. She caught eyes with Tonks. Tonk's face had gone ashen.

'Run', Tonks mouthed.

She caught sight of three black-robed figures on the edges of the crowd, wands raised, light coming from their wands. The light illuminated their silver masks. Her legs went weak.

"Do you see them?" Draco asked.

"No." She began to pull him towards the house. "I need to get something!"

He followed, and they scrambled into the house, nearly getting separated by the rush of guests attempting to leave. Whatever they were shouting was incomprehensible, but he caught one word clearly, and it was enough to make his stomach drop.

Deatheaters.

They got in.

He reached for his wand on instinct, and then remembered it had been locked away. But Hermione had hers out, and her hand was tight on his, pulling him through the terrified crowd.

Another hand latched onto him, and he looked back, heart stopping, expecting to see a silver mask. It was Pansy, and she nearly tore his whole robe off with the force of her grip. Her eyes were wide, desperate. He took her hand and pulled her along.

They found Ginny, Harry and Ron upstairs. Bill was just leaving them. He looked at them all seriously.

"Stay here, hide, and don't do anything stupid," he ordered. His wand was out. He rushed back downstairs.

Hermione ran into her room and came back almost instantly, slinging a leather purse over her body. She had thrown a muggle coat on.

At once, Draco understood.

It was time to go.

Pansy's hand tightened around his.

They could hear shouting downstairs. Multi-colored light reached the third floor landing window. He forced himself to look through it. Multiple Deatheaters had infiltrated the tent.

He felt like he might vomit. What would they do if they came inside and found them all here? Would
they know it was him?

*How did they get through? Were the wards broken?*

The Order was holding them at bay. Many guests had stayed behind, too, to defend. That gave him some reassurance, but the DeathEaters seemed to be advancing little by little. Many DeathEaters already lay stunned or injured on the ground, but at a cost. Charlie appeared injured, and two guests lay on the ground, motionless.

"Draco, put this on," Hermione said. He turned back and she pushed a coat into his hands. "Quickly!"

He did, not even bothering to ask why.

"Where will you go?" Ginny asked. She looked on the verge of tears.

"I don't know," Hermione said, pressing her fingers to her temples. "I don't know. I thought I'd have time to plan it out. Anywhere."

"What about you?" Potter asked Pansy and Ginny.

"We'll hide, find some way to help you," Ginny said. "Bill said we could stay at his and Fleur's place if we want to." She made a face. "How will we be able to contact you?"

There was a loud *BANG* downstairs. They all looked at each other.

*We've run out of time,* Draco thought. His hands were clammy with sweat. Hermione stepped forward and pushed something into his hand. It was his wand. She was looking up at him seriously, fear written all over her face. He nodded slowly, although his mouth was dry and he wanted nothing more than to run.

Someone ran up the stairs so quickly they barely had enough time to draw their wands. They relaxed visibly upon finding Tonks there, bleeding and out of breath. She rushed over to them, pulling them all close.

"Whatever you're doing, wherever you're going," she hissed urgently, looking back over her shoulder, as if expecting to see someone had followed her up, *don't come back here. Someone at the Ministry betrayed us and took the wards down.*

"Who?" Ron asked, looking furious.

"We've got an idea, but it doesn't matter now. Your home's compromised. Go anywhere else."

"How did you know we were leaving?" Hermione asked her, wide-eyed.

Tonks shook her head. "I just knew. Plus, it's what I'd do."

"What about the others?" Ron asked, looking down the stairs. He looked like he was about to be sick. Hermione could see his inner debate on whether to go, or run downstairs and help protect his home and family.

"They're fine," Tonks said hurriedly. "We've all got each other. You go do what you have to do."

"If you knew, did Mum know, too?" Ginny asked.

"She didn't."
They jumped as they heard another loud crash outside the Burrow. People were yelling, but their voices mixed together so haphazardly, it was hard to differentiate who was who.

"Go now," Tonks said. "We're keeping them from getting into the house. They think they've found everyone, since they don't know you're here."

"What about Grimmauld Place?" Harry asked quickly. "Is it still protected?"

Tonks looked unsure. "I don't know. Now that the Burrow's been breached, we'll probably have to move back there ourselves, unless we find someplace else."

"Like where?" Ron asked.

"I don't know...we'll think of something."

"Wait—we need to find Bill," Ginny said to Tonks, grabbing her arm urgently. "Pansy and I can't stay here."

Tonks frowned. "You're not all going together?"

"We decided it's safer not to," Draco said.

"Blimey. Alright." She worked her jaw and nodded to herself. She looked up at the others. "You, go now. If you wait any longer and they manage to come in and find you, it'll all be over."

Seeing their torn expressions, Tonks snapped, just as there was the sound of someone bursting through a door downstairs, running quickly in their direction.

"Now!"

They didn't even have time to say goodbye. All they could do was look at Ginny, Pansy, and Tonks and try to convey it through one quick, terrified look. Ginny looked pale, frightened, but resolute. Pansy was crying silently, staring at them all, worry in her eyes. Tonks tried to smile.

"Tonks!" They heard Charlie call. "There's more coming! We need to go!"

"Be careful, and stay safe," Tonks said quietly to them.

Hermione grabbed Draco's hand tightly in one, and Potter's hand in the other. Potter grasped Weasley's hand in his. Hermione closed her eyes, and they vanished with a soft 'pop'.

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Chapter End Notes

This is officially the last chapter of Strange Mercy. (I might add an epilogue.) There will be a third part to this series. As soon as I manage to pick a title, I'll be posting again for your enjoyment. I know I've said that SM would be dark, but I decided to split it in two to keep it from getting too long (also because I don't have a lot of time to write currently
so I need a breather to be able to focus on school. I already have a lot written for the next fic, but no first chapter currently.) The next installment will be the one that'll truly earn its M rating, so please bear that in mind if you choose to continue.

Thank you all so much for sticking with me and this story and continually leaving your feedback! This one has been a struggle but I'm proud of it and can't wait to continue the story right where we left off here in this chapter. I will be posting any updates I have on my blog about the development of the next story and you can ask me any questions you have. I have lots of social media accounts, so please don't be afraid to PM me and ask for a link to see what I'm up to! I get tired of feeling like I'm just dropping content into a void. If you have any fic recs, send them my way! If you want to share art you've made about one of my fics, show me! I don't bite! I'd really like to interact more with my readers, but it's a challenge.

Anyhow, sorry for rambling.

Thanks, as always. I'll see you all very soon <3

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!