How To Train Your Auror 2: Family Ties
by MrBenzedrine89

Summary

Draco and Hermione are back at it again in the anticipated sequel for How To Train Your Auror. 2 years have passed for our OTP. 2 years since their world was ripped apart by Bastian Cane. Questions rise: where is the Pandora Stone? Who is attacking the students of Hogwarts? And what does Draco's father have to do with any of it? Sequel to HTTYA. Rated M for sex, violence, and dark adult themes. COMPLETE.

Notes

Summary: Draco and Hermione are back at it again in the anticipated sequel for How To Train Your Auror. 2 years have passed for our OTP. 2 years since their world was ripped apart by Bastian Cane. Questions are left unanswered: where is the Pandora Stone? What happened to the Ministry and the weakened Auror Division? New questions emerge: Who is attacking the students of Hogwarts? And what does Draco's father have to do with any of it? All of this and more answered in the exciting addition to the HTTYA series.
How To Train Your Auror 2. It's a thing. And it's here. If you are new to the HTTYA Dramione, please take the time to go to my author's page, find the original fic, and read it before continuing on this adventure. If you've already found love with these two, and you've enjoyed HTTYA, well... here we are. My editing will look much better this time around, thanks to MissPancake and WayMay. Good friends make great people to help you realise when you've ruined a phrase, or have missed a great comedic opportunity. So, please, give them all of the love, because without these two wonderful ladies, I wouldn't have this brilliant first chapter (that I'm quite proud of). I've decided to share it early. Still working on "Sex Ed" which will have my main focus until Friday, July 15th, when I will be posting chapter 2 of HTTYA2. Then, I will be balancing the two until Sex Ed is done, because we all know that HTTYA plots take a while. Anyways, this story should tie up some loose ends, answer some much needed questions, and give us a look into how our favorite couple is doing. Expect some larger twists, turns, and darkness. If adventure is what you crave, look no further. Welcome to How To Train Your Auror 2.

A/N: I will be posting review replies at the end of chapters this time around instead of before, as to not take away from the story for those who do not wish to read the replies, as per a suggestion by a reviewer. Hope you enjoy! Please leave a review when you're done, if you would. I get a small high off of it (and also, I just like to know that I'm giving you guys what you want/deserve out of a story.)

~A.

Disclaimer: I do not own the world of Harry Potter, and I'm NOT going to make a profit from this story. Maybe some new friends. But that's about it.
Are you gonna be mine?
I feel it falling from the skies above
Are you gonna be mine?
My wave, my shark, my demon in the dark
The blue tide pulling me under
Or are you my soul, my heart, pull everything apart?

Are you gonna, are you gonna be my love?
"Shark" by Oh Wonder

It was in the moments like these that Draco thought to himself, turning the white gold band between his fingertips, when all the world could go to Hell. It had taken him five bloody, painstakingly gruesome weeks of answering advertisements and bouncing from shop to store to private jewelers to find this very ring that he clutched so frantically in his hands. His nerves were in a frenzy, turning from anxiousness to spouts of full blown hyperventilation every few hours or so as he sat at his desk in the bullpen of the Auror Division, awaiting the infamous countdown of the clock to strike 6PM.

6PM was a very special moment. It would be the start of his requested time off for the weekend. He'd cleared it with Potter three months ago, even volunteering to pick up extra shifts and work overtime just to seize the date. One would think that it would be easy to procure time off, but as an Auror, where you were never guaranteed 'time off' but simply 'downtime' while being 'on call' for the next Voldemort (or perhaps Gregory Diggle) to strike, it was rather strenuous to get guaranteed time for both yourself and your loved one. Speaking of which, where was Hermione? He wondered. She should have been back from lunch with Dean by now.

He tapped his foot nervously as he slipped the ring with its oversized diamond and tiny topaz accent stones (the same color of that breathtaking dress she had worn their first... romp together) back into its box and proceeded to spin the box around on his desk in a lazy fashion. He knew he should really be writing up that report on his trip to France last week, but... oh, who was he kidding? He was much too nervous to work at this point.

What if she said no? What if she said yes?

"You alright there, Malfoy?" The lull of Potter's tone as he leaned against the cubicle wall separating Draco's desk from Dean's made Draco jump in his skin, slamming his hand down on the box to cover it. He scowled, clearing his throat, and gave Potter a look that said he very much wished he'd just keel over and die already.

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?" he snapped, a bit too crisp.

Potter's eyebrows twisted up theatrically, and he nudged to Draco's hand that covered the tiny black box. "What's that?"

"Nothing." Draco clutched the box in his palm and scraped it across the desk, opening a drawer and dropping it in before slamming the drawer closed.

Draco spun around in his office chair, hands clutching the armrests like an emotional support system as his eyes turned on Dean Thomas, who was bundled tightly in his winter pea coat while grasping two hot foam cups of what appeared to be either coffee or chocolate, and on Hermione, who still had bits of snow woven into her curly brown hair as she clutched something between her wool mittens.

"What is that?" asked Draco, pointing to some sort of grey ball of fur against his girlfriend's chest.

"It's a kitten." She gave a grin, shoving the fiendish feline out right against the tip of Draco's nose. Silver eyes met charcoal as a rough tongue dipped out of the kitten's mouth and scraped against Draco's septum.

"Obviously." He scowled, terrified that the cat in question elicited a stoke of embers in his stomach at the adorable - er, atrocious action. "What I meant to say was what are you doing with it?"

"Poor fella was running all around Hogsmeade," replied Dean, handing his friend one of the cups in his hands. Draco inhaled the aroma of caramel mixed with hints of espresso. "He kept climbing up Hermione's leg."

"So I brought him here." Hermione gave a grin as she set the kitten atop Draco's desk. Draco glared at the offending kitten as it batted at one of his ink bottles.

"Thanks," he said to Dean, holding up the coffee. He then turned his attentions to Hermione. "We're not keeping a cat."

"Oh, that's fine. I didn't think you'd approve," she told him, scratching the kitten behind the ears as she leaned down to kiss Draco firmly on the lips. It always made his insides turn in breathtaking ways when she did. It also didn't hurt when Potter would scowl, much like he was doing now, and make up some excuse as to why he would suddenly need to leave the vicinity. Like now for instance.

"I… erm… have to… go… make some copies… yeah, copies…” He turned on his heels and scurried away at once, causing Draco to smirk into the kiss.

Hermione pulled away, tucking a bit of hair behind her ear as she plucked the kitten up and kissed its nose. "Just so we're clear, we're not keeping the cat, but I am."

His eyebrows furrowed together. "What?"

"You heard me." She patted his cheek softly, her mittens scratching against his morning stubble. "I haven't had a cat in years, not since Crookshanks passed. And Scorpius would love a kitten, you know…"

"Of course he would." Draco perched an eyebrow at her. "He's two and a half. Anything that has fur and a wet nose is bound to attract his attention."

"Cats actually have soft, dry noses," Dean joined in, sipping from his cuppa. When Draco turned his scowl to him, however, he nodded once and added, "Right. I'm just going to help Harry with those copies."

When Dean was out of earshot, Draco careened his head back towards Hermione and smirked. "We don't need a cat."

"Well, we might not need a cat. But I want him. And luckily for you, I don't need your permission." She placed the kitten atop her shoulder and leaned down to kiss away Draco's foul mood. He sighed into the kiss, realising that no matter what he might try to say, her mind was made up and they'd be
keeping that mangy feline until the end of its days. Oh joy. Just what he needed. Another addition to the family.

"Are you all set for tonight?" he asked as his hands slid down her sides to her voluptuous hips. He still found himself just as attracted to her two years into their relationship as he did when they had first shared that ever so intimate kiss in his bathtub. He wasn't sure when that whole mess of 'puppy love' was supposed to end, but he was fairly certain it might never. He was completely enthralled with Hermione Granger, from her smile to her scent to her moans and screams in pleasure. Oh, and that whole bit about her being a nice person as well.

"I think so. If I'm a few minutes late, would that be a problem?"

He huffed out an agitated sigh. "Why?"

"Well, with the new Auror recruits coming in next week, I wanted to set my classroom up for the next week, and seeing as how you made me take the entire weekend off, I might not have any other time to do it."

"Bollocks your office, Hermione," he told her. "I expect you off work at precisely 6PM sharp." He could really give a damn less if the Auror trainees had encouraging posters on the wall with kittens hanging precariously off the edge of a branch with words that read 'Hang in there!' "If I don't see you here," he pressed his finger down on top of his desk, "at six, I'm going to come into that classroom and give you a lesson you'll never forget."

Hermione's cheeks tinted pink as the steely gray kitten rubbed against her neck. "Promise?"

"No." Harry cut his hand between the two and appeared once again, this time with a thick stack of files. "Malfoy, I need you to go over these cases and send them off to the appropriate offices."

"Why don't you do it?" Draco scoffed.

"Because I'm the boss," Potter told him, tossing the files into Draco's lap. "And because I plan on keeping you busy until 6PM lets out and I have an entire weekend free of you."


"You." Harry pointed to his best friend and the kitten. "To your appropriately assigned other-side-of-the-offices desk, Miss."

Hermione rolled her eyes and shoved Potter in the shoulder playfully. It made Draco's scowl even larger. "Whatever, Harry. You know you like Draco."

"I haven't. I've never. I never will." Potter grinned, waving to both of them before setting off towards his desk at the back of the office.

"My sentiments exactly," Draco muttered, watching as Hermione herself waved him off as she took to her spot in the office, near Potter's desk, and away from Draco Malfoy. Whatever. He smirked. Tonight, he'd be rid of the four-eyed prick and confessing his undying affection for Hermione… if he could work up the nerve. He knew it was a Friday, but he was sure it could have been a Monday by the way he felt as he pried open the drawer with the ring and plucked it back out, sitting it atop his desk in front of his picture frame of himself, Hermione, and Scorpius at the park. The picture had been taken by Astoria, which was the only reason he ever wanted to burn it. But it was a special day that day - Scorpius had taken his first steps. He smiled, tapping the box with his index finger and biting at the inside of his cheek. No. He could do this. He just had to put on the Slytherin charm…
It was in moments like these that Hermione Granger thought, staring down at the clock as it ticked away the last five minutes of her work for an entire weekend, when all the world could surely implode at any moment. Draco had been acting rather suspicious lately. He was skulking around at random times at the day, disappearing on his lunch breaks before she could even get a chance to invite him. He'd been fidgety, exceedingly so, and his patience with her had worn thin. She wasn't entirely sure what had went wrong in their relationship -she couldn't account for a fight that hadn't ended up in passionate lovemaking and laughter. So why was he acting so secretive?

She stared into her empty classroom, around at the chairs and the desks, thinking to herself what it must have been like for him to prepare for class two and a half years ago. Had he been anxious? Had he been plotting his revenge since the moment he had seen Draco's name on the roster? Had he anticipated seeing her? Shivers ran down her spine. The thought of Gregory Wallace Diggle was not one to be taken lightly. He still had a way of haunting her, even to this day. She was reminded of his face behind her eyes every time she visited Ron's grave since Kingsley Shacklebolt had sent Greg to Azkaban. It was hard to stomach that the very man she had once found attractive and tolerable had really been her husband's killer all along. Not to mention a raving psychopath who dabbled in Gray Magic and murdered nearly half of the Ministry. It had been a tough time building the departments back up. Draco, Dean and Hermione had been the only ones to survive their class. She remembered Simon Simmons' funeral as clear as if it were yesterday. She hadn't ever cared for the man that had detested her simply for being a woman, but… she hadn't been prepared for his death, or for any of the others, for that matter.

That's why being the newly appointed Auror Trainer was so important to her. She wanted to give the hopeful trainees the chance they deserved! It had been so humbling when Harry had approached her about the subject, though she did think he might have selected her simply to put a barrier between her and Draco. Sure, Harry had gotten used to the idea of his childhood rival and his best friend pairing off together, but ever since that trip to Tuscany where the three had worked a case together and Harry had accidentally intruded on Draco and Hermione… fooling around… (in the confines of their own hotel room, for the record!)… well, he wasn't very good at letting things go. Even if Hermione and Draco were a tag team to be reckoned with, solving nearly every case they were presented with.

She glanced up at the clock, cursing under her breath. 6:02PM. Maybe this could be turned around into a good thing? Oh, as if Draco had really meant he'd hunt her down if she weren't at his desk by-

"You're late."

She jerked her head up from her desk and found Draco in the doorway, his hair slicked back much like the later part of his years at Hogwarts, dressed in a handsomely deep burgundy button up matched with a black blazer and tight fitting dress pants. His left eyebrow was quirked up dangerously as he gave her a calculated smirk.

"Yes…" She bit down on her lower lip and shoved her paperwork into her briefcase, spelling it shut with a wave of her wand. "Sorry about that. Did you run here? I'm two minutes… that's hardly-"

"Tardiness is never acceptable in class, Miss Granger," he interrupted her, stepping inside the room and shutting the door firmly. His smirk widened as he stepped towards her, holding the moment out as he approached at a snail's pace. Hermione felt her breath catch - he could still make her knees weak by simply being who he was; an arrogant, dangerous man with the heart of a tamed lion. Or dragon. Whichever analogy suited best she couldn't decide. When he had made it to her desk, he pursed his lips together and glared down at her. "I told you six o'clock. On. The. Dot."

She giggled into her hand, realising he meant to truly keep to his word. He would 'punish' her for her tardiness. The excitement thrilled her, but the thought of being caught by someone (namely Harry)
still made her a bit apprehensive. She pulled out her wand from her work robes, flicked the lock closed with it, and set it politely down on her desk. "I'm so sorry, Mister Malfoy." His eyes smoldered as he watched her unclasp the top of her robes and stuff them off to reveal a fetching, yet modest a-line silver dress with ruffles along the sleeves and a slight dip around the collar to reveal her collarbones. It made her blush, the way he was immodestly undressing her with his eyes.

"Have you been wearing that all day?"

"Of course not. I changed into it about an hour ago." She grinned up at him, rising from her chair. "Do you like it?"

"Like it?" He walked around to her side of the desk and gave her a once over. "You're so fetching."

"Don't." She told him, snapping a bit too harshly. She retracted, running a hand over his silky shirt. "I just… don't use that word."

"Why not?"

"Because… you know why."

He sighed, his own hands finding solace in resting on her shoulders, thumb pads brushing against the smooth skin of her arms. It sent tingles down her spine. "He's gone, Hermione. He's in Azkaban, and he'll rot there until he's good and dead. And even then some, if I had any say in the matter." He pulled her close to him and kissed the top of her forehead. "Are you ready to go?"

"You're not going to punish me?" She was surprised at how pouty and childish the words flew from her mouth. She even had a little crinkle between her eyebrows.

"You want to be punished?" He grinned, fingers sliding up her shoulders to her neck, where he began to play with her earlobes between his fingers. "Is that what I'm hearing, Miss Granger?"

She closed her eyes, biting down on her lower lip to keep from gasping at his touch. His skin felt like fire stoking a deep, primal urge inside of her to submit to him. She was comforted he was touching her this way - his distance had truly been a concern of hers for some time now. "I think I deserve it," she answered him breathlessly. "I disobeyed a direct order. In our line of work, that could get one killed."

"Mhmm…" he mused. "How shall the punishment fit the crime then? Oh. I know." He released her from his hold, causing her eyes to startle back open. She watched him stalk back around her desk and take a seat at their very own work table - the one that they had bonded over. Well, at least this bench was in the same spot as back then; it was quite unclear if it really had been the exact same desk. He patted his lap playfully. "I say five lashes for every minute you were late."

Hermione blushed, but didn't disagree. She simply slipped out of the flats she had been wearing and scooted herself up on the desk next to him before laying gently down across his lap. Her stomach draped across his legs, but he scooted her forward and bunched up the skirting of her dress until she was exposed to him with only her gray cotton panties between his hot hand and her wanting flesh. She pushed her hair off over one shoulder, letting the cool air tickle the back of her neck. She closed her eyes, rested on her elbows, and awaited her 'punishment'. Draco wasted no time in giving her a firm smack with his hand, but then he tisked and clucked his tongue.

"No. I'll have to start over. These are in the way." He jerked her underwear down till they were to her mid-thigh and brushed his palm along the exposed skin of her backside. "Yes. Much better. Were you also aware you're failing my classes, Miss Granger?"
"You don't teach any classes," she laughed as his hand came down on her, making her gasp. Her head fell forward, blood rushing to her cheeks as well as her ass cheek.

"Of course I do. And your first lesson was being on time, which you failed." Another amazing whack to her rump. Then another. And another. "Frankly, I think you'll have to do quite a bit of makeup work if you plan to pass."

"What happens if I fail?" she smirked, tilting her head to the side to meet his haughty expression.

"You're enjoying this too much," he noted, and his next swat to her bum stung. She arched her back, groaning a guttural moan that made him slip a hand around her throat. "Let's see… that was four."

"Five."

*Smack.* "Don't argue with the person administering your punishments. Didn't you learn anything in school?"

"I didn't get punished often," she whispered as heat spread down her backside and between her legs.

"Maybe if you'd learnt your lesson, you wouldn't be so disobedient." *Twack.* *Smack.* And then a third swat. His fingers slid down around the curve of her buttocks and even further still, playing up against her slick folds and dipping a finger into her unexpectedly. "But I suppose you've been a good girl as well, haven't you, Hermione?" Her name dripped off of his tongue like melted honey, seeping into the darkest crevasses of her soul and filling her up with lust. His hand on her throat slid up her jaw and just as he pressed as second finger into her, he slid two fingers into her mouth all the way to the back of her throat. He played with her like she was a beautiful violin, and her body was the strings. He would alternate, pressing down her throat and slipping out of her, only to push into her again and drag his fingers across her tongue to the tip of her lips. Before long, Hermione found herself groaning in pleasure against his fingers in her mouth, which he pushed all the way in until she swallowed his fingers with tender care. The other hand between her legs sped up its rhythm, his thumb finding that resting place against the nub of her clit to provoke a low moan from her. Hermione could feel the build up inside of her - she just needed a bit longer… "Bloody Hell, is that the time?" Draco slipped both sets of fingers out of her and smacked her hard on the ass for good measure. She heard herself groan in protest. "Come on, Hermione. We have reservations at 6:30."

"We can skip them," she whispered, sitting up on the desk and capturing his lips in a sultry kiss. Draco hurried the kiss along, brushing down her skirt as he did so. When he broke away for air, he kissed the bridge of her nose and shook his head.

"No. We're not skipping dinner. Do you know how long I had to plan this out to get these reservations? Sorry, Granger. You're going to have to wait to ravish me until later tonight."

Hermione gave a small huff, slid off of the table, and let her underwear fall to her ankles. Getting a dastardly idea that could have only been influenced by Draco Malfoy, she kicked them off from around her and put them in her desk drawer. Draco raised both eyebrows and gave a low whistle. "Naughty."

"Well then," she smiled, slipping back into her flats and gathering up her purse and wand. "Let's get this over with so that we can go back home, and I can show you just how naughty I can get."

"Promise?" He grinned. They both laughed and left the office arm in arm.

"When you said you had reservations for dinner, I had no idea it was going to be at Madam Mystique!" Hermione squeaked out as their waitress brought them the final course of dinner;
chocolate eclairs drizzled in a white chocolate syrup. Draco always remembered the little details, or at least, he tried to. Red shirt. Eclairs. His best attempts at capturing all of her favorite things were going according to plan. His nerves were shot by dessert; he kept feeling around in his blazer pocket every few minutes to check and make damn sure that ring box was still there. He'd planned this entire evening out for months. Scorpius with Astoria. Time off. New, in-style restaurant, eclairs, red shirt… he kept repeating the words over and over in his head, as if the next time he said them he would remember that he had forgotten one of them.

"Do you like it?" he asked, motioning around to the cozy back corner table away from the prying eyes of the restaurant. Hermione nodded gleefully, picking up her fork to dig into her eclairs. "Good. Erm… wait." He fidgeted, slipping his hand into his pocket just as Hermione stopped mid motion and set her fork down.

"Yes, Draco?"

"I.." He'd practiced the speech for over a month. He'd even let Scorpius 'help' him with a line or two, though the two year old hadn't any idea what he was helping with exactly. It would go something like this: *Hermione, ever since that first kiss, I haven't been the same. You've turned my world topsy-turvy* (Scorpius's favorite line he liked to use when describing the feeling he got when he got to fly around the yard on his daddy's broom). *You've changed me for the better. And (he'd get on one knee, then, in front of the restaurant) Would you do me the extraordinary honor of being my wife? Or something like that. But instead all that came out was, "Erm… how's the eclair?"

"Well, I haven't tried it yet," she replied, raising one of her graceful eyebrows at him. "Is everything alright, Draco? You've been acting a bit off lately."

"Have I?"

"Yes." She narrowed her eyes. "What are you up to?"

"Excuse me?" he sneered, clutching the ring box tighter in his pocket.

"The date. The expensive venue. You're up to something… what did you do wrong?"

"Who says I've done anything wrong?"

"When you do something wrong, you always go all out to make it up to me. So what have you done?"

He narrowed his own eyes and thought that maybe throwing the ring at her and shouting, 'I want you to marry me, you stupid witch!' might end up being a more fitting proposal. Instead, he stuck his chin up in the air, raised a superior eyebrow, and shrugged. "I haven't been 'up to anything'. Couldn't I just want to spoil you?"

"I don't need to be spoiled, Draco." She reached her hand across the table and set her hand on his free one that was clutching itself so tight his knuckles were turning white. "I'm happy just the way we are, aren't you? With Scorpius, and our home, and the way we live. Isn't that enough?"

The corners of his lips turned upwards as he glanced down at her hand. "And what if I wanted more?"

"More?" She asked, clearly missing the point. For the brightest witch of their generation, she sure could be thick sometimes.

"Yes." He rubbed at her left hand with his thumb, brushing up against her ring finger, hoping she
might take the hint. "What if what we have isn't good enough anymore? What if I wanted-" He was going to say the word forever, but it never came to being, because his sentence was interrupted by a four eyed git with unmanageable black hair.

"There you two are."

Hermione, startled, slipped her hand out of Draco's and glanced over to the side. Standing, still in his work robes, was Harry fucking Potter.

"Potter," Draco growled. "You have seriously got to be the worst cock block in European History." He crossed his arms as he let the ring box slip back down into his pocket. "Possibly the world."

"Look, I know I'm intruding on your time," Potter began, pushing up his glasses onto his nose in a business like way. "But I really need you to come with me."

"Alright, Harry." Hermione had no qualms about bowing out on their expensive, thought-filled evening. But Potter stuck his hand up to stop her.

"Not you, Hermione. Malfoy." Potter's green eyes flitted over to Draco, full of concern.

"What's this all about?" Draco asked, feeling his patience wane. "I specifically requested this evening off to be rid of you, not to-"

"-I know, Malfoy. I know." Potter threw his hands up, moving out of the way for a passing server. "Look," his voice ducked quieter. "I wouldn't come to you if this wasn't of the utmost importance. I have a feeling this night is pretty special to you."

All Draco could manage out in return was a harrumph.

"What's going on, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"This concerns Draco… and… his father."

That peaked Draco's attention. "My Father? What in the bloody hell does he have to do with anything?"

Potter swallowed a hard lump in his throat. "Maybe we should step outside."

"No. You're going to tell me. Right here." He pressed his finger to the table. "Right now."

"Alright, Malfoy. Fine." Harry sighed, letting his shoulders slump momentarily before he straightened himself up again and put on his Head Of The Auror Division stare. "Your father's been admitted to St. Mungo's."

"He what?" Hermione gasped. Draco sat silently, tainted with a hollow sensation that he should feel something for his Father.

Potter continued. "Someone tried to have him killed at his residency in Prague."

Draco sat quietly for a time. "And?"

"And we can't get a testimony. Your parents won't talk to anyone from the Division. They'll only speak to you."

The three of them basked in the background sounds of forks clinking and plates tinkering until Hermione broke the silence. "We'll go."
"What?" Draco croaked out.

"Draco Lucius Malfoy. That's your name, isn't it?" Hermione squared up his glare with her own. "No matter how you look at it, you'll never be able to be rid of him. Not really. And I'm not saying he should ever be forgiven for his crimes. Because, frankly, he should be locked up for life—"

"We've been over this, Hermione," said Potter. "He's been exonerated for all of his crimes previous to the Battle of Hogwarts. Otherwise he would be in Azkaban—"

"-But the point is," Hermione interrupted, "is that you have to face him eventually. Enough is enough. This could be cathartic. This could be your opportunity to stand up for yourself and be rid of him for good. You're going, Draco. And I'm going with you."

Harry winced, ready for her crushing glare. "Actually, Hermione, when I said that they won't see anyone at the department, you're included in that."

"Fine." She sat her napkin on the table. "But I'm going to go anyways."

"Hermione-" Both Draco and Harry started at once, but she cut them off with a contemptible glower that shut them both up.

"When do we leave?"

"Um… immediately…"

"Alright. Draco, get the check, will you?" Hermione stood, determination etched in her brow. She slipped her purse over her shoulder, strolled over to Draco's side and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I'll see you outside. Come on, Harry."

Draco watched as Hermione dragged Potter out by the arm quickly, excusing herself as she pressed through a group of confused waiters and waitresses. Draco slumped back down in his chair, glaring at the unfinished eclairs. With a heavy sigh, he plucked the ring box out from his pockets and sat it on the table to strum his fingers atop of it.

"Ehem…" came the timid voice of his waitress from behind him. "Shall I fetch the check, sir?"

He nodded dully, still staring at the box.

Well, this was certainly a bludger out of left field. Oh well… if there was one thing Draco Malfoy was good at, it was playing the game. He tucked the box back into his pocket and awaited the check. This was going to be an interesting evening indeed.
What We Sow

Chapter Notes

I really am excited to kick this off, and this chapter is a roller coaster of emotions. Thank you for coming with me on this journey once more.

Special shout out to WayMay for going over my mistakes in this chapter and fixing them in the best way possible. I can't wait for us to share our fanfiction!

A.

And if I couldn't guard our secrets
Am I not, another troubled soul to sway
And if we ask for life, can we commit?
We're the ones standing tall
Yet we look so terrified
The strong are always in want
Run another mile
Regrets and treason
One like the other
And if I say this is not another fault of mine
And set sail to find another

"Another Mile" by Faux Tales

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Standing above the hospital bed, watching Lucius Malfoy take breath after careful breath in his sleep, Draco had never felt more haunted. The man before him played two distinct roles in his childhood. On the one hand, this was his father, his flesh and blood. This was the man that taught him how to mount his first broomstick and bought him his very first potions set. In the other hand, there was a cold, calculating, malicious man who harbored a thick hatred for everything that Draco had come to love. He was the thread that had unraveled Draco's world when he should have there to stitch it up. He was supposed to love. Not be a murderous hazard to his son's psyche.

It had been years. So many years since Draco had seen his father face-to-face. The Floo network had acted as a successful barrier between the two for so long; it felt odd to see him without the flicker of green flames dancing around his face. Lucius had aged since their last encounter -crow's feet and heavy lines around his mouth blared out like sirens as Draco observed his father. Would he himself
age this way? Would karma find penance in bringing out the angry, volatile man Draco had been before he had met Hermione Granger in the lines in his face the way it had Lucius?

In his chest, emotions stirred like a cauldron of ingredients being ladled. None of them were kind. He knew he should feel something more for the man who had raised him, but really he just felt empty inside as his mother put a hand on his shoulder and hugged him. "It's so good to see you, Draco." Metaphoric ice froze his heart shut like a freezer burn. All he could do was wrap his arm around his mother's shoulder and allow her to lean her head on his shoulder.

"What happened?" he asked her, hearing the hitch in his throat. He suddenly wished Hermione had been admitted into the room with him, but as per his parents' request, no one set foot inside unless they were staff or Draco. Well, Potter could enter as well, but that was out of their control. Still, he thought maybe if he consoled his mother a bit, she might allow for at least one more person (Hermione). He squeezed Narcissa closer to him and kissed her cheek.

"I shouldn't say," his mother whispered to him, smiling at his affection. "Your father made it very clear he wanted to speak to you and you alone. The sleeping potion should wear off soon. You can ask him then."

"You two are being stubborn. You should talk to Potter."

Narcissa raised a manicured eyebrow at him and lifted her head off of his shoulder. "So it's true. You really have fallen into step with the Ministry."

"If you're referring to my Auror position, yes. I'm an Auror."

Narcissa blinked once, and then changed the subject. "How is Scorpius? I wish you'd let us see him, darling…"

"He's fine," Draco said quickly, dragging his gaze to the floor. Astoria and Narcissa had never gotten along due to their separate points of views on muggleborn culture, and it had certainly helped divide the rift in Draco's connection with his family. One of the reasons why he had been so drawn to his ex-wife in the first place was her acceptance of everything that his parents had detested. And really, if it weren't for Astoria changing his views on the world, he'd never have opened his mind up to the possibility of Hermione Granger. "He's with Tori this evening."

"Maybe you could bring him over sometime. Or we could come visit-"

"Mother. Let's not do this." Draco gripped the rail on the side of Lucius's bed and gritted his teeth. "Let's not pretend that we're anything more than strangers anymore."

His mother scowled and crossed her delicate arms. "Draco Malfoy. How dare you?"

"How dare I?" He turned his head towards her. "How dare you? Do you know what it was like when you left? All of the press at our doors at all hours of the night, and you two were off blowing all of your money with lavish summer homes and extravagant luxuries all while ignoring the chaos you left in your wake." He released the railing and turned to her. "We used to be a family. But after the way you two ran off like dogs tucking your tails between your legs… why would I ever want my son to be a part of something so broken as what we are?" He cleared his throat and tugged at the collar of his shirt. It was a bit stuffy in here for his liking, or maybe it was the nervous tension; he wasn't entirely sure. "You wanted me here, you have me here. But let's make one thing very clear, Mother. I'm here to represent the Auror Division of the Ministry of Magic. Any ties that I have with you as family were severed the moment you allowed this to happen." He undid the button of his dress shirt and jerked it up over his forearm to reveal his Dark Mark. Narcissa's expression was cold,
and above all else hurt. She placed her chin up in the air and pursed her lips.

"I see…"

"You may call on me when he wakes up. Until then, I'm going to find myself a bar with my muggleborn girlfriend and get tossed."

He left the room quickly, nearly running smack dab into Hermione as he shut the door. She was still dressed in her evening dress, though she was wearing Draco's blazer to keep her warm from the frigid temperatures of the St. Mungo's hallway. She stared up at him, concern painted across her pretty face. He simply slipped his hands on the sides of her face and forced his lips down on hers in a desperate kiss. She let him, and he relaxed almost at once. There was something unburdening in kissing her, and he hoped that it would be this way for the rest of their lives. If he could ever get around to asking her about the rest of their lives.

"How did it go?" Hermione asked as she pulled away from the kiss, leaving Draco in pieces. No. He didn't need them to stop now. He was desperate for any skin to skin contact. He tried to go in for another kiss, but she put her hand up to his lips to stop him. "Draco?"

"Can we… just get out of here for a while? He's sleeping and I…"

"Of course." She smiled up at him, though there was something written there in that smile; something that said she desperately wanted to talk about something. He wasn't a mind reader, and for a moment he panicked, thinking he had left the ring in the blazer before giving it to her. But then he remembered he had stowed the box away in his pant pocket and relaxed once again. "Where would you like to go?" she asked.

"There's a pub just down the road," offered Potter from the side, sitting in a public waiting chair just outside Lucius's door. "I can call Hermione when he wakes."

"That would be kind, Harry. Thanks." Hermione wove her arm around Draco's and patted him. "Shall we?"

Hermione watched Draco take down his third shot of fire barrel whiskey, sipping on her own butterbeer (the first and only, because she didn't plan on being three sheets to the wind like Draco). With his unbuttoned collar, disheveled hair, and rolled up sleeves, he looked more like some male model with the flu than a man trying desperately to drown his screaming past into muffled whispers.

"Maybe we should order some crisps?" she offered, trying to wave down a server. He put his hand up and told her not to bother. Sighing with frustration, Hermione sat her head in her hand and mumbled, "You shouldn't get tossed before going back. You're representing the Ministry, or have you forgotten?"

"Hermione." Draco stared hard into her eyes, his own half-lidded with alcohol's chokehold. "I love you. You know that. So when I say this, I mean it in the least offensive way possible. -Get off my arse and quit lecturing me."

Hermione wasn't entirely sure how she was supposed to take that in any way but offensive; however, out of respect, she changed the subject. "Did you write Astoria and let her know where we were?"

Draco snorted a laugh and wrapped his long fingers around the mug of her butterbeer before sliding it across to his side of the table and taking a long swig. When he finished downing about half, he wiped the froth from his lips with the back of his sleeve and shook his head. "She plans to have Scorpius the entire weekend. So unless I plan on picking him up early or I've had my foot spelled..."
"off, I don't plan on bringing her into this."

"Well, despite the fact of your divorce, she still is Scorpius's mother, and therefore a rather important part of this family." Hermione stomped her foot under the table and scowled. "Honestly, what's gotten into you? This isn't you."

"Isn't it?" Draco quirked a snarky eyebrow and stuck out his tongue. "Look, just give me the benefit of the doubt, alright? Not a single bit of tonight turned out the way I had planned, and I'd rather just drown my sorrows for an hour. You can even feed me a sobering potion when all of this is done." His offer did ease her heart, and she nodded meekly. "Thank you."

"You should talk to me," she said, reaching over the table to take back her butterbeer. Draco clung to it, and she gave up. "Don't shut me out."

"If I wanted to shut you out, I wouldn't have brought you with me."

"I don't think you had a choice in that, either way."

He chuckled. "No, I suppose I didn't."

Hearing him laugh alleviated some of the tension, and she relaxed her shoulders. After a time, she spoke again. "So… how was tonight supposed to go?"

Draco’s gray eyes flitted up to hers, and there was a sort of pensive nature about them. He smirked, reached down for something in his pockets, and placed it atop the table, directly in the center. Hermione's heart skipped a beat when she recognized what it was. The velvet black box made the entire pub muffle under the weight of its promise. Hermione suddenly forgot how to breathe. It had something to do with the lungs, she was sure, but beyond that it was lost on her. She knew she had to learn soon, because if she didn't she would surely pass out, and then Draco would be scraping her off of the pub floor with a spatula and spending oodles of money to keep it out of the papers, and everyone knew how much Hermione hated being in the papers-

"Is… is that…?"

His eyes stared apprehensively at her, and he nodded slowly. Very, very slowly. Or maybe, that was just her perception. Time seemed to have slowed. When he spoke, time shattered to a normal tempo again. "Potter really is the biggest cock block I've ever met, you know."

Hermione, despite the tension gripping in her chest, burst into laughter at his quip. She set her face into her hands, thick, robust laughs slipping from her lips. Draco wanted to marry her. Why hadn't she seen the signs? She had suspected for weeks before Ron had proposed. Why hadn't she seen it this time? It all hit her at once, and when she raised her head again, there were tears streaming down her cheeks. "Is this why you've been acting like a complete cur?"

He scowled playfully. "I wouldn't quite say a cur. Secretive, manipulative, stealthy…"

"So like a Slytherin?"

He chuckled, strumming his fingers atop the box. "Like a Slytherin." He glanced around the pub, and then without warning stood up from his chair and shouted, "Can I have everyone's attention!?" The crowded pub's patrons turned their eyes away from their mugs as their talking died away. Draco climbed up on the seat of his chair and threw his hands around theatrically. "Tonight, I planned out a fantastic evening of taking the woman I love to an expensive restaurant and proposing to her, but instead I'm sitting here, slightly tossed, shouting to the sodding lot of you! But I suppose you'll do for an audience, so pay careful attention!" He hopped off the chair, snatched up the ring box, got down
on one knee at Hermione's feet, and smirked up at her. "I'm only going to say this once, Hermione. So listen carefully."

Oh God, was this actually happening? She didn't know why it surprised her so much; she just hadn't thought Draco would ever want to go through a marriage again. Not when his first one had failed so miserably. Hermione nodded timidly, heat flooding her face. "Alright."

His tension-filled face relaxed ever so slightly. "I love you. Despite me being an arrogant ass with the cheek bones of a Playwitch Magazine male model, you somehow always manage to find the good in me. And you love Scorpius and…" He glanced around the room, and then back to her. "And I know that this isn't traditional, and it came at possibly one of the worst evenings possible, but I'm an impatient man, and I don't think I can wait to plan out another evening just to have it ruined by Four-Eyes. So," he straightened his shoulders, slipped the ring from its slit in the box, snatched up her left hand and placed the most expensive ring Hermione had ever laid eyes on to the tip of her ring finger. "Former Mrs. Weasley; would you do me the extraordinary honor of becoming the new, and final, Mrs. Malfoy?"

Hermione glanced down to her hand shaking in his, and then up to Draco, whose silver eyes glistened up at her with liquid courage and adoration. She never thought she'd make it to this point in her life again, which right at this moment felt rather silly because how did she not think they'd get here eventually? Her thoughts fell on to Ron and his shaky proposal in her car, dropping the ring between the console. Draco waited patiently for her answer, though the corners of his lips were tense. He really was an impatient man, wasn't he?

She blinked once, swallowed, and nodded hopelessly. "Oh, Draco." Her free hand shot up to her cheeks and swiped at a few traitorous tears. "Yes." She continued to nod like a bobble head doll. "Yes!"

"Yes?" He sounded surprised.

"Yes!"

"Holy shite." He slid the ring up her finger; it was a perfect fit. Hermione wondered if it was designed by magic to fit perfectly, or if Draco really had gone through all of that trouble to find her exact size. It didn't matter. She was ecstatically high as he stood and swept her up into a ferocious hug that nearly sucked all of the breath out of her. Somewhere in the distance, she could hear the claps from the bar patrons around her, but she couldn't fully concentrate on them because her ears had lost their ability to hear, aside from the blood pumping through them.

She was aware Draco had said something, so she shook her head and focused. "What?"

"You wanna get out of here?"

She nodded, pulling him into sloppy kiss. The crowd of bar attendees roared with applause. It was a little silly, really, but she could care less. She was going to marry Draco Malfoy. They were going to be an official family. Draco and Scorpius and… and possibly a little one in their future… a child of her own by blood. It dazed her mind, and when she broke away from the kiss she scooped up her butterbeer and downed the half a glass in less than five seconds. Draco raised both eyebrows, impressed. He looked so human, half sloshed and still in his post-proposal high. It made her want to take him in an alley somewhere and tear off all of his clothes. She let him grab up her hand, pay the tab, and lead them out of the tiny pub. Hermione looked up at the name: the White Serpent. She'd have to remember that obscure name for recounting the events with Ginny and Luna later. Oh, Lord. They were going to have to plan a wedding! What colors would they go with? What would the flower arrangement be? She'd have Ginny as a bridesmaid for sure, and Luna, and she might be able
to call on Parvati Patil…

"Slow down," Draco told her, grabbing her around the hips and warming her down to the bones as they stepped into the winter cold.

"I'm walking perfectly slow."

"I meant your mind. It's written all over your face- you're already planning out all of the details." He kissed her forehead and stared up at the pitch black sky. "Just enjoy it for tonight. You can stress tomorrow." He closed his eyes and breathed in as the wind picked up and slapped across their faces. Hermione smiled to herself. Somehow, he knew exactly what she had been thinking. They really were perfect for each other. She put her hands on top of his as they rested on her sides.

"I feel terrible now."

"For what?"

"For cutting our dinner short."

He shrugged, eyes still closed. "This was better."

Her smile widened. "Yes. It was."

The cellphone in Hermione's coat pocket hummed, pulsing against their hands. Draco's eyes popped back open, and they glanced down at the white-gold band on her finger. "We never just get a moment to enjoy, do we?"

"We will later," she promised, reaching into her pocket and flipping her phone open. "Hello? Harry?"

'Hermione,' Harry said on the other line, 'He's awake.'

"Alright. We'll be there soon." She hung up and nodded. "Ready to head back?"

"You didn't tell him," Draco almost looked disappointed.

"Well, of course I didn't. I want to see his face, don't I?"

Suddenly, Draco didn't look so disappointed anymore.

Seven words. That's all it took to shatter Draco's high and send him tumbling into the abyss of his scattered soul. Seven words to ruin what could have been one of the best nights of Draco Malfoy's life.

"It's good to see you again, Son."

He stared down at his father, hands shaking and resolve wavering. He wished Hermione was here by his side, but the orders had been clear from the hospital staff: no one was allowed in aside from Harry Potter and Draco, and he had left Potter out there with the rest of the world. His mouth suddenly became dry, and words… words were a fleeting idea that didn't hold much merit against the sheer terror he felt as he stepped across the room and took a seat at his father's side. The Healer's swivel stool made a perfect throne for the young Malfoy prince to sit atop of, burdened heavily by the knowledge of what kind of blood coursed through his body; xenophobic, racist blood that he himself had been tainted with from the day he was born. You could take a Malfoy out of the family, but you could never take the family out of a Malfoy. Not really, he realized as he reached out and
gripped his father's cold hand. All of that hate, that despair-it sat on a shelf waiting while all of those worthless feelings like admiration and adoration came sweltering up from underneath Draco's heart. It hit him so hard that he felt as if he had taken a Quaffle to the gut.

Words found their way to his mouth, but he didn't recall thinking them. "Father. I've missed you." He could hear his mother sniff into a handkerchief. All of his was too much to handle. He lowered his head and sighed. "Who did this to you?"

Lucius Malfoy gave a cough and cleared his throat. "How have you been?"

"I asked you a question," Draco said, tightening his hand around his father's. "Tell me."

"That... is a complicated answer to give." Lucius nodded over to his wife, exchanging a wordless order. Narcissa nodded back to him before turning and leaving the room momentarily. When she returned, she brought the head Healer in charge of Lucius's care with her. He was a small man with a balding head and a thick mustache. The Healer's name tag read 'Marvin Marigold.'

"Hello, Malfoy family," said Marigold, glancing down to his clipboard. "Mr. Malfoy, your wife informs me that you'd like me to share your results with your Son. Is this true?" Lucius gave a curt nod. Marigold continued. "Very well. As per patient-doctor confidentiality, I ask to you Mr. Malfoy," he addressed Draco, "that what is said in this room may not be repeated to anyone." Draco raised an eyebrow. He had never heard of such a request, but curiosity got the best of him, and he nodded all the same. "Thank you. -It appears as though when your Father was assaulted this evening, the object used to attack him..." Marigold wiggled his mustache from side to side, struggling to find the words. "Well, I'll just come out and say it. It has drained him of every last drop of magic."

Déjà vu swung at Draco's psyche like a violent sword, severing that last bit of happy feeling lodged somewhere deep, deep inside. He glanced from his Mother, to Marigold, and finally his eyes caught his Father's, ever so much like his own. "Was it blue?" he asked quickly. "The object -was it blue?"

Lucius nodded once, and with another silent nod gave the order for Healer Marigold to leave the room. When the door clicked shut behind him, Narcissa let out an anxious breath and came to stand on the other side of Lucius's bed. "We really should tell the Auror Division, Lucius," she whispered quietly. "We shouldn't burden Draco with this."

"Nonsense, Cissy," Lucius replied dryly. "This is a family matter, and it should stay in the family."

"Why is it a family matter?" Draco asked, so confused. "Father, the object used on you was the Pandora Stone. Two years ago, Bastian Cane tried to take down the Ministry-"

"-I'm quite aware." Lucius nodded. "After all, it was I that sold that stone to Cane in the first place."

Draco paled. Surely he had heard wrong. No. It couldn't... could it? Lucius patted his son's hand and coughed harder than before.

"Our family has been the procurer of dark artifacts for as long as the Malfoy name has been synonymous with rich. I found the stone two years after the War, tucked away in a hole-in-the-wall shop in Turkey. Word gets out amongst collectors quickly. One thing led to another, and Cane made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

"What sort of offer would make you give up something as powerful as the Pandora Stone?" Draco asked quietly.

Lucius exchanged glances with his wife before returning his silver flecked eyes to his son's. "Dark
Magic has its toll on everyone, Draco. What we reap is indeed what we sow. In the end, my fate is no different. – I've developed a condition with my lungs. Cane had an overabundance of herbs to keep my condition at bay. And it has worked for all of these years…"

"But without his magic," Narcissa chimed in, "The herbs are useless."

Draco could feel his heart pounding in his ears. This was all too much to soak in. He stood from his chair, releasing his father's hand to take a stance in front of the medical board on the wall. Glowing letters bustled around, checking off visits and potions. His breathing hitched, and he found himself unable to stop the anger from boiling out like a volcanic eruption. "So not only did you murder innocent civilians during the War, but you, inadvertently, cost the lives of hundreds of witches, wizards, and muggles. All because you're afraid to die." He closed his eyes, his fists balled. "You could have told me." He tried to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from yelling, but it only flared his fury. "Your stupid Malfoy pride got a lot of people killed!" He spun on his heels, eyes retching open to cut heavily into his father's. "Do you know what your selfishness cost? Do you?" He knew he was shouting, but he couldn't control the volume of his voice anymore. Even Hermione and Potter were sure to hear him. "You are the cause of everything that's wrong in my life! Do you know I have a wonderful fiancé standing outside of that door over there, but I can't bring her in because of you? Because, even without of your stupid secrecy, I couldn't invite her in to look at the man who caused her late husband's death! You sold your soul for your own bloody life, and now look at you! Dying! Serves you right, you insufferable bastard!"

"Draco!" Narcissa shouted, but Draco wouldn't have any of it.

"Fuck him!" He screamed at her. He turned his attention to Lucius. "So you're dying? Boo hoo! I could give a shite less! Do you know what Cane did with that stone? Are you aware of how much blood was spilled on account of it?!"

"Yes." Lucius nodded, his voice even. "I'm very much aware, Draco. Now sit down, boy."

Draco was a grown man approaching thirty, but even now he was that little boy on his father's coat tails as he crossed the room and slumped back down in the swivel stool. He crossed his arms much like that small child he felt like, making a point not to touch his Father again. "So why tell me any of this?"

"Because," said Lucius, "This goes beyond you or me. This stretches out to the farthest reaches of our family. I do not know who attacked me tonight. He wore a white mask painted like a wolf. And he told me something that I never wish to repeat again, after tonight. So, are you listening, Draco?"

Draco nodded.

"What he said was this: the followers of Lord Voldemort and the seeds of their trees would be uprooted. Do you understand, my boy? Do you get it now? This isn't just about me. Or you. This is about your friends, your family, your son. Whoever attacked me plans to not only take out the remaining Death Eaters, but their families as well. And you're on that list, the same as me. Our days are numbered, Draco, unless you can find out who is behind all of this. But I must ask you to keep my condition of the utmost secrecy. If word got out..."

Draco scoffed, standing from his chair. "Don't worry. Your precious secret is safe with me. And I won't tell them you sold Cane the stone, but I warn you; if you slip a toe out of line before you pass away, I'll throw you in Azkaban myself, old man."

He clenched his fists, kissed his mother's cheek, and stalked his way towards the door. He glanced back once to his parents, remorse for all of the missed years between them coming to a head.
Tonight, he wished for nothing else but finding Scorpius and hugging him so tight he might never let go again. Merlin… the Malfoys were quite a fucked up bunch, indeed. What had he gotten Hermione into?
Here we are at chapter 3. Thank you all for the wonderful responses, and I'm very excited to be able to share this experience with all of you. There will be an awful lot of darkness in this fic, so please be prepared. As always, I will reply to reviews, but this time around at the end of my chapters instead of before. Lots of love, and a big shout out to WayMay for editing this chapter. *hearts* It's amazing she can proof-read my lemons with a straight face. Oh, by the way, there's a lemon.

~A.

You only hold me up like this
Cause you don't know who I really am
I used to waste my time on
Waste my time on
Waste my time dreaming of being alive (now I only waste it dreaming of you)
Turn off the lights and turn off the shyness
Cause all of our moves make up for the silence
And oh, the way your makeup stains my pillowcase
Like I'll never be the same
I've got headaches and bad luck but they couldn't touch you, no
I've got headaches and bad luck but they couldn't touch you, no
I'm not trying
You only hold me up like this

"Of All The Gin Joints In All The World" by Fall Out Boy

Harry raised a cool eyebrow. "So you're going to marry Draco Malfoy? How does that work?"

"What do you mean, Harry?" Hermione asked, shifting in the seat next to him outside Lucius Malfoy's personal room. It was simply amazing (and disgusting) what an obscene amount of money could buy: a private room, a private healer, a private conversation with a son instead of talking directly to a Ministry official like Harry. She wasn't entirely sure it was legal, but the loopholes they managed to find were admittedly extraordinary. And here she was, about to marry into it.
"I mean… It's Malfoy. He's the polar opposite of Ron, you know?" Harry rubbed his exhausted eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. "He's not funny, or kind, or particularly generous."

"Yes, he is." She frowned at him. "You just don't see that side of him because you're too busy trying not to vomit at the sight of us every five seconds."

Harry cracked a smile and glanced over at her. "Yeah. You two make me sick."

They both laughed as the door swung open, and Draco stalked out looking rather pale and extremely disgruntled. Any happiness that he had walked in with had been left back in the room. Or perhaps it had just been snuffed out like a flame altogether. He glanced over to Harry, plucked the clipboard from his lap, and began to scribble down notes with the pen connected to the board by a tie-string. "I'll have a report on your desk by tomorrow," he told him, not bothering to look Hermione or Harry in the eyes. As he jotted down his statement, he added, "Oh. And I'm going to need a portkey."

"To where?" asked Harry.

"Azkaban."

"What?" Hermione frowned. "What are you going on about, Draco?"

"Look." He sat down his pen and shoved the clipboard into Harry's stomach. "My Father doesn't want a word of this getting out to anyone, so if either of you so much as make a peep I'll not be responsible for whatever rein of Hell my father unleashes if he found out I told you."

He motioned for the both of them to come in closer, and when they did, he leaned forward and whispered, "Someone's got the Pandora Stone. They used it on my twat of a Father, and they're coming after the ex-Death Eaters. I'm going to need details as to every free Death Eater you have on file, and I need a protective order put on all of their families."

Hermione took her time to process Draco's words, but Harry jumped right on in. "You got all of that from the ten minutes you were in there? I've been trying nearly half the night!"

"Guess the great and powerful Harry Potter isn't good at something, finally?" Draco smirked.

Hermione ignored their quipping, opting to listen to her inner monologue instead. It was like all her proverbial chickens had finally come to roost. The Pandora Stone? They'd been searching for it ever since Greg Diggle had been taken into custody, but without its tie to the Gray Magic, it was impossible to trace. That nasty bit about it sucking up magic like a wind tunnel meant that any tracking spells would simply dissolve as if they were cotton candy to water. She had tried on her time off working different cases to search high and low -it was one of the things that kept her up at night. The other… well, she'd rather go back to dreaming about her late husband than the other thing. And speaking of the other thing…

"Why do you need a portkey to Azkaban?"

Draco looked up from the clipboard that he and Harry were checking off. Hermione had a quick thought that it was rather adorable, but now wasn't the time to dwell on it. Draco gave a heavy sigh, shoved the clipboard into Harry's chest, which knocked the breath out of her friend, and took a step closer to her. "Alright, Granger. Look. You're not going to like it."

"You're damn right I'm not going to like it!" she shouted, stepping up to her fiancé (oh, wasn't that an odd word to apply to him? She'd need to get used to it.), "You told me he was going to rot there. Rot. Don't tell me you're honestly considering speaking with him!"

"What choice do we have, at this point?" He lowered his voice as two Healers strolled by. "He's the
only one who knows where the stone was last placed. He's our only connection."

Hermione's body broke out into a cold sweat, and her hands were clammy as she squeezed them into fists and released them. No. She didn't want to think about this -not even consider it. "I won't be a part of it," she told him, and then glanced over to Harry. "Do you hear me, Harry Potter? I won't be a part of any of it. Send me on protection detail. I don't want to be anywhere near here when you two speak with him."

Harry's green eyes glistened back at her with humility and pity, and he nodded slowly while chewing at his bottom lip. "Alright, Hermione. Whatever you want."

She sighed, grateful. "Thank you." She turned her attention back to Draco. "Why do I feel like there's something you're not telling us?" It was written all over his shining gray eyes -a darkness lurked behind them that she had only seen in their first days together, before his confessions. She wished, for a blink of a moment, that she still had the Gray Magic so that she might peer into his mind and get a peek of what was rolling around in there.

"I'm telling you everything significant to the case," he scowled. "Don't accuse me of holding back information, Hermione. I'm insulted."

"Well, you can be insulted all you want, Draco, but I know you better than you know yourself sometimes."

His eyes rolled. "Sometimes, you sound just like Astoria."

A surge of anger flooded within her, and she gasped. She tried to pretend that the insult did not, in fact, insult her, but considering he had married that witch and divorced her, it didn't set right being penned in the same category as his ex-wife. Especially when she now wore a ring that signified she was going to spend the rest of her life with him. She placed her hands on her hips, fingers brushing against the fabric of her dress, and stomped her foot. "Well, if I sound like Astoria I might as well act like her as well. You're sleeping on the lounge!" She gathered up all of the strength she could muster to flash him one of his own smirks and added, "Oh, and I told Harry about our engagement without you! He was practically horrified, and you missed the entire thing!"

"Oh, for fucks sakes!" he called out to her as she stomped away, heading in the direction of the floos that would be provided on the first floor. "Damn it! Did you at least record it on your camera thingy?"

Much to Draco's disappointment, he did indeed get banned from the bed when he arrived home. His pillow and one of his favorite throw blankets were piled neatly on the corner of the chase-lounge, while Hermione had made a bundle of pillows in Draco's spot on the bed and proceeded to snuggle them in her sleep. He'd been stuck with Potter for two more hours, filing paperwork and preparing for the briefing tomorrow, after which he would have a portkey waiting for him to send him on a round trip to Azkaban to face off with his arch nemesis.

Merlin, right now all he wanted to do was shag the living daylights out of Hermione and fall asleep in a post-orgasm induced coma. He set his work briefcase down at the edge of the door, unclasped his robes, and let them fall to the floor before he approached the bed. She was asleep, looking as
angelic as ever despite the fact that she was a cold, calculating witch who had told him he wasn't allowed to sleep in his own bed. Well, what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her. He reached for the covers, planning on removing the pillows one at a time to climb in, but as soon as his fingers wrapped around the silk material, he heard her soft voice whisper, "Do it and I'll hex you."

"For fuck's sake, Hermione," he grumbled, yanking the covers back and tossing all the pillows off at once. "This is a bit uncalled for." He made sure to leave the covers on her side of the bed intact - the last thing he wanted to do was piss her off even more. "Let me sleep with you."

"No." She pried an eye open and rolled onto her stomach, spreading her arms and legs across the bed in a show of claim. "If you want to call me Astoria Greengrass, I will act like Astoria Greengrass."

"Mione…"

She jerked her head up, but still kept her position as queen of the bed. "You don't get to 'Mione' me, Draco."

He crossed his arms like a two-year-old. "It's my bed."

"Our bed," she corrected. "Or did you forget you asked me to be your wife this evening?"

"No. I'm very much aware. Which is why I want to climb into the bed with you and do unholy things to your body right now." He shifted on his feet, frustrated. "I'm sorry, alright? There's just some things that I couldn't discuss in front of Potter."

Hermione rolled over onto her back, arms still spread out but appearing a bit more approachable. "Are you going to tell me, then?"

"If I can sleep in the bed."

She chewed on her bottom lip, contemplating her next move. With a sigh, she scooted over to her side and allowed Draco to climb in with her. Satisfied that he had won the battle, he picked up one of the pillows from the floor, tossed it on the bed, and gracefully slipped in next to her, pulling her close so that they both lay on their sides, nose to nose. "I can't believe I had to barter with information to get back into bed with you."

She wrapped one of her bare legs around him - oh, Merlin, was she only wearing panties? That was entirely too sexy for what he had been prepared for. He wished now that he had stripped down out of his clothes, but here he was. At least he was back in the bed. "Tell me," she whispered to him.

Draco stared into Hermione's chocolate colored eyes, at the cute cupid's bow in her upper lip and her tiny nose, melting into the man he could only be around her behind closed doors. She had a way of making him forget all about his past and all of the terrible things he had done. How could he afford not to tell her all of his secrets? Even if they were embarrassing and far more sinister than she'd ever imagine. The Malfoy family had a way of turning everything beautiful into ash. Would he burn through her the way he had everything else worth having in his life? Would he do it to Scorpius, like his father did to him? He didn't want to, but the way he was holding in these secrets… it was turning him right into Lucius Malfoy. He shook his head, sighing. "I'm afraid to."

"Draco, since when are you afraid of anything?"

"Since always." He managed a smirk, searching her beautiful doe eyes for something, but he wasn't entirely sure what it was. He just knew he had to find it. "Don't you know anything about me?"

She held back a giggle and brushed her nose against his. "Would you like to know what I think?"
He nodded, slowly. Yes, he very much did want to know. He really wanted her to tell him that he wasn't worth all this headache. Maybe then he'd feel like he was being held responsible. She didn't always need to forgive him - he wasn't sure he could bestow that kind of forgiveness to anyone the way she'd give to him again and again.

"I think," she said, slipping a hand around the back of his head to rub her fingers through his blonde locks. Her touch was his escape from reality. "Everyone is afraid. But you always manage to overcome your fears and push through them, despite the fact that you'd like to let them cripple you. Giving in to them would be easier, but you aren't the type of man to do anything the easy way. Not anymore."

"You put far too much faith in my resolve," he muttered. He kissed her once, soft and tender. He wanted to remember this moment - the one before she knew the ugly truth about the family she had agreed to marry into. "Hermione, I don't know how to soften the blow, so I'm just going to come out and say it."

"Okay?"

He sighed and closed his eyes. "My father was the one to sell Diggle the stone. He's the reason for all of this chaos we've gone through." He pinched his eyes, fighting the urge to throw them open to see her face. He knew he didn't need to see the moment that she lost all faith in him. The silence grew with each passing moment, and he felt her shift on the bed. His eyes betrayed him eventually, and he pried one open to find her sitting up next to him, knees to chest, staring up at the star-lit ceiling that was his bedroom constellation. He glanced up with her, trying to pinpoint what cluster of stars she was staring at exactly. The only one he could find that matched was the one that he was named after. He fought back the urge to scream and instead let his other eye fall open and simply stared up at the ceiling with her. Minutes went by like this, staring in silence without the comfort of knowing what she was thinking. He was just about to plan to slip out of the bed to go sleep on the lounge again when she broke her statue-like demeanor and reached out, grabbing his arm and slipping it around her. He sat up next to her, drawing her closer, leaving kisses along her shoulder. "Say something."

She trailed her eyes over to his, determined. "We could get him thrown in Azkaban."

This wasn't what Draco expected to hear, and he scowled. "What?"

"If he sold Diggle the stone, that's something incarcerating he's done after the War. With proper proof, he could pay for all of his crimes."

Merlin, that witch was brilliant. She never ceased to amaze him. Though... "I doubt it will do any good. He's dying."

And there was the person he fell in love with; her eyes softened and she reached out, touching his cheek. He didn't deserve this kind of affection, especially after being a right ass to her, but here she was, comforting him when he should have been the one to comfort her. "How?" she asked.

"Condition in the lungs. Whoever used the stone on him must have known it - without his magic, the herbs he's been using no longer contain the illness."

She stroked his cheek in a delicate manner. "Are you alright?"

He sneered silently, jerking out of her touch. "I could care less how I feel right now. - How are you? I tell you my family is responsible for your ex-husband's death, and you want to know how I'm doing?" He fought back the urge to laugh mockingly. "If that arrogant bastard hadn't been so self-
preserving, Weasley might still be alive. No. He would be." He slammed his fist down on the bed. "Fuck!"

"Draco, calm down."

"Calm down?" His voice rose an octave. "You expect me to calm down? How the bloody Hell do I go about that, Hermione? I don't deserve to put that ring on your finger! I don't deserve you! That goddamn Weasley boggart was right! I don't deserve-"

But he was cut off when her soft lips captured his in a distorting, mind-boggling kiss that nearly knocked him back on the bed. He groaned, knowing that he should rip himself away. But there was a selfishness in him that he had inherited from his Father, and instead of doing the right thing, he allowed the kiss, even going so far as to kiss her back, licking along her bottom lip and pushing her back down against the downy pillow top. He climbed on top of her, determined to pour his emotions into each and every bit of skin-to-skin contact. One of his hands went up into her hair, gripping it tightly while the other slipped down around her pelvis. He was sure his fingers would bruise her by the way he was forcing his fingers into her skin, but Hermione didn't seem to mind. Her lips crashed against his like an ocean wave, pulling him deeper into the current of her love.

"Draco," she whispered, dipping her head lower and kissing along the pulse point in his neck. "Let it out."

He closed his eyes, frustration building within him. "Don't... deserve..." he struggled out, his throat tightening.

"You do." She found his lips again, hungrily tugging at his lower lip with his teeth while her hands slid down his back and gripped his ass cheeks. If there was one thing Hermione was good at, it was tempting him. He wanted so desperately to pour his emotions into this, but he knew he didn't have any right to. But by the way his body was reacting, he might not have a choice in the matter anymore. Hermione's eyes found his, and she practically begged him. "Trust me." She blinked, taking one of her hands to brush along his jaw. "Let it out, Draco. Please."

"Hermione..." He stared down at the wondrous woman underneath him who would rather him let his body talk to her in angry, volatile ways than to bottle it up. Who would rather let him let it all out than talk about her own feelings. Who, despite his sharp tongue and defining glare, forgave him for his family's mistakes. What kind of creature was she? Surely, she wasn't human.

Giving in, he drove his mouth down on hers, growling through the harsh kiss as he snatched up both of her wrists and threw them above her head. In one quick movement, he slipped both of her wrists into one of his large hands and held them firmly there. If he was going to let it out, he was going to do it right. With his free hand, he found around for his wand in its hilt on his belt and unsheathed it. He brought it up to her wrists and without speaking bound them together, weighting them so that she would have no way to move them from their current position. This was new territory for them; he loved being in control, but he had never taken her free choice out of the matter. He scanned over her eyes to assess that it was alright, and she nodded.

He smirked, more confident now, and pointed the wand at her collar bone. "You want me to let it out, Hermione?" His voice was low, gravely. "Is that what you want?" Her eyes left his and traveled down to his wand, where she gave an anxious sigh and nodded.

"That's exactly what I want," she told him.

"Bold words."
"I'm a bold woman."

He chuckled darkly. "That you are." He dragged the wand down her skin, letting his magic flow into it to warm the tip. She gasped as it heated over the flesh of her breast, and she instinctively wriggled against her wrists. Her legs rubbed against each other as the wand caressed against the freshly pebbled nipple underneath her black camisole. Sweet baby dragons, those tits were just begging to be sucked. But he wanted to drag the moment out, so he whispered, "Diffindo." His wand did the rest, cutting through the material of her shirt in a vertical line all the way down her stomach. Hermione scowled at him as he pushed the annoying fabric to the side to reveal her gorgeous breasts.

"I liked that shirt."

"You're going to like what I do to you more," he teased and dipped his head low to slide his tongue over the hot mound of flesh. He placed the tip of his wand on the other nipple while he lapped at the one in front of him, sucking and licking and occasionally nipping at it between his teeth. Hermione moaned softly above him, and he smirked. His struggles seemed so distant to him now; all of his efforts were being thrown into doing whatever he wanted to her. He drew tiny circles with his wand over her pert nipple as he abandoned the one in front of him and trailed his tongue in a path across her sternum to the other one. He alternated between the heat of the wand, the wetness of his tongue, and the cool air of the bedroom as he teased her breast.

Hermione groaned loudly, draping a leg over his waist. "Draco… mmfuck…"

He said not a word as he reached up with his free hand and pinched her abandoned nipple harshly, eliciting a slur of obscenities from his fiancé's lips, followed by an arch of her back. He slipped the entire breast in front of him into his mouth and suckled at it. Her skin across his tongue made all of the world's problems melt away. This was where he felt like home, lost in the skin to skin contact with her, and knowing that she loved every moment of it. He wanted to abandon himself into her, and if that meant he'd need to physically act that out, well… that was just icing on the cake.

He drew his face up and released her breast, taking to staring at them in great detail. Her chest heaved up and down between jagged breaths, and her eyes were closed, lost in a daze of punch-drunk lust. "So stunning," he muttered to himself, setting his wand on a course down her stomach to blaze a trail to the dip of her belly button. Her breath caught, and she laid still in obedience. He took his wand further down, right over the fabric of her lacy underwear. Hermione gasped, and her legs spread apart. The leg that had been draped over him abandoned its position to make room for him as he scooted down on the bed to nestle between her legs. He set the hilt of his wand right against the nub of her clit, still covered by her already soaked underwear, and whispered, "Vibratoem." His wand lit to life with pulsations, and Hermione moaned mercifully as her body was rocked with the vibrations. Her head fell back, her mouth parted, and she panted desperately as he moved his wand against her, sliding it up and down her clit while teasing the base of it along her folds. From this angle, she was by far the most beautiful creature he'd ever laid his eyes upon.

He loved watching her gasp and sigh as he played with his wand against her, rubbing circles around her nub, occasionally trading his wand for his lips to taste her. He broke down after only two minutes and yanked her underwear down her legs to shove them into her mouth. "Not a word, Hermione," he winked. He took his place between her legs again, this time relishing in slipping the hilt of his wand inside of her as he lapped at her aching clit. He was going to enjoy going to work and knowing that the same wand that he used to bring in criminals was the one he used to bring his lover to ecstasy.

Hermione moaned into the soaking panties lodged in her mouth and arched her hips up to meet the thrusting vibrations of his wand and the gentle caress of his tongue. He titled the angle of the hilt, and she all but screamed in pleasure. Her muffled moan made his already pressing erection spring to life.
in his pants. He wasn't going to be able to hold out long, he knew, before he would have to take her in the most immodest ways possible.

"Fuck, love. You taste exquisite," he breathed against her thigh, diving in for another taste. He could feel her legs shaking next to his head, and he smirked as he trailed his tongue leisurely up and down. "I love it when you shiver." He withdrew his wand from her and licked it clean before pointing the tip, still pulsing with warmth, to her clit. He wanted to bring her over that divine edge of reason and logic and spill her into his darkness. There was so much of it still left in him, despite the way he had turned his life around. He was a Malfoy, after all, and Malfoys were synonymous with the loss of a halo. Hermione always wanted to find the damned thing, but she might as well accept the fact that it was never coming back, and even if it were to, it would be held up with a set of horns.

She came undone, squeezing her thighs around his head and screaming softly into the fabric gagging her. Draco smirked, plunging his tongue into her to taste her as she came. This was where he wanted to be, not in a hospital by his father's side and not on his way to Azkaban to face down the man who was Draco Malfoy's own personal Hell. He wished he could stay here forever between the sheets of his bed. This was his own personal Heaven, after all.

He sat upright when he was sure she was spent and tossed his wand over to the floor. He'd retrieve it later; right now was all about hearing Hermione scream again. He reached up, tugged the underwear out of her mouth, and cast it aside next to his wand. "I want to hear it. Who do you belong to?"

"You," she whispered, staring at him through lustful slits.

"And who do I belong to?"

"Me."

"That's right. And I'm not going to let anything come between that." He reached down and unbuckled his belt, slid it through the loops of his slacks, and tossed it over to the floor. "Do you hear me, Hermione?" His eyes never left hers as he unclasped the button of his pants and untucked himself, freeing his cock. He stroked himself, pants hanging loosely off of his hips and his skin shimmering over with a heat that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. Hermione's eyes fell hungrily to the dick in his hand, biting her lower lip and groaning for any contact. He chuckled when her leg came at him unexpectedly, hooking him around the hip and tugging him forward. He caught himself before he fell forward, and from there he climbed on top of her, teasing her with the head of his cock, rubbing it against her clit and down the trail of wetness. He made a point to push the tip right against her entrance but not slipping it in. "Someone wants it bad. Do you know how wet you are?"

"So wet," she murmured. "I'm so wet, and it's all for you, Draco. My body, my heart, it's all for you." She closed her eyes and tried to rut against him.

"Tell me what's mine."

"Me."

"That mouth?"

"Yes. It's yours."

"That's right." He rested the length of his shaft between her folds, grinding against her, loving the slip and slide that she could produce between her legs. "And that delectable arse. That's mine, too."

"Yes," she hissed, struggling against the restraint of magic that bound her arms above her head still.
"And your pussy… that's mine. Would you like me to fuck you, Hermione? Would you like me to fuck that scrumptious little cunt until you're screaming and spent?"

"Yes!" She threw her head back as a bead of sweat dripped down her forehead. "Please, Draco. Fuck me. I can't take it anymore. Please quit teasing me…"

"But that's how I show my love," he whispered into her ear. "And I love you so much."

"Perhaps you should love me a bit less," she chided, and they both shared a quiet laugh before he cut her off guard and rammed his dick into her. Her laugh faded away into a lively moan, and her head fell back once again against the pillows. "God, yes."

"God…" Draco stayed there for a moment, lost inside of her before he brought his cock out just to the tip. "…has nothing…" He slammed harshly into her, forcing her to bite back a scream. "…to do with this." The feeling of her lovely pussy tightening around his dick made him groan, and he focused solely on thrusting in and out of her; scooping her legs up around his sides and tucking his hands under her calves to better the angle. He drove hard into her over and over again, every thrust building his sense of urgency to release all of his pent up rage. He didn't want to think about the pain that he felt in the wake of his Father's newest betrayal. He didn't want to imagine the anger he would feel when he had to look Diggle in the eyes again. He didn't want to know that he had brought Hermione in, yet again, to his drama-filled life, expecting her to understand it. He was the epitome of a self-deploring megalomaniac.

His thrusts became harsher, and he leaned over to bite dangerously at her neck. She gasped and sighed, but didn't push him away, instead taking every bit of his cruelty. He released her legs and gripped her hips, digging his nails into the point where he was damn sure he drew blood. She yipped into his mouth as she kissed him over and over, but said nothing. She just tightened her grip on him and moved her hips with his, taking the pain like it was a baptism- as if him bestowing his grief upon her was absolving him of his sins. "Fuck… me…" she hissed between bated breaths.

Draco could only oblige, speeding up his rhythm as beads of sweat broke across his brow. "Love… you…” He muttered through clenched teeth before he bit down on her shoulder and stayed there. He suckled on the skin, bruising it, claiming what was his. This was his Hermione. His love. His goddess. He would never let his Father or any secrets come between them again. He was going to marry her, and love her, and unconditionally give her his heart. This would be the mother to his son, to his future children, to his beating heart. This stirred a new emotion in him, and he released her hips from his hands, drawing them up to her face to brush away her wild curls. "I love you," he told her as his thrusts slowed until he was simply rolling into her. Hermione's eyelashes fluttered open and closed, reacting to the new sensation as he didn't simply fuck her, but made love to her. He placed his hands on the side of her face, planting soft kisses on her lips. "Need you… to tell me…”

The corners of her mouth pulled upwards, and even though her eyes were closed, she reached up and stroked his cheek with her hand. "Love you too, you… ah… silly man."

He turned his face towards her hand and kissed her palm before he slipped one of her slender fingers into his mouth. He sucked on it, then went to the next one, and the next one while he drove his hips forward and into her, rubbing his pelvis against her clit. From this angle, he could feel the moment building, could feel the way she tightened around him as he drove home. He pushed further into her, wanting to fill her up. She moaned as she arched her back, and Draco knew then that she was close. He slipped a hand between them and began to trace circles on her most sensitive point as he quickened the pace. With a fumble of words, Hermione came, whispered, "Fuck-love-you-Draco."

He tried to ride out her orgasm, but her words sent him over the edge as well until he was spilling his
cum into her and groaning out, "Love you too." Their bodies spent, he laid there, still draped between her legs as he came down from his high. He opened his eyes, found hers, and smirked. "How's that for letting it out?" He willed the spell on her wrists to dispel.

She giggled, nudging him playfully in the shoulder. Chewing on her lower lip, Hermione leaned up and wrapped her arms around Draco's neck. "That was erotic."

"Yeah?" His smirk widened. "Well, I don't like to brag, but I hear I'm a wizard in the bedroom." His double entendre made them both barrel over with laughter until finally Draco removed himself from her and rolled over onto his back. He reached over and pulled her to his chest, the biggest shit-eating grin spread across his face. It was in that moment that Draco vowed, to himself, that he would never hide anything from her again. He'd be open and upfront and everything that she needed him to be. That's what a husband was supposed to do, and sooner, rather than later, he would be that husband.

Oh, but if Draco only knew just how terribly he would break that silent vow, he would have never made it at all.
Yay for all of the positive energy surrounding this continuation! Are you guys ready? Here comes Devious Diggle!

~A.

P.S. Please go check out "Branches" by LightofEvolution if you enjoy a good, funny dramione.

Tears are shed, a shame, I should have known
I should have thought, I could have thought
Before I cast that stone
The waves radiate far and wide
There's a ringing in my ears
For a minute
I think I'm going blind
Tears are shed, a shame, I should have known
The crown weighs heavy
Heavy as I sit back in my throne
I say hey, it wasn't me
I'm just a pawn
But the devil's not into details
Where have all the heroes gone?

"Hey I Don't Know" by KONGOS

Much to Draco's disgruntlement, Saturday morning was no longer on the table for time off. He and Hermione dressed early in the morning, fighting back exhaustion as they prepared for the debriefing this morning at the Ministry. The entire Auror department was scheduled to come, aside from those select few who had to stay to their cases off base. Even then, they were assigned to floo in if at all possible. Draco bought them both English muffins from the corner shop near the entrances and even picked up a muffin for Dean, who thanked him when they all sat down in the briefing room, snacking on their morning breakfasts. Dean told Hermione that her cat, which he had taken over the weekend to give the couple their privacy, was doing well, despite the fact that he had torn up three of his couch cushions.

"We'll pay for the cushions to be replaced, won't we Draco?"

Draco scoffed. "It's your cat, Hermione. You're responsible when it goes astray."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and turned her head to Dean. "I'm really sorry, Dean. Really."

"S'allright. The fur ball is cute once you get past the initial devil-like nature."

"Perhaps you should call it Lucifer."
"We're not naming the cat Lucifer. I was thinking something like Ollie…"

"Ollie-fur?" Dean offered, throwing his hand out for Draco to high five, but the aristocratic Auror simply rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Fine." Dean put his hand down. "I'm going to get you to do it one of these days."

Potter arrived two minutes before the briefing, passing out parchments to each one of the Aurors in the room. On each was a list, and at the top of it, Draco saw his own name. This was the list for every Death Eater that wasn't contained in Azkaban either because they had been exonerated of all crimes like Draco, or because they were still on the run. Beneath each bulleted name was also a list of known family members. Hermione, Scorpius, and Astoria were amongst his parents on the list underneath his name, which was marked 'Defected'. He felt detached, looking at it as if this list didn't actually refer to him. If he kept it separate in his mind, it would make this briefing go by so much quicker. He stared down at the other names on the list, including Walden Macnair(defected), Adam Avery Senior (missing), and Agustus Rockwood (missing). There were relatives on this list more than actual Death Eaters. Draco scanned his eyes over family names he had grown up with: Dolohov, Rosier, Goyle, Crabbe, Lestrange, Black. Though most of the actual Death Eaters associated with these names were either imprisoned or dead, it didn't hold back the names of their family members. Draco's eyes scanned over his mother's maiden heritage of the Blacks, and then his eyes rested on an unfamiliar name in the Crabbe column. There was Irma, Vincent's mother, but then there was a second name. Eleven years old. Female. Victoria. Victoria Crabbe.

Draco scanned his eyes over the name again and again. Surely this wasn't correct. That would mean that Crabbe… had a sister. And she had been born only shortly after the war. Was that possible? Did his once childhood friend somehow live on in the form of a sibling? And why had he not known? It must have been because he had pulled away from the Crabbe family after Vincent's death.

"If I can get everyone's attention," Potter spoke, breaking Draco away from his thoughts. "Last night, the Ministry of Magic discovered a new group of enemies who are aiming their attacks on former Death Eaters and their families. What is said here is in confidence, and you're sworn by your oath not to repeat it to anyone, so I shouldn't have to remind any of you that the penalty for breaking that oath means you would be stripped of your position here at the Ministry. This briefing is done in the utmost confidentiality to protect those on the lists before you. Which, if you will turn to your list, is a complete, to the best of our records, recording of any and all Death Eaters not in the confines of Azkaban, and their families as well. Last night, Lucius Malfoy was attacked in his home in Nepal by an unknown assailant wearing what could be described as a white mask painted like a wolf."

An Auror by the name of Kingston raised his hand. "Not that I don't believe in protecting our citizens, but why should we be concerned if a few Death Eaters are picked off? Wouldn't that help our cause?"

There was a hushed murmur across the room, and Draco felt Hermione pat him on the leg in support.

"That's not our place to judge, Kingston," replied Potter. "Right now, our first priority is the protection of those who would be attacked. The weapon is a blue stone that many of you are familiar with from the cataclysmic events two years ago known as The Takeover. On this day, Gregory Diggle used technology inspired by a blue rock called the Pandora Stone. Auror Granger, would you pass out the pamphlets?"

Hermione nodded, rose from her chair, and passed around a new set of parchments, this time with everything known about the Pandora stone written alongside a detailed sketch Draco had drawn two years ago.

"This stone has the power to strip magic, so if you come across it, do not come in direct contact with
it. If it touches your skin, you're most likely to never perform magic again. Your jobs are simple. Each one of you will be assigned a family to monitor. Until we know more about this assailant and their goals, we must keep those who are in the line of fire out of harm's way. Aurors Malfoy and Thomas will see me for their assignments. I would also like Aurors Jameson and Bolt to stay behind. Please see Auror Tyme before you leave for your assigned family."

Potter took a bit more time explaining the situation before excusing the room. Hermione stayed behind with Draco, Dean, Lindy Bolt and Theodore Jameson, the new recruits from last year. Lindy always worked Draco's last nerve; she was an overeager witch who couldn't recognise sarcasm and always thought too much of Draco. Theodore wasn't too bad, though he was quiet, and Draco didn't know much about him other than that.

Potter crossed his arms and addressed the remaining Aurors. "Auror Bolt, you're paired with Auror Malfoy as his personal detail until the time being."

"What?" Draco shouted at once. "I don't need a detail, Potter! Do you forget, I'm an Auror?"

"An Auror who has a giant target on his back." Potter replied coolly. "Having a second pair of eyes won't hurt, you know."

"Hermione can be my eyes," Draco nudged over to his fiancé.

"No, she can't. She has a new set of recruits to train up starting Monday morning."

"What about Jameson?" Draco threw his hand over to the silent-as-the-grave Auror.

"Jameson assigned to your son and his mother. So unless you'd like to stay on house arrest, I suggest you take Lindy with you and work with her."

Lindy waved a hand over to Draco. She was annoying, not a hair out of place as she had her sandy-blonde hair pulled back in a tight fitting bun. Her robes were far too pressed, her shoes far too polished, and her smile far too white to be natural. If anything, she was like one of those robots Draco had watched on Hermione's telly. He bet if he cut her open, she'd bleed perfectly too.

"And me, Harry?" asked Dean.

"Your assignment is to monitor the Malfoy senior household. I'm asking this of you, Dean, because I know you're good at keeping a firm head to not gossip."

"Oh, joy..." Dean said dully.

"Right. So, is that it?" Draco stood, and much to his disgruntlement, Lindy did as well. She was going to be an annoying thorn in his side, wasn't she? "When do I get my portkey?"

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Hermione asked, reaching up and touching his arm. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"He's in Azkaban, Hermione," he assured her. "What can he do to me locked in a magic-binding interrogation room? Seriously, you have nothing to worry over." He leaned down, kissed her firmly on the lips, and rose to stand.

"Congratulations on your engagement, by the way," said Dean, coming to stand next to the two. Lindy wasn't far behind, pushing her way between Draco and Dean like an ant through the slats of a floor. "So, Malfoy, mate, have you chosen a best man yet?" He ribbed Draco in the side.
"You're real subtle, Dean." Draco rolled his eyes. "We've been engaged less than twenty-four hours. Perhaps give us at least a day before you decide to worm your way into the wedding party."

"Right, right," Dean grinned. "But really, Malfoy. You and I both know I could throw you one Hell of a bachelor party."

"Dean, maybe you should really tone it down a notch," Hermione laughed. "The more you try to pry Draco into doing anything, the less inclined he is to do it, even if it's what he's been planning all along."

Draco scowled. "Just because I don't know who I want to be my best man doesn't mean I'm less inclined to pick someone based off of how they nag me. -Bribery works best, Thomas."

"Draco!"

"What?"

He smirked down at his soon-to-be wife, patted her on the head, and glared over to Lindy Bolt. "Come on, Auror Bolt. Let's go to Azkaban."

"Wh-What, sir?" Lindy squeaked.

"Oh, didn't you hear? We're going undercover. Gonna sit in a cell for a day or two."

"Oh, honestly, Draco! Stop it!" Hermione scolded. "You've given her a fright!"

Draco ignored her, strolling his way back up to Potter, who looked rather chipper. "What's on your mind, Scarface? -Sorry, Auror Scarface?"

Potter rolled his eyes. "You know Hermione's going to expect you to put me in your bachelor party."

"That thought had crossed my mind…"

"Is that your way of asking me?"

"No. Shall I get down on one knee?"

"It's a start."

"Fuck off."

"Sure, Malfoy," Potter smirked, speaking loud enough so Hermione could hear. "I'd love to be in your wedding party."

"You asked Harry!?" Hermione jumped for joy on the other side of the room. Draco stared, horrified, at Harry Potter. That meddling little imbecilic fool. "Oh, Draco! I'm so proud of you!"

"Oy! What about me?" Dean shouted. "I didn't even get a formal invitation to be a groomsman!"

"Thomas," Draco rolled his eyes, "Would you like to be a groomsman?"

"You're damn right I would!" Dean smiled, satisfied. "And I expect that best man invitation soon, mate."

"Potter, the portkey?"
"Right this way, Malfoy."

Azkaban. It was a place meant only for those devious enough to receive an invitation. Murderers, rapists, torturers, followers of Lord Voldemort—they all ended up in the same place. Used to, it was a haunting shell of a prison with only inmates and Dementors as its sole occupants. Now that the Dementor program had been abolished by Kingsley, Azkaban was actually a ray of sunshine compared to its glory days. Draco didn't like it one bit. The prisoners actually got warm meals and interactions with wardens, who took the place of Dementors. It still was a dreadful place, where the smell of piss, shit, and despair lingered in the air like morning dew. He had spent two weeks here when he was seventeen prior to his Wizengamot trial. Then, Dementors still roamed the halls. It was odd to think that he would ever return here again under the circumstances.

An Auror Draco recognised as Reginald Bind greeted him upon arrival, and escorted Aurors Malfoy and Bolt to their interrogation room. Lindy wouldn't stop yammering, so Draco was left listening to the annoying sounds of her as she babbled on about how frightening it was to visit Azkaban.

"I can't believe we're here! I knew that Aurors traded off on their duties to work here, but I've never been assigned here myself. Have you, Auror Malfoy?"

"No." He'd been lucky on that end, too.

"Do you suppose you'll run into someone you know here? Not that I'm insinuating that you'd know someone, but I just thought since you have the Dark Mark on your arm that perhaps you might still know some of the Death Eaters in the holding cells—"

"Lindy. Shut up." He didn't want to think about if he ran into Crabbe Senior. He never planned on facing Vincent's father in the eyes. Bind led them into a square room with white-washed walls and a long table. There were two chairs, one at both sides. "I'm taking the chair, so you… just go stand over there in the corner. Don't speak unless I prompt you to. Understood?"

"Absolutely, Sir." Lindy gave a quick bow and scooted herself to the back wall in the corner near the door. Draco sat his wand in front of him and took a seat at one end of the table, a sudden uproar of anxiousness in his chest. It had been two years since he had last laid eyes on Gregory Diggle, the man who once claimed the title and form of Bastian Cane and nearly ruined Draco's life. If Draco hadn't been paired with Hermione Granger in Auror training that fateful morning, he might have given into Cane's demands eventually and handed over all of his secrets. It had been Diggle's downfall to pair them up together; he hadn't anticipated they might fall in love. And, truth be told, neither had Draco. He had been married to Astoria, after all, and had just been given the gift of Scorpius's birth.

Draco would be so glad when the weekend was up and he could hold his son again. He knew that he had arranged it so that Astoria would have him the entire weekend, but as the tension slowly built up with this new case, a sticky-fingered hug from a two-year-old might just be the cure to Draco's displeased disposition.

"What's he like, sir?" asked Lindy.

"Who?"

"Diggle, sir. Or Cane. I'm not sure what to call him…"

What could he say about Greg Diggle? That he had a sick fascination with Hermione? That his muggle-elitist views were just as unsettling as Voldemort's ideologies on pure blood? That he had
murdered his fiancé's husband as a way of burying information and taking out the competition? That he had set Draco up to fall from the beginning? "Bolt, the things I could tell you about this man would make your skin crawl. -He's an arsehole. That's all you need to know. You may call him 'arsehole'."

Lindy giggled into her hand as the door opened, and her laughter died away. A burly looking Auror that Draco didn't recognise entered the room first, dragging a long chain behind him. Attached to that chain were a pair of arms, and attached to that pair of arms was a chiselled face with emerald eyes, unkempt brown hair, and a scruffy beard in desperate need of a trim. Prison had aged him, but when he took a seat at the other end of the table, all Draco could see was the same frightening man that had once threatened the safety of his child. Could he be behind this new development from his comfy cell in Azkaban? Was he somehow a part of the white-wolf masked assailant's plan to take out Draco's family? He couldn't put it past him… but still… he was locked away.

Draco straightened his posture, hand trailing instinctively to his wand. Diggle noticed and placed his shackled wrists atop the table. With a smile, he tilted his head and offered his hands out, palms up. "It's good to see you, Draco. Or… should I say 'Auror Malfoy' now?"

His voice was still that same confident, arrogant tone like the superior Chief Commander he once had been. It made Draco want to lurch over the table and wring his muscular neck.

When Draco opted to say nothing, Diggle spoke again. "How's Hermione?"

That made Draco's fists tighten into fists, and he gritted his teeth together. "We're not here to discuss Hermione, Diggle. I'm sure you've been briefed as to my visit?"

"Somewhat." Diggle nodded slowly. "But I'm very interested to know how our favourite witch is doing. Is she still as fetching as ever?"

Draco's fists slammed down on the table. He heard Lindy shuffle behind him, but she didn't move from her position. The burly Auror in the doorway simply watched on, as if he could care less what Draco might do to Diggle as long as the attack wasn't aimed at him.

"The next time you mention Hermione without my permission, I'll make sure you leave here in a pine box."

Diggle chuckled and folded his hands. "You and I both know that you can't do a thing to me in here. Auror code and all that." He leaned forward. "But, I suppose you'd like to get down to business then. I have to say, I thought I'd be seeing you long before now. Haven't you been dying to know about that stone?"

"Yeah, about that." Draco snapped his fingers, and Lindy scrambled over to him, handing him a thick set of files. He opened the first one up to a picture of Lucius Malfoy. "Last night, my father was attacked by means of that stone. So, wherever you thought you hid it obviously wasn't a good hiding spot."

"Interesting… By chance, was your dear daddy's attacker wearing a white wolf mask?"

Of course, Draco thought irritably, Diggle would know all about this. "Do they work for you?"

"Work for me? Heavens no." Diggle shook his head, leaning back in his chair. "But surely you didn't think I was the only criminal with a vendetta against Death Eaters?" He let his eyes roam around the room, taking his time to draw the moment out. Then he set his eyes on Draco as the
glistened with satisfaction. "I know you're just dying to know all about them."

"Them? So there's more than one?"

"Oh dear, I've said too much." Diggle smirked.

Draco scowled. "You know, time was when you were on your way to this Hell-hole, you were sorry for your actions. Sitting here across from you, I can't help but to think that was all a ruse."

Diggle shrugged back to his rival. "Just because I'm sorry for my actions doesn't mean my personal feelings towards you have ever wavered. You still stole Hermione from me."

"You never had her, you stupid sod. Hermione never liked you."

"Oh, that's not entirely true, now is it?" Diggle's lips pulled back again in a wide grin. "Before she developed feelings for you, she was actually quite taken with me. Or have you forgotten already?"

No, Draco had not. He remembered searching Hermione's mind that fateful day he had decided to share his contemptible past with her. She had cared about Greg at the beginning, but after developing feelings for Draco, she had cut her ties. The only reason she had dated the prick time after time was to obtain information and distract.

"Let's stop changing the subject. Tell me about the white-wolf mask."

"Oh, I'll do you one better than that," said Diggle. "I'll tell you where I put the stone."

Draco snorted a laugh. "The stone's been stolen, you imbecile, or haven't you been listening?"

"Has it? Are you sure? Because I'm willing to wager it's exactly where I left it." His green eyes danced with joy at Draco's confused stare. "I tell you what, Auror Malfoy. I'll give you the stone's location. And if it isn't there, I'll tell you everything I know about the person in the white-wolf mask. And if you're wrong, and if the stone is precisely where I tell you, then you owe me one request."

"I don't make deals with prisoners." Draco made to stand, irritated. "You're obviously full of shit."

"Am I? Oh dear. Are you willing to put your son's life in jeopardy over selfish pride? You really are your father's son, aren't you, Draco?"

Draco's back tightened, and he shut the files with a swift motion. "You don't know a thing about my family."

"Again with the lies. We both know that's not true." Green eyes met silver, and Draco made a silent prayer that Diggle wouldn't spill the beans about Lucius's involvement with the stone in front of Bolt. Much to his relief, Diggle left it alone, instead saying, "But if you're really willing to risk it…"

An impossible decision was left in front of Draco: on the one hand, he knew not to trust Diggle. His location could be a trap, or it could be nothing at all. But if it were something, and there was some merit behind Diggle's words, then it would be a game changer, wouldn't it? His thoughts trailed to Scorpius. He didn't want any man in a mask coming after his child. What would be the risk of giving Diggle's suggestion a shot? Besides the obvious injury to his pride, there wasn't much of a threat. He sat back down, crossed his arms, and glared. "What would be your one request?"

Diggle's face parted in a maniacal grin. "So glad you asked."
Big shout out to WayMay for keeping me from using too many 'hads' in this chapter. Sloppy writing will never do, and she makes sure I do not fall to the wayside of terrible authors. Thank you, WayMay. *hearts*

Every time I feel selfish ambition  
Is taking my vision  
And my crime is my sentence  
Repentance is taking commission  
It's taking a toll  
On my soul  
I'm screaming submission and,  
I don't know if I am dying or living  
'Cause I will save face  
For name's sake  
Abuse grace  
Take aim to obtain a new name  
And a newer place  
But my name is lame  
I can't walk and I ain't the same  
And my name became  
A new destiny to the grave

"Fall Away" by Twenty One Pilots

"A letter?"

"Yes."

Draco was sure he heard wrong, so he repeated it again. "You want me to give Hermione a letter."

"Yes."

"From you?"

"That's correct."

He blinked once and then raised a cool eyebrow. "What will it say in this letter?"

"That's my other condition," Diggle said simply, "No one may read it except her."

"Like I'm going to let you subject Hermione to something like that."

"At this point, do you really have a choice? It's just a letter, Draco. I can't curse it. I've been
forbidden to do magic ever again -might as well slap me around with a Pandora Stone."

"If I find that cursed stone, I might just do that." Draco listened to enough -he rose from his chair, thrust it against the table, and said, "Even if I did consider your offer, I'd have to discuss it with her first. I'm not going to volunteer her for something she has no idea about."

"And if she says no?"

"Then I'll find another way." He stalked his way to the door, setting his hand atop the handle. He debated on telling Diggle about his engagement just to rub it in his smug face, but then he thought better of it. The last thing he needed was to piss him off at this point. So instead he turned the handle, jerked the door open, and muttered, "I'll let you know my decision by the end of the day tomorrow."

"That's very cordial of you, Draco."

And even though Draco hated Diggle with a fire in his belly, there was a small (very, very small) part of him that remembered him as his early days pretending to be Cane. That person always seemed to put Draco's best interests at heart, and he wondered to himself if they could have possibly been friends once if circumstances had been different. It was a sick thought, he knew, but a part of him missed that darkness Cane could evoke from him. Being on the light side was always so difficult, and he teetered on the line most days. It wouldn't have taken much for Draco, when he was young, to fall into the darkness and never return. The only thing that kept him at bay was that nagging conscience -did Diggle have one of those? And if so, how did he ignore it? Draco didn't think he could ever dispose of the damn thing. And it wasn't that he wanted to -it's what Hermione found endearing about him, after all. But sometimes, the darker part of him wondered what it would feel like to come out and play again.

He stormed out of the interrogation room, and it was only after he had made it halfway down the long hallway that he realised he had forgotten about Bolt. He turned on his heels, pried open the door, and said, "Are you waiting for a formal invitation, Bolt?"

"You told me to stay in the corner, Sir," she replied simply.

Diggle chuckled. "They're really just taking any application for Aurors now, aren't they?"

"Wonder whose fault that is?" Draco quipped, snapping his fingers. Bolt jumped and scrambled to the door beside her partner. "Honestly, Lindy, if you were any slower you'd be walking backwards. Keep up. -And don't feed the animals. Especially that one. He bites." He smirked at Diggle and left without another word.

Hermione hoped explaining all of the events of this weekend to Astoria would soften the blow that she would have an Auror protection detail assigned to her, but she hadn't gotten that far because all the chestnut-colored witch wanted to discuss was Hermione's engagement to Draco.

"How did he propose?"

"He was drunk? Well, that wasn't proper at all!"

"And in a bar no less! Goodness, his manners have gone downhill, haven't they?"

"Have you set a date?" "What will your colours be?"

Hermione tried to answer every question with diligent politeness, especially since Scorpius sat on her lap playing with his Quidditch action figures. If the white-blond boy hadn't been there to buffer, she might have thrown a few hexes at Astoria for wasting her time.

"Scorpius, sweetheart," Hermione said to the boy who remarkably resembled Draco, "Would you
mind if Mummy and I stepped outside for a moment?"

The beautiful little boy raised his pudgy face and smiled at his step-mother. "Okay, Mummy. - I can play toys?"

"Of course."

Scorpius hopped off of her lap and gave her a hug. "Ring pretty." He said, pointing to the engagement ring.

"Thank you. Your daddy gave it to me."

"Why?"

"Because we're going to be married. Do you know what that means, Scorpius?"

The little boy shook his head. "Uh-uh."

"It means that we're going to love each other forever and ever. Is that alright with you?"

Scorpius jumped up and down, leaning his hands on Hermione's legs for support. "Yup!"

"And you'll have to wear a tie, Scorpius. You're going to be in a wedding!" said Astoria, clapping her hands. The little boy quirked an eyebrow just the way his father did.

"No tie, Mummy."

"Yes, tie."

"Nooooooool!" Scorpius took to running around the room, laughing. "No, no, no!"

"There'll be cake," Hermione offered. The child stopped in his tracks, and he grinned.

"Cake?"

"Yup."

"Nilla or choclatt?"

"Both, most likely."

"Yay!" Scorpius threw his hands into the air gleefully. "I wear tie."

"Great - Your mother and I are just going to step into the hallway. Alright?"

"Kay!"

Hermione stood and motioned for Astoria to follow her out into the hallway. When both witches were out of earshot, Hermione started in on what she had truly come for.

"Astoria, there's been a development."

"Goodness, are you pregnant?" Astoria eyed Hermione over and nodded to herself. "That would explain why your hips are a bit fuller..."

"I... no!" Hermione glanced down at her hips, horrified. "No, I'm not pregnant, Astoria. Do I really look-? Oh, never mind. -Listen, there's been a development in the Pandora Stone." In a quiet
whisper, she told her all about the attack on Lucius, the person in the white-wolf mask, and how Draco was speaking to Diggle at this very moment. Astoria listened carefully, nodding and giving physical cues that she was involved, but not speaking until Hermione finished explaining that an Auror would be set up at her residence to monitor the household. That's when Astoria jumped in, wand blazing, so to speak.

"An Auror? Here? Following me around? Nonsense."

"Tori, you shouldn't think of it as following you around so much as protecting Scorpius," she tried to reason with the witch. "All of the Malfoy family is under attack, and Scorp is a perfectly acceptable target to this wolf."

Astoria bit down on her finger, thinking. "How would I even begin to explain it to him? Or to the papers? I'm a Greengrass. Where I go, reporters follow."

Hermione knew all about the struggles Astoria spoke of; dating a Malfoy had come with tabloid articles, interviews, and even the cover of Witch Weekly. She had fought very hard not to be a centrepiece, but Harry had asked her to, saying any promotion for the Ministry would be greatly appreciated. She still received letters in the mail, some of them thanking her and Draco for breaking the status quo, while others threatened them within an inch of their life for dismantling tradition. It had been so overwhelming at the beginning, but now it was something as normal as breathing. Once she had realised the death threats were merely just that: threats, and not actions, she learned to laugh at them the way Draco did.

"Tell them..." Hermione thought about it. "Tell them that he's your boyfriend."

Astoria scowled. "You want me to pretend to date an Auror?"

"For the sake of your reputation, would that really be so bad? You're not seeing anyone, are you?"

"No. Being a mother is a full-time requirement. Even when he's with you, I still can't shake my instincts. I wouldn't know where to start dating again." She gave a small sigh. "Purebloods don't divorce, as you know. It has been difficult to begin to explain to a portion of the magical community that it isn't a sin to fall out of love with someone. -In a way, you're lucky that you and Draco found each other. I dare say, he would be in the same boat as me if it weren't for you."

Hermione wanted to point out that perhaps if Astoria loosened the reins just a little bit on every miniscule detail of her life, she might actually find someone. But, being a strict pureblood woman who had been trained since birth to be cultured and polished, she'd never gotten a chance to learn to live a little. Draco had been drawn to her in a time of his life when he was lowest, and she was good for him then- but he was actually a fun-loving individual beneath that hard exterior, and Astoria's idea of fun was shopping and painting her nails. If she spent half as much time on her attitude as she did on her appearance, she might be worth her weight in gold.

"Well, even so, Astoria," she said, "Perhaps this will show potential prospects that you're a sought after witch."

Astoria smiled at that, resolve setting heavy in her green eyes. "Yes. I think that does sound rather like a bright idea."

"Great, because he's waiting outside."

"He's what?"

Hermione took off towards the door, but Astoria wasn't far behind her. The two woman made it to
the door before Hermione pried it open, revealing Auror Jameson. He was a handsome gentleman of around the age of twenty with deep auburn hair and hazel eyes. He wore a band of freckles over the top of his nose and a pale complexion. He wasn't particularly tall or muscular, but Hermione remembered his training scores were off the charts -it was no wonder Harry gave this task to him. There was only one other whose training scores matched with the same vigour, and that man was rotting away in Azkaban, probably on his way back to his cell from talking to Draco.

"Astoria, this is Theodore Jameson."

Astoria's mouth hung open as she eyed the Auror up and down, then, after a moment, she began to circle him, clicking her tongue. "I can work with this..." She nodded. "Yes. He's a bit young, but... Auror Jameson, how would you like to be my lover?"

Theodore was a man of few words, but when Astoria offered her proposition, he coughed, most likely choking on his own spit, and floundered out, "M-Miss Greengrass... that's a bit... forward. I am an Auror of the law, and I've b-been assigned to your family-"

"Oh, pish-posh! I'm aware of why you're here," Astoria rolled her eyes. "But I'm a woman that is always in the eyes of the tabloids. If you wish to keep your job, you'll have to pretend to date me. - He's a bit young, Hermione. -Jameson, do you think you might be able to grow a beard to age you up a bit?"

"Astoria-" Hermione scolded, but Theodore cut her off.

"I'm not sure I can grow enough facial hair to-"

"That's alright." Astoria waved her hand, dismissing him. "I'm sure we could whip you up a potion. Now, about your wardrobe..."

By the time Draco arrived at the Greengrass Estate, Astoria had bullied Jameson out of his work robes and into a strapping three-piece dress robe ensemble that had him looking posh and not at all in his comfort zone. When Draco laid eyes on the blushing wizard, who was muttering incoherently as Astoria fitted his belt and had her head rather close to his crotch, he snorted into laughter and doubled over.

"For Merlin's sake, Astoria!" He managed out between bursts of chuckles, "Maybe take him on a date first!" He exchanged glances with Jameson and laughed even more. "What did you do to piss Potter off to get stuck on this little fiasco?"

"I dropped tea on his lap last week..." Theodore muttered.

Draco raised an eyebrow, the last of his laughs dying away. "Seriously? I was only joking when I asked. Potter's ruthless." He looked around the room and asked, "Where's Scorp?"

"Up in his room with Miss Granger," Tori replied dully, still fixing the last bit of details to Jameson's attire as she waved her wand and shrunk his pants two sizes smaller. "Or should I say the future Missus Malfoy? Congratulations on your engagement, Draco." Her eyes met his, and they softened. "I am really happy for you."

Draco couldn't help the small twinge of pink that slipped up his cheeks. "Thank you, Tori." Not to sound too nice, he then added, "Although, I never needed your approval."

Astoria rolled her eyes. "If anyone asks, Theodore and I are in love."
Draco watched as Jameson's face blared bright red as he muttered, "Cover story..."

"Right." He nodded. "Well, just so you know, she's a bit of a bore in the bedroom department, if you should ever care to take your part to heart."

"Aww, thank you, Draco." Tori flipped him the bird. Draco matched her with one of his own and set up the staircase leading to Scorpius's room. He found Hermione on the floor, face down, arms and legs splayed out as Scorpius waved a pretend wand at her and shouted, "Stupfee!"

"Ah!" Hermione feigned a groan.

"Stupify, my good man," he corrected as he stepped inside the bedroom. Scorpius's eyes lit up upon seeing his father, and he tossed the wand to shout, "Daddy! Daddy! I beat Hermny! You see?"

"I do see. Hermny looks quite stupified." He winked down to his betrothed as he scooped his son up in his arms and began to spin him around the room, dangling him over his shoulder.

"Weeee!"

"How'd it go?" Hermione asked, leaning on her elbows.

Draco spun Scorpius a few more times before he blew a raspberry against his son's neck and set him back down on the floor. The toddler giggled gleefully as he staggered around the room, thoroughly dizzy. Draco's eyes set on Hermione's, and he gave a small sigh. "That's a complicated answer."

"Later, then."

He joined her down on the floor, legs crossed, and picked up Scorpius's toy wand. "Now, Scorp, what should you do if someone tries to throw a stunning spell at you?"

"Spelliamus!"

"Expelliarmus. Yes. Good. Stupify!" He pretended to shout the command while pointing the wand at his son. Scorpius giggled, brandishing an invisible wand, and shouted, "Spell-y-a-moose!"

"Close enough." Draco threw the wand out of his hand at once, giving his son the illusion that it had indeed worked. "Now what do you do?"

"I..." Scorpius thought about it. "I dunno."

"You tickle them, of course!" Hermione shouted, pouncing upon Draco and digging her fingers into his abdomen. Bollocks, Draco hated being tickled! He threw his head back, fighting the laughter that erupted from his lips. Scorpius laughed, jumping up and down before dogpiling on top of Hermione as he began to tickle her. "No, not me!" she laughed. "Daddy! Daddy!"

Draco leaned up and whispered in her ear, "Ooh, I like when you call me that." He then said, loud enough for his son to hear, "Get her, Scorp!"

"No! Ah!" Her fingers loosened their grip as Scorpius tickled her mercilessly. Draco took the opportunity and began to tickle her as well until she was flailing and giggling at the mercy of two generations of Malfoys.

"Alright, Scorp. Let's let the prisoner go free," Draco told his son, and they both stopped at once. Hermione rested her head in the crook of Draco's neck, still laughing uncontrollably. Scorpius climbed off of his parents and pouted his lower lip.
"Why?"

"Why do we let the prisoner go free? -Because we might need her later. She's rather handy with a wand. - Aww, come on, Scorp. Don't give me that look. I'll... I'll buy you candy. Want to go to Honeydukes?"

"Yay!" Scorpius shouted, "I get mine coat!" The toddler bounded out of the room, leaving Draco and Hermione to fend for themselves. She left a kiss here and there on his neck, whispering, "That child just bested you with a pout."

"He never bested me," he replied hastily, "I planned on taking him anyways."

"Sure you did." Hermione sat upright, though her legs still draped across Draco's lap. He didn't mind - in fact, if they weren't in his son's bedroom, he might have tried to initiate a quicky. "So, while I have you alone..." Ooh, yes? "What did Diggle have to say?" Oh. That was not where he thought she was going with that.

Draco leaned his head back against the floor, staring up at the Quidditch mobile above Scorpius's bed to his left. Where should he begin? At the beginning, he supposed. He spun his tale down to every detail. He told her of Diggle's offer and tried to be as neutral as possible when he told her it was her choice. After everything she'd been through, he couldn't find the nerve to bully her into it, no matter how much he wished she would.

The room was quiet for a time until Scorpius came bounding up the stairs, a second set of footsteps following closely behind him. His son and his ex-wife stepped into the room; Scorpius donned in a grey, rustic peacoat that complimented his silver eyes. Astoria crossed her arms. "What's this I hear about filling our child up with sweets?"

"Ah, come on, Tori. Let the child live a little," Draco smirked, tossing Hermione off of him and sitting upright. Hermione laughed, punching him in the arm. "What's the harm in a few sweets once in awhile?"

"Nothing. But this will be the third time this week he's gone."

"Third?"

"Once with myself, once with my father, and now with you."

"You sly child, you." Draco winked at his son. "I bet you pouted your way to Honeydukes the other times too, then?"

Scorpius tried his best attempt at his father's smirk, only giving off about half of the deviousness it required. "I smart."

"Yes. Yes, you are."

"And devious," said Astoria, smiling. "He'll make a fine Slytherin."

Hermione laughed. "What if he ends up in Gryffindor? What will you two do then?"

Draco and Astoria exchanged careful glances before saying together, "Bribe the sorting hat."

"Snoring hat?" Scorpius asked his parents. Hermione was the one to jump in with the answer.

"Sorting hat. It's a magical hat that sorts you into a school House based off of what's in here," she
scooted across the floor to Scorpius and pointed to his temple, "and here." Then she pointed to his heart. "Although, there's still speculation that children might get sorted too soon."

"I've often wondered why you weren't sorted into Ravenclaw," Draco mused.

"I suppose my need for breaking the rules to obtain knowledge is what got me placed in Gryffindor," she replied. "It's no wonder the two of you were in Slytherin. You could take any phrase and turn it against someone."

"Silver banners for silver tongues," quipped Astoria.

"And green banners for green with envy?"

"Evy?" asked Scorpius.

"Envy. It's... oh, never mind." Hermione made to stand and pulled Draco up with her. "Let's go get you some sweets, shall we?" She turned to Draco and whispered, "Can I think on it? Diggle's request?"

"Of course." Draco nodded. "I just need an answer by tomorrow."

"Alright." She gathered his hand in her own. "Let's try to be a family for one day. Just one, normal day."

"Normal. What's that? Never heard of it." Draco smirked, kissed her hand, and reached out, ruffling his son's hair. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah! Go! Go!"

"Will you be bringing him back tonight?"

"Would tomorrow be alright?" asked Draco. "With all that's going on in the Division, I'm not sure when I'll get another chance to keep him."

Astoria nodded and then brought herself down to Scorpius's level to kiss her son on the cheek. "I love you, Scorpy. You be good for Daddy and Hermny, alright?"

"Kay." Scorpius kissed his mother on her nose. "Bye, Mummy!"

"Bye, sweetheart."

Draco scooped Scorpius up in his arms, snuggling him. Despite all of the terrible occurrences these last two days, being surrounded by family -his real family- made all of the drama seem like a fleeting idea. Even Astoria felt like a peaceful reminder that he didn't have to be like his Father. He could love and lose and love again. He could create precious life and instead of snuffing out the possibilities, he could stoke them. Scorpius would want for nothing when it came to the emotional support Draco so craved as a small child. He would break the cycle. He would, in turn, plant a new tree with the seed of second chances and watch it thrive. The roots of the Malfoys had been poisoned, and the name sullied. But not anymore. This time, Draco would make it right, and he would start by never forcing his son into thinking exactly the same way Draco did. Whatever he chose in his life, whether it be muggle friends or muggleborns, Scorpius would be encouraged to choose friends for their hearts and not their blood.

After all, that sort of thinking was what had landed him Hermione Granger. And that, in itself, was worth everything.
He smiled over to his fiancé and promised, "One normal day."
Post and Pancakes

Chapter Notes

First off, I'd like to thank WayMay for whipping my terrible writing into shape. She had to endure quite a bit, so please give her a round of applause while she made this chapter the pretty little gem it is compared to the lump of coal she received.

Secondly, I'd like to dedicate this chapter to someone who doesn't know me, but could really use the good vibes. She's a friend of LightofEvolution, and her name is Jenny. Jenny is kicking ass and taking names in the battle against her body. Please, give her all of the good vibes.
~A.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I stared up at the sun,
Thought of all of the people, places and things I've loved.
I stared up just to see
With all of the faces, you were the one next to me.

You can feel the light start to tremble,
Washing what you know out to sea.
You can see your life out of the window tonight.

If I lose myself tonight,
It'll be by your side.
"If I Lose Myself" by OneRepublic

Harry Potter received the letter in the middle of the night while snuggled up next to Ginny, who was three weeks away from giving birth to their third child, Lily. Things were already stressful at the Ministry with the attack of the 'white-wolf', as the Auror Department was currently nicknaming the assailant, but adding his wife's pregnancy on top of that put Harry in a constant state of restless sleep and an overabundance of coffee and tea to keep him going during the day. So when the large, tawny owl pecked loudly at his bedroom window, Harry didn't grumble. He shuffled over to the window, opened it, and greeted the owl he recognised as a Hogwarts staff owl with a stretch of the arm. It landed gracefully on his arm, digging its talons into his skin. Harry winced but smiled gratefully as the owl presented a scroll attached to its leg.

"Thanks," he told it, giving it a pat on the head before untying the scroll. "Want some of my biscuits? They're over on the table if you're-"

The owl didn't need to be told twice, hooting excitedly as it flew over to Harry's desk and began to peck wildly at his evening snack. Ginny rolled over when she heard the owl and sat up, muttering, "Harry?"

"S'alright, Gin. Just something from Hogwarts."
"Oh..." She laid back down and before her head hit the pillow, she was asleep once more. Harry smiled and glanced down at the wax stamp on the scroll. He recognised it immediately as McGonagall's Headmistress stamp. Becoming more concerned, he peeled back the stamp, unrolled the scroll, and read quietly to himself.

'Dear Mr. Potter,

I require your presence at Hogwarts at your earliest convenience. Following the events of this evening, which I will discuss with you upon your arrival, I find myself in need of your services as both an Auror and a friend. Please floo when you receive this letter, and let me know when to prepare for your arrival.

Best wishes,

Minerva McGonagall

Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry'

Hmm... Well, that was peculiar. What could McGonagall possibly want with him when he had a perfectly good Auror detail set up at Hogwarts? Whatever it was, it sounded urgent. He left the window open should the owl decide he'd like to leave before Harry came back to bed and took off to the fireplace in the living room. Grabbing up a bit of floo powder, he tossed it into the fireplace, said, "Hogwarts" and stuck his head into the flames.

"Headmistress?" he called out, searching around the hearth of the Headmaster's office that he once associated with Albus Dumbledore. He spotted McGonagall pacing in front of her desk, and she jumped at the sound of his voice.

"Auror Potter," she sighed. "It is good to see you again, though I'm afraid the circumstances, to which I have called you, are grave."

"What's wrong, Minerva?" The schoolboy in him felt out of place for using McGonagall's first name in conversation, but he reminded himself that he was an adult, and this was cordial to address friends by their given name.

"You do recall the name of a female student you've ordered under the protection of your Aurors from the Ministry?"

"Of course. Victoria Crabbe. Vincent Crabbe's sister, if I'm correct."

"Yes. Well.." McGonagall trailed off, then sighed once more. "Victoria came into the infirmary complaining about dreams."

"Dreams? You called on me because a student is having some dreams?"

"Dreams about a white wolf, Auror Potter. Which, if I'm to have read your briefing correctly, was associated with another attack earlier this week."

"Are you saying she's having some sort of premonition?"

"Either that or, a more logical explanation is that someone is directly targeting Ms. Crabbe through her dreams as a way to provoke her. You were personally trained by Severus in the ways of Occlumency. I think it rather prudent that you consider training Ms. Crabbe."

"I... Not to sound rude, Headmistress, but I am the Head Auror at the Ministry. I can't just drop
everything I have going on here to educate a student on Occlumency." Harry rummaged through his mind for another way and came up with one after only a few short moments. "But I do know someone who is just as versed at me, if not more so. I can send him in a day's time. You remember Draco Malfoy? He was also trained in the craft."

"Malfoy? Isn't he an Auror now?"

"Yes. And he works for me, so he can't turn the assignment down. You'll have your man by the end of the day tomorrow."

"I think that would be a marvellous gesture on your part, Auror Potter, considering you threw three Aurors into my school without a moment's warning. You caused quite an uproar amongst the students trying to figure out why the Ministry would find it so prudent to send Aurors to care for us."

Harry tried to force a smile, even though inwardly the scolding caused a flare of irritation inside of him. "My... apologies, Headmistress. I wouldn't have done it if it wasn't of the utmost importance and urgency."

McGonagall pursed her lips and said, "Yes. I'm sure you wouldn't have. But be that as it may, I do not appreciate being forced into the situation you've put us in. -You may tell Auror Malfoy that we shall have a room set up for him prior to his arrival."

"Of course..."

"And please tell him that time is of the essence."

"Yes, Professor," Harry quipped, and McGonagall broke out into a small smile.

"Goodnight, Mr. Potter."

"Goodnight, Headmistress."

_________________________________________________________________

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddeeeeee!"

Draco and Hermione awoke to knees on their stomachs as Scorpius bounced merrily up and down on their intertwined bodies. Hermione had been on the cusp of a very saucy dream involving her, Draco, and a small broom closet tucked away in the halls of Hogwarts when she jolted awake. Draco groaned next to her, as awake as she was but more perturbed as he glared up at his son and said, "What do you think you're doing, young man?"

"I play!" Scorpius shouted, vaulting himself into the air and made to land his knees into Draco's chest when the prepared father jerked his hands up and caught his legs before they had a chance to do any damage. Scorpius giggled, unaware that he was pushing on his father's patience by the second. "Yay! Daddy play too!"

"No, Daddy not play, Scorpius. It's..." He reached over to the table for his wand, waved it about, and watched as red smoke formed itself into the time. "Six forty in the morning. Shouldn't you be sleeping? We spent all afternoon at Honeydukes with no nap -you should be passed out right about now."

"Nope. Play." The Slytherin-to-be rolled to his side and climbed on top of Hermione, pressing his nose to hers. "Mummy play too?"

Staring up at the innocence in those eyes, she sighed and caved. "Alright, sweetheart. We can play.
But maybe I should make breakfast first? How do pancakes sound?"

"With Seerup?" he pronounced the word with the cutest drawl that made Hermione want to snuggle him. Which is exactly what she did. She wrapped her arms around the child and engulfed him in a suffocating hug, to which he tried to wriggle out of much like a cat that didn't want to be pet. Speaking of which...

"Yes, with Syrup. And Uncle Dean is bringing over a surprise for you today."

"Suppise? Oooh! Gimme!"

"Only if you're good, and only once Uncle Dean arrives." She couldn't help but notice the impatience that overtook Draco time and time again had indeed been passed down in lineage. She glanced over to the already-falling-back-asleep Draco and tapped him on the arm. His eyes bolted open, and he turned his head to her. "Pancakes?"

"Hmm? Yeah... sounds great..." He closed his eyes, adding, "But you don't have to cook them... just get one of the... (yawn) house elves to do it for you..."

"They're free elves, Draco. I'm not going to ask them to cook pancakes for us this early in the morning when I'm perfectly capable of doing it myself."

"Whatever," he grumbled back, turning on his side to make a point that he want to go back to sleep.

"Shall we go whip us up some pancakes, then?" Hermione turned her attention to Scorpius, who rubbed his stomach and nodded. She dragged herself out of bed, threw on one of the silk bathrobes Draco had given her for Christmas, and took the child's small hand to lead him down the stairs and into the kitchens. As she gathered her ingredients, Scorpius took a seat on one of the swivel stools at the counter, watching.

"No magic?" he asked.

"Not everything requires magic, Scorpius. Remember that. You're perfectly capable of being a whole individual without a wand."

"Pweeeeeease?" he begged. Good lord, she thought, this child was definitely going to be a Slytherin after all. She caved to the tiny pout and big, grey eyes, pulling out her wand from her bathrobe and giving it a flick. Scorpius watched in delight as the ingredients began to pour and mix themselves in a bowl. "Yay!" he shouted, a bit too loud.

"Shhh, sweetie. We don't want to wake Daddy."

"Daddy mad?" the child asked her suddenly, eyebrows knitted upwards in concern. He was far too young to be concerned with such things, she thought. She walked over to him and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Of course not. Why would you think that Daddy's cross?"

"He no plays me."

Oh, that pulled Hermione's heartstrings right out of her chest. She gave him another big hug and bent down to his eye level. "No, Scorpius. Daddy's just sleepy is all. He's had a rough couple of days, and he's very tired. I promise he'll be right as rain when he wakes up, and you can bet he'll want to spend his morning playing with you. He loves you more than anything."
Scorpius beamed with pride, and he attempted yet again that infamous Malfoy smirk. "Daddy love me."

"Yes. Yes, he does. And I love you, too. And Mummy, and Uncle Harry, Uncle Dean, and so many others. You are a very loved child, Scorpius. You are so, so special." She patted his head and with another flick of her wrist put a skillet on the stove and let her magic ladle out pancake mix. Great, she thought, at this rate, he'll grow to have a larger ego than Draco. That was saying something. "Scorpius, would you like to check the post for me?"

"YES! WOO!" Scorpius bounded off of the chair, ran around the island counter a few times, and took off out of the kitchens and to the owlry. Hermione had no idea where he managed to find so much energy, but she wished she could bottle it up and use it on days like this morning.

Tomorrow would be the start of her training the new Aurors. The thought made her both thrilled and apprehensive. With all of the new threats looming over their heads and this white-wolf masked assailant running about, she felt as if this might be the only peaceful morning they might have in a very long time. She suddenly wished Draco would get his bum out of bed and enjoy it with her -did he not understand that tomorrow marked the beginning of a whole new set of complications? With him working this case and her taking over the training, they'd see so much less of each other, not to mention Scorpius. It broke her heart to think that the lives they had built with each other could be wedged apart by work, but that was the life of an Auror. However, now she had a wedding to plan, and trainees to attend to, and she'd be taking on a whole new role in Scorpius's life as an official stepmother. Well, she supposed, she had already fit that role for almost the entire time since she had met him, but to know that it would be legal... it set a warmth over her skin. All around her, her friends were having children -Harry and Ginny were on number three, for crying out loud! And someday, she might actually become a birth mother herself.

Oh, good Lord, she suddenly thought, what if Draco didn't want more children? They'd never really discussed it - not that Draco hadn't tried. She always avoided the subject whenever possible because it brought up the thought of Ron and her trying right before he'd... she swallowed a lump in her throat and closed her eyes. It was nearing three years since Ron's death. What would he say if he could see the new ring on her finger? Would he be happy that she had found someone new, albeit his schoolboy rival? Would he be proud of her for loving Scorpius as her own? Would he hold her in contempt for not allowing more time to pass before she decided to make a life with Draco? Perhaps he'd kiss her forehead and tell her everything was going to be alright? She wished, in a moment of darkness, that Harry had not discarded the resurrection stone so she could see Ron just one last time. But that was long since gone, discarded in the Forbidden Forest and lost to the world forever.

She dabbed at her eyes when she heard Scorpius's tiny footsteps approaching the kitchen. He bounded through the door with letters in his hands and a grin on his face. "Here, Mummy! Post!"

"Thank you, sweetheart." She reached out and took the mail, sifting through it. There was a letter addressed to Draco with Harry's Auror seal stamped to the back, and another from her parents with Harry's forwarding address. Hermione's parents didn't like sending by owl, so when Hermione had moved in with Draco, where muggle post would never dare tread, she gave them Harry's address to keep the lines of communication open. She answered their phone calls when she could, but being around magic made cell phones finicky, and it was tricky to get reception in the walls of the Ministry. She opened up her parent's letter and scanned it once over. Oh goody, they were coming for a visit... wait... they were coming for a visit? Next month? Oh, good Lord! Hadn't they ever heard of making plans instead of inviting themselves? Not that she didn't love her parents dearly, but preparing herself for the torturous events of her father and Draco quipping back and forth at an alarming rate was never the highlight of these annual visits. At least they could see how much Scorpius had grown, and she could tell them about their engagement.
Looking over to the other letter addressed to Draco, she allowed her mind wander to Diggle's request as she watched Scorpius leave for a moment and return with a few dragon plushies to play with atop the counter while he waited on his pancakes.

What would Diggle's letter say, she wondered, should she choose to accept it? Would it be a stalker letter professing his ongoing adoration for her? Or would he apologise like he had at his Wizengamot trial? What could he possibly have to say to her that he hadn't already said? She didn't like to admit it, but ever since Draco had told her about Diggle's request to give her a letter her curiosity had been peaked. And she knew that she would never get her answers if she turned it down.

"Mummy!" Scorpius shouted, now tugging on her robe. "Pancakes!"

"Hmm?" She turned around and saw that the magic had done a fine work of stacking beautifully golden brown pancakes on top of each other on a plate. She smiled, fixed Scorpius up a plate, and cut his pancakes into little triangles just the way he liked them.

"Seerup," he reminded her. Hermione sat a bottle of maple syrup in front of the toddler and watched him drench his pancakes in the sugary goodness.

"Use your fork," she suggested when he made to pick up a bit with his fingers. Scorpius rolled his eyes and picked up the utensil.

Draco arrived promptly on time as Hermione finished making a second plate, and she sat it down in front of him as he took a seat next to his son. "Are they good, Scorp?"

"Yummmm..."

"Great." He smiled up at Hermione. "Thanks."

"You're most welcome," she grinned back at him and went to make herself a plate. As she began to butter her 'fluffy circles of scrumptiousness' as Ron used to call them, she glanced over at Draco and said, "I've made a decision."

"Yeah?" He chewed on a bite of pancakes and swallowed. "What's the verdict?"

"I've decided that it would be in the best interest of your lead to accept the letter. I mean, it's only a letter, isn't it? He couldn't curse it from his cell in Azkaban..."

Draco set his fork down and scowled. "Diggle said the same thing."

"Did he?" She made a point to stare down at her pancakes that now had far too much butter to be healthy, thinking how eerie it was that she and Greg had shared a thought so similar. She didn't like the idea that they thought the same way in any form or fashion.

"Who Diggull?" Scorpius asked his father.

Draco smirked. "A tosser, that's who."

"Draco! Language!"

"Sorry, Hermione. -Scorpius, he's a major tosser."

She rolled her eyes. "I give up... Scorp, Diggle is a very bad man that Daddy and I put away in prison because he did some very bad things."

"Why?" asked the inquisitive blonde.
Draco gladly accepted the challenge to answer. "Because he didn't clean up his toys when his parents told him to."

The toddler's eyes went as wide as saucers, and he stuffed a whole forkful of pancakes into his mouth before dashing off, presumably to clean his room.

"That was downright cruel," Hermione scolded. Draco chuckled as he dug into another helping of pancakes and threw a smirk her way.

"Yes, but it got him to be responsible, so really I should be receiving an award for parent of the year."

"How very Slytherin of you..." She nudged her thumb towards the end of the counter. "Post came for you. It's from Harry."

"What does Scarhead want now?"

"You've practically been friends with the man for two years now. Don't you think you could drop the childish name calling?"

"That's not how our friendship works."

"Well, at least you're admitting you're friends." Hermione sat down beside him with her plate at Scorpius's abandoned chair and watched as he opened up Harry's letter. His eyes scanned over the words, and with each passing moment, his face grew sterner. "Something wrong?"

"He's sending me on assignment," he answered her, eyes still meticulously scrutinising every letter on the page. "There's been a development at Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts? What sort of development?"

"Apparently, one of the students is having visions of this man in the white-wolf mask." He handed the paper to her, and she hastily read over Harry's sloppy handwriting.

"Well, this is good, isn't it? It's a connection."

"He wants me to teach the kid Occlumency. Thinks it will help."

"And what do you think?"

He turned his face towards her. "I think we should be approaching this offensively, not defensively. With Legilimency, I might be able to sift through her dreams and get a better grasp as to if it's being put into her head or if she's making the whole thing up."

"Does it say who the student is?"

"Yeah." Draco's eyes shifted down to the paper. "Read at the bottom." There was a sobering way in which he spoke, and she trailed her gaze down, down, down to the bottom to read, "Victoria Crabbe. Crabbe... as in..."

"Vincent's sister, presumably." He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands and glared at his plate. "Of course, it would be her, wouldn't it? I mean, it couldn't have been one of the other two students being monitored, could it? Just my bloody," he slammed his fist down onto the table, "luck!"

Hermione sat a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Maybe this could be a good thing," she offered. "You could tell her stories about her brother."
Draco snorted an indignant laugh. "Yeah? And say what? 'Hi. My name's Draco, and I used to bully your brother around while getting him to do my dirty work. He eventually turned evil, tried to kill the famous golden-trio, and ended up getting himself burnt to a crisp. I was there. I watched it all happen, and I didn't save him because I was busy trying to save my own arse.' That'll go over real well, Hermione." He stood up from his seat, disposed of his plate in the sink, and walked to the doorway. "I'll go talk to Diggle today before I leave. Potter wants me sent off tonight. L..." He turned back around suddenly, sadness etched in his brow. "I don't like going on assignments without you, you know?"

Indeed, Hermione knew exactly how he felt. For the last two years, they practically worked every case together, side by side. They were an excellent team, feeding off of each other's knowledge and wit. The fact that fate pulled them in different directions on possibly one of the most dangerous cases they had ever worked put a great strain on both of their hearts. She stood up and walked up to him, running her fingers over his Dark Mark. "We'll keep in touch by floo, and depending on how this turns out, you might not even be gone that long. -We'll get through this. We always do."

Draco let his cold demeanour shift to a soft, tender persona he only allowed around her and Scorpius. He pulled her close to him, kissed her on the lips, and whispered, "Love you, stupid witch."

She cracked a smile. "Love you too, arrogant prat."

When Draco entered the Azkaban interrogation room for the second time, not twenty-four hours later with Lindy by his side, he noted the conceited smile Greg Diggle wore as he watched his once-pupil approach the table.

"Hello, Draco. I take it you have an answer for me."

"She'll do it," Draco said, "So now you've got what you want. Tell me where you hid the stone."

Diggle grinned from ear to ear, and he rubbed his hands together. "Oh, yes, the juicy bit. Are you ready for it, Draco Malfoy? It's been under your nose the entire time. Practically in plain sight, but none of you were bright enough to figure it out. I really am quite surprised Hermione didn't, but then again her brilliance has been clouded by the shadow of a smug-faced Malfoy, so I can forgive her just the once."

"She's never needed your forgiveness, you prick. -The stone's location. Now."

Diggle chuckled, leaning back in his chair. "I stowed it away inside of a box... in the Department of Mysteries." Diggle watched as Draco's face turned to one of sheer astonishment at his confession. "So you see, I very much doubt anyone in a white-wolf mask got their hands on that precious little gem. Because if they did, you'd have a traitor in your midsts. As it were, I can guarantee you, it hasn't moved, and I'll gladly tell you where I've stowed it. -You'll find it tucked behind a prophecy on the nineteenth row, nine shelves up."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "It better be there, Diggle."

"It will be, Draco. You have my word."

Chapter End Notes
Easter Egg! There's a significance to 9 and 19. Can any of you figure it out? XD Please feel free to drop a review in the little box! This drama is like a roller coaster: we're riding up the ramp about to take a deep, plunging fall into the abyss. So ask yourself: did I pee before I got on the ride? XD

~A.
Drum roll... can't wait for you guys to get done with this chapter. A very special thanks to WayMay, again, for helping me perfect this. 3 Love you, Way.

~A.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Don't wanna call you in the nighttime
Don't wanna give you all my pieces
Don't wanna hand you all my trouble
Don't wanna give you all my demons
You'll have to watch me struggle
From several rooms away
But tonight I'll need you to stay.
"The Run and Go" by Twenty One Pilots

"Malfoy, I can't just give you access to the Department of Mysteries."

Draco stared, dumbfounded, across the desk from Harry Potter. "Listen, Potter-" he began, realising the fact that they were in the bullpen and that he would have to refer to his superior as 'Auror' around present company. Before Potter could open his mouth, he corrected himself, "Auror Potter. You and I both know that Diggle is an untrustworthy sod, but you have to believe me. He wants to get this letter to Hermione, and he wouldn't risk it. So, shove protocol up the arse and give me clearance."

Harry blinked back at him. "Are you done?"

"I'd say so."

"Good. As I was saying, I can't just give you access to the D.O.M. -I'll have to accompany you." He stood from his desk, pushed his chair in, and began to rummage through a side drawer. Draco smirked, relieved that, for once, Potter wasn't going to give him shit about following a lead. He watched the scarhead pull out a set of long, black keys from somewhere deep inside the drawer and waggle them in front of his face. "Look, I just want to say I appreciate the fact that you're going to Hogwarts on such short notice. I know we're working this case, but if Victoria Crabbe is connected on some deeper level, we need to know how."

"I know," Draco replied quietly, swallowing a bit of vomit that threatened to upchuck. He still didn't like the idea of meeting Crabbe's younger sister one bit. Perhaps she'd never heard his name before, and he could have a clean start of things. Yeah, and maybe he'd ask Potter to be his best man. Ha. As if. -He began to follow Potter as he led the way through the Auror Division and to the set of elevators in the hallway. As they stepped inside, Draco attempted conversation. "Hermione says I should stop giving you nicknames."

"Does she?" Potter cracked a smile as he pressed the basement level 9 and inserted one of the black keys into a slot next to the button. This particular key was jagged and looked quite old, though it
couldn't have been considering these new key protocols became implemented just a few short years ago. The elevator, upon the key's turn, lit to life and began its slow descent to the bottom level.

Draco leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms. "She doesn't like me calling you scarface."

"I don't like you calling me scarface."

"Sure you do. It gives you comfort."

"How in Merlin's name would you being a git give me comfort?"

"Because, you know if I'm ever just peachy-keen polite to you, it's not me, and someone with polyjuice potion has most likely replaced me."

"Fair statement." Harry shrugged. The lights in the elevator began to flicker, but Potter ignored them as if this were common for the power to drain. Draco didn't feel at ease at all. In fact, he rather wanted to piss himself. He didn't, but the urge was certainly there. "I can't believe he hid the stone in the Department of Mysteries..." Potter mirrored Draco, crossing his arms. "If it's really there, that means it's been here the entire time."

"Great. You know how to point out the obvious." Draco rolled his eyes. "All I can say is it better be there because this is taking time away that I could be spending with my son."

"How is Scorpius doing?" Harry's voice was genuine. "I don't think I've seen him since Christmas."

"He's adjusting... This past year, I've taken on a lot more cases than I did before and can see he's trying to wrap his head around why I don't have a normal schedule. How do your children cope with you gone all the time?"

Potter looked surprised at the question, but covered it up quickly and said, "Well, Ginny and I put James in Nursery school when he was younger, and now Albus goes as well. James recently graduated into Reception. I could, you know, have Ginny send Astoria some pamphlets on the school if you're interested."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Sure."

The two men stood in silence as the elevator creaked and groaned its way down until it gave a hearty jerk and stopped. Potter removed the key, slipped the set into his pockets, and nodded. "Well, let's get this over with then."

"Lead the way."

He'd never been inside the Department of Mysteries before, so when Draco took in the sight of the elusive black room with its circular design and blue-flamed candles interspersed along the walls, he felt a tad overwhelmed. The flames flickered about, reflecting off of the black marble floor. Draco's eyes played tricks on his mind, giving the illusion of water at their feet, and for a moment he feared treading on the floor. But when Potter stepped forward, he could hardly let his dread grip him, and he crossed the threshold. The floor, much to his relief, was perfectly safe, and he followed quickly after Potter to the handle-less black doors that surrounded them. Draco heard the rumours; that Potter had lost his godfather in one of the rooms hidden behind these doors. Draco knew how he'd feel if he ever were forced to step inside of the Room of Requirements again; this couldn't be easy for Potter. But one would never know it by looking at him- Harry pushed his hand out to the farthest door on the left and looked back at Draco to follow.

As they stepped inside the door, it slammed shut, and before them stood a vast, rectangular room
with twinkling lights that danced in sparkles across the walls. Tables spread along them; on top were clocks, pocket watches, and an array of random timepieces.

"Time room," explained Potter, pointing around to the different tables. "Used to have time turners, but they've since found themselves in a time loop." He gestured to the end of one of the tables, where a set of time turners regularly appeared at the end of a table, fell, and disappeared to find themselves at the top of the table once more. "At the end of this Hall will be the Hall of Prophecy."

"Shouldn't there be more personnel?"

"The Ministry's budget has been hurting since The Takeover cleanup. A lot of people were deflected to other departments to make up for the lack of staff." Potter pushed open the door at the end of the hall while Draco stared at a particularly brilliant bit of light spilling from a bell jar at the end of the longest table near them. He felt drawn like a moth to a flame, but Potter thrust out his hand and waved it in front of his face, knocking his senses back to reality. "Whatever you do, do not touch that."

"What is it?"

"No clue. But the last person that touched it disengaged."

"Got it. Don't touch the glowing-jar-of-death."

He followed Potter into the next room, which stunned him even more. The Hall of Prophecy had been described only once to him by his father, but even that description didn't come close to the grandeur of the rows upon rows of glowing blue orbs that sat on their shelves, gathering dust. The Manor library was nothing compared to the towering shelves that shined in this room. Even more candles rested in their brackets, reflecting off of the orbs. Draco immediately felt the temperature change, and noted that he could see his breath as he said, "Nineteenth row, nine shelves up."

"Do you think that the numbers are significant?" asked Harry, lighting the tip of his wand with a quick 'lumos' to lead them as he counted the rows.

Draco had mulled this around in his head, and the only logical explanation that he could come up with made his skin crawl. "It's Hermione's birthday. September nineteenth."

Potter stopped dead in his tracks, turned on the balls of his feet, and stared Draco in the eyes. "That's one of the most disturbing theories I've ever heard."

"It's the only one that fits. -And we both know how obsessed he was with her. Still is, as a matter of fact. So let's just get this damn stone and never mention the birthday thing to Hermione, got it? The last thing she needs is to add Diggle's fanatical endearments to the list of stresses this case already has."

"For once, I agree with you." Harry nodded and then began to take point again, counting. He stopped at eighteen, turned his head towards Draco, and said, "To brief you, this is going to be a difficult task. If you touch a prophecy that's not meant for you, it'll make you go blimey."

"You're just now telling me this? What if I had touched one? What then, Potter?"

"Well, then I guess I wouldn't be renting a tux for your wedding," Potter smirked. "When we find the ninth shelf, we'll levitate the orbs."

"Fine. The sooner this is done with, the better." They made their way to the nineteenth row and counted their way up to the ninth shelf. Draco scowled, looking at the mantelpiece with concern.
"Would have been nice if he had told us what brilliant orb he decided to put it behind."

"Going by your theory, I'd say the seventy-ninth one."

Draco opened his mouth to argue, but Potter's suggestion fit the mould. September 19th, 1979. A constant reminder that she was older than him. They walked the length of the shelf, counting carefully out loud each and every orb until they made it to their assumed goal. Potter levitated the orb, while Draco handled the task of accio-ing anything that he could see behind it. Lo and behold, a small, cubed box unnervingly resembling the first design of Draco's Pandora Box floated down from the shelf. He levitated it to their feet and stared down at the wondrous square. Draco came prepared, pulling out a set of dragon hide gloves from his pockets; he slipped them onto his hands and carefully plucked the box off the floor and between his fingertips. He offered it out between them, pried open the top…

And right there, giving off its brilliant cobalt glow, was the Pandora Stone.

A mixture of emotions found their way into Draco's chest; relief at finding the stone, agitation at it being right under their nose for two years, and frustration, because now they had no other leads as to the attack on his father Friday evening. Could there be two stones? What did Diggle know? Question after question presented itself, and Draco felt, for a moment, as if he might explode. Merlin, Hermione's curious nature was rubbing off on him, wasn't it?

"How do we know it's the real one?" asked Potter. His voice didn't hold suspicion, but simply authentic concern.

Draco stared down at the stone, a bead of sweat dripping down his forehead. "I'd need to run some experiments… Do you think Hogwarts could set me up a room?"

"You don't expect just to carry the stone around with you," Potter asked, levitating the prophecy back to its appropriate spot on the shelf.

"Tell me. Do you or anyone else know this stone as I do? Not even Diggle could say as much. So, if you want to leave it in the hands of some Ministry official, who's going to get himself harmed, by all means. But you'll be the tosser that let it happen." He snapped the box shut and offered it out to Harry. "Your call, Potter."

Harry looked down at the box, back up to Draco, and sighed. "Fine. I'm entrusting you with it, Malfoy. You're going to be around children. Remember that. -I'll go get those answers from Diggle."

"What?" No way. He's my witness-

"You have your assignment. I'm perfectly capable of handling Greg. Quit trying to take on the entire case by yourself. -You have friends, Draco. Remember that. This concerns all of us, not just you."

Draco snorted a sardonic laugh. "Yeah? Tell me, is your family being threatened in their beds at night? Can you honestly say you know what I'm going through?"

"Of course I can," Harry snapped, his voice careening at Draco like a violent wave. "I'm the head of the Auror Department! I have a target on my back every day! I just don't wear my fear around on my sleeve like some!" He glared daggers, and Draco took a step back. "For as long as I can remember ever since coming into my magic, I've never had a moment of rest! So, you know what, Malfoy? How about you get out of that incredibly large ego of yours and remember that you're not the victim unless you make yourself the victim." He came down from his outburst, the anger leaving his face as quick as it had come. He paused a moment, flexing the hand that didn't hold his wand. "You can't
think that way, alright?” He sounded reflective. "The moment you do, you've isolated yourself. I would have never defeated Voldemort if it weren't for countless others. People that gave their lives. People that sacrificed so much… But I always had help. Ron. Hermione. Dean. Luna. Neville. Even you. I'd never have made it this far without any of you. So, for once in your life, could you take off the burdens and divvy them up between all of us? You're not going at this alone, and the sooner you realise that the less likely you are of screwing this all up." He thrust out his hand between them. "Got it?"

His heart beating wildly in his chest, Draco stared down at the calloused, square hand and thought about Harry's words. He'd never considered reaching out and burdening others with what he thought were his responsibilities. He just wasn't raised that way. The Malfoys were a family of secrets, scheming, and always staying one step ahead. They never relied on anyone because, according to his father, it made a man weak. But he had made something of himself in these last two years, hadn't he? And he hadn't done it alone. He wasn't the one to take down Diggle-they all were. The thought of putting his burdens on someone else… he didn't know if he could stomach it. He'd done it once, and look how that had turned out? Half of the Ministry torn to shreds, and the weight of falling in love with someone whom he knew he could never deserve. Conflict burned within Draco, and just to appease Potter, he took his hand and shook. "I expect a full report of what he tells you."

"The same goes for your end," Potter agreed. "Find out what you can with Victoria. Protect the students at all costs. I'll have the Headmistress open up a floo in your room so that we can communicate."

"Fine." Draco dropped Harry's hand and rubbed his dragon gloves along his robes, wiping away any bit of sweat. Potter gave him an incredulous look, and he quickly explained, "I don't want to expose the stone to anything. Not until I know if it's the real thing or not."

"Right… Well, let's get out of here, alright? The last time I was in here, I gave your dad a run for his money. I'm not too fond of the memories in this place."

"Neither is my father."

They began towards the exit at once. Draco slipped off one of the dragon hide gloves, stowed the box inside of it, and tucked it safely into his pocket.

"So you found it?" Hermione sighed into the receiver of her cell phone as she bounced Scorpius up and down on her knees. She'd brought the blonde back to Astoria's as promised, but without Draco here, the child was less than happy. He'd taken to throwing his toys around the room with an accidental spout of magic when she'd told him that Daddy had to leave immediately for work, and his attitude wasn't much better now. "Are you sure it's the one?"

"Malfoy's going to run some tests at Hogwarts," Harry said, his voice crackling over the static air. "Is he with you now?"

"Yeah. Gimme a moment. –Hey, Malfoy! Hermione wants to speak to you." There was a crinkle of sound, and then an agitated, "Confound it all, Hermione, you know how I hate using these blasted things."

"Yes, well they're much more efficient than an owl," Hermione muttered, turning her face down to Scorpius. "Daddy's on the phone. Would you like to speak to him?"

"No." Scorpius crossed his arms. "I mad."
"He's what? What'd you do?"

"I didn't do anything, Draco. He's mad that you left in such a hurry."

"...Put me on the Sonorus and let me talk to him."

"Oh, we've been over this. It's called a speaker phone." She pressed the button. "You're on."

"Scorp. It's your Father." She could hear Draco attempt his best Lucius impression. "Stop misbehaving and listen to your mothers. Both of them."

"I mad," the child said again, looking down to the little black box in his mother's hand. "You no play me!"

"I had to go to work, Scorpius. You know this is what I do for a living. I'm stopping the bad guys, remember?"

"Daddy's like a super-hero," Hermione told him with encouragement.

Scorpius pouted his lip. "Want Daddy home. Now."

Draco sighed. "I can't do that, mate. I'm sorry. But I promise you, as soon as I come home, I'll make it up to you. Honeydukes. Quidditch match. Whatever you want, Scorp. But I need you to be a big boy for me right now, alright? I love you."

Scorpius's pout dropped into a quivering lip. "Daddy come back?"

Hermione jumped in quickly. "Of course, he's coming back, sweetheart. And it's alright to miss him."

"But it's not okay to disobey because of it."

Astoria came into the room, carrying a tray of tea. Jameson followed behind her, donned in a tailored tweed ensemble that brought out the amber flecks in his eyes. He looked like he wanted to vomit as he took his seat next to her and was forced to hold her hand in an adoring manner. "He's one to talk, isn't he?" chimed in Astoria. "Considering all that man ever does is act out when he doesn't get his way. And then he expects more from a two-year-old?" She laughed.

"I can hear you, Tori."

"Good. Serves you right.- I've got it on this end, Draco. I put up with your foul temper for years. I think I can handle the terrible twos."

Hermione giggled into the back of her hand. "She's got you."

"Yeah, yeah..." Draco grumbled. "You hear me, young man? No acting out while I'm gone. I expect a good report or no sweets."

"Awwww!" Scorpius whined. "I good!"

"Then act like it. I love you."

"Love you, Daddy!"

"We all do," said Hermione. "Be careful, alright?"
"Since when am I not careful?"

"Don't even get me started."

"It was a joke, Hermione. Settle down. I'll floo you tonight when I've settled. –I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Stupid witch."

"Arrogant prat."

There was another fumble over the airwaves, with Draco muttering, "How do I turn this stupid thing off?" and then a click. The line went dead. Hermione smiled to herself as she ended her call and stared down to Scorpius, whose disposition changed substantially since talking to his father. He, now, wore a sly smile on his face, as if he were trying ever so hard to look like he was 'good'.

"Honestly, that man babies our child more than I do. Who is wearing the skirt in this family, anyway?" Astoria ran her fingers along the hem of her long, emerald dress and winked over to Hermione to soften the witch's growing apprehension.

"If anyone, I'd say it's Jameson," Hermione replied gracefully, leaving Theodore in a puddle of bright red embarrassment oozing on top of the divan. The doorbell rang, and immediately the Auror sprang to life from the sofa, wand clutched in his hand. He narrowed his eyes and looked between the two witches.

"Either of you expecting company?"

"It might be Dean with the K.I.T.T.E.N." Hermione glanced down at Scorpius and up to the adults. "I told him I'd be by here." She stood and made to cross the room, but Jameson was trailing behind her like a dog at her heels. She sighed, saying over her shoulder, "I can handle this, Theo."

"Perhaps, but my instructions from Auror Potter were quite clear: I was to protect anyone inside the Greengrass Estate. So, under statute 437, I must accompany you to the door."

Hermione rolled her eyes and led the way through the curving hallways to the front door. She reached for the handle, but stopped herself last moment and drew her wand, looking to Jameson. "As a precaution."

"Of course." Jameson nodded. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd appreciate it if you'd allow me to open the door as well, Auror Granger."

If looks could kill, Jameson would be in a pine box right about now, but she stepped aside and allowed him to take point at the door, and with a jerk, he twisted the handle to swing it open. The hazel in his eyes darkened, and with a conservative stance he raised his wand and stepped outside. Hermione, who couldn't see outside from her current position, readied her wand and stepped through the threshold.

What she saw, she could never un-see.

Scattered amongst the vast, flat plains of the front courtyard were the bloodied, mangled remains of some orange and white animal. As she focused her eyes, she realised they were foxes -dozens of foxes dead and bleeding from their mouths. Their beady black eyes stared vacantly up to the sky. Hermione put her hand up to her mouth to stifle a scream, and she rushed out to the courtyard, Jameson on her heels.
"Miss Granger! Stop! You mustn't-!"

But Hermione had already fallen to her knees beside the closest fox, waving her wand over the limp body in an attempt to detect life. But she could tell by the smell alone -these were long since dead. "Oh God…" Nausea overtook her, and she turned her head, vomiting her morning breakfast. Jameson stood by her side, patting her on the back but kept his wand drawn and eyes out across the field. When she had nothing left to give, she wiped the back of her mouth with her sleeve and glanced up at Theodore. "Who would do this? Who would kill all of these innocent creatures?"

"Miss Granger, we should get you indoors until I've contacted the Ministry."

Hermione tried her best to use her professional brain instead of allowing herself to succumb to the pain she felt at all of the dead creatures in front of her. She looked out across the field, and that's when she saw it: they weren't just scattered about. There were seven rows, distinctly, with four each. She jumped to her feet and began to count to confirm. Jameson stayed on her heels, catching on, quickly scoring with her. "Twenty-six… Twenty-seven… Twenty-eight." With a sinking feeling in her stomach, she counted the last fox. "Twenty-eight. Twenty-eight foxes. Jameson—do you know what this means?"

Together, they exclaimed, "The sacred twenty-eight!"

A scream erupted from inside the Manor, and before Hermione could register it, Jameson was already off at a sprint towards the front door. Wand clutched tight in her fingers, Hermione took off as well, following the screams as she burst inside all the way to the family den, where Scorpius lay collapsed in his mother's arms, convulsing.

Chapter End Notes

And so begins the fall down the rabbit hole.
~A.
It was, of course, fate that Harry's phone would die shortly after speaking with Hermione, so neither he nor Draco had any idea of the ongoings at the Greengrass Estate when they stepped through the floo together and arrived in Headmistress McGonagall's office. She was already waiting there at her desk, writing something with a very lengthy and plumed quill. Her eyes flickered up to the green-flamed hearth as the Auror duo stepped through, and she gave out a heavy sigh. "Auror Potter. Auror Malfoy." She rose from her chair and nodded once to both of them in acknowledgement. "I'm so very relieved to see you."

"What's wrong, Headmistress?" Harry asked. Draco set the one suitcase he brought with him down beside him and watched McGonagall's face turn sour.

"Shortly before your arrival, Victoria Crabbe collapsed in class with convulsions. She's in the infirmary now, but I fear if something isn't done soon, she could very well lose her sanity."

"More visions?" asked Draco, catching her attention. She nodded slowly to him.

"Yes." The elder witch wrung her hands together, and she looked extremely disheartened. "Except, this time… it wasn't just Miss Crabbe. Willard Parkinson has, also, come under attack."

"Pansy's cousin?" Draco didn't know him well enough, but he was aware that he was on the list of three children with the possibility of a target on their back. "And the third child? Edward Lupin?"

'Teddy' Lupin, Draco's very own first cousin, once removed, was only tied in because of his mother's lineage to the Blacks.

"He seems to be doing just fine. For now."

"Right." Draco rubbed his hands together, relief filling his core. Though he didn't know the child well, there was always a soft spot in his heart for family. "Take me to the infirmary."

"Of course."

The fire lit to life once more, and out of the green flames burst forth Lindy Bolt, wearing a casual jumper and sunhat. "So sorry I'm late, Sir!" She gasped, turned around, felt through the green flames, and pulled out two suitcases. "I didn't get your owl until a few moments ago. My boyfriend and I were just saying our goodbyes…"
"No," Draco sneered, looking to Harry. "No."

"Yes." Harry insisted.

"I don't need her here, for Salazar's sake! I told you, I don't need an Auror detail-"

"Consider her a partner, then."

"Hermione's my partner!"

"Auror Malfoy, I can assure you my credentials make me an adequate replacement for Auror Granger." Lindy bowed respectfully to him. "I promise not to get in your way. I'll be a lacewing fly on the wall."

"Hmph." Draco rolled his eyes.

Headmistress McGonagall raised an eyebrow and stared at Potter. "Another Auror, Potter?"

"Malfoy's personal detail."

"I don't need a detail!"

"I don't care what you think you don't need, it's happening. End of discussion."

The elder witch, between them, tapped her foot, obviously just as irritated as Draco that another Auror would be taking post in Hogwarts without previous consent. "I'll… have Argus set up another room, then?" She gave an irritated sigh. "Is there anything else, Auror Potter? Should I expect the entire Bulgarian Quidditch team as well?"

"No, Headmistress…" Potter bowed his head respectfully. "I'm really sorry to throw all of this on you, and I appreciate your cooperation."

"Considering I had no choice in the matter… -Auror Malfoy, I'll have Argus retrieve your bag, if you'd like to follow me to the infirmary…"

"Oh. No need." Draco smirked, glanced back at the over-eager Lindy, and pointed down to his bag. "Get that, will you?"

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Lindy nodded gleefully, scooping up Draco's bag with zealouosity. "Absolutely! I'll just get mine as well, then, shall I?"

"Lovely," Draco drawled back, and turned his face to the McGonagall. "Lead on, Headmistress."

"Scorpius!" Astoria screamed, cradling her son in her arms. Hermione stared down at the small boy whose body shook at uncontrollable speed as his eyes rolled in the back of his head. She'd never felt so helpless as, standing there, watching the two-year-old convulse.

"It's a seizure." She said it out loud, solidifying it. Quickly, she dropped to her knees next to him and added, "Astoria, help me get him on his side."

"O-Okay!"

Hermione reached out to help, and as soon as her fingers touched his skin, Scorpius fell silent. The shaking ceased immediately. "Scorpius? Scorp!"
"What'd you do to him?" snapped Astoria.

"I… I didn't! I wouldn't." She reached down to check his pulse. There, she detected a faint heartbeat and could see his chest begin to rise and fall. "He's alright." With quivering fingers, she stroked hair out of Scorpius's eyes. "He's alright…"

"Miss Granger," said Jameson from behind her, "We need to get him to St. Mungo's at once."

"I'll carry him," Astoria said crisply as Hermione tried to scoop her arms under the frail, unconscious child. Her green eyes glared daggers at her friend, as if she blamed Hermione for Scorpius's state. Hermione backed off and allowed Astoria the room she needed to gather Scorpius's limp body and stand. Jameson stepped over quickly, escorting his pretend girlfriend to the floo.

"I'll inform the Ministry," Hermione whispered, struggling to catch her breath as her heart beat wildly. Jameson caught her words and gave her a crisp nod of agreement before he and Astoria stepped into the floo on their way to St. Mungo's.

Hermione's eyes drifted over to the empty spot on the floor where Scorpius had laid only moments ago, tears welling up in her eyes as anger boiled in her brain. How could anyone attack a child like that? There was no doubt in her mind that whomever was responsible for those foxes had also done something to poor Scorpius. But just how - or why - was a mystery to her. Without thinking, she took off at a run out of the room, down the hall, and through the front door. She paced around each and every fox, looking for a connection. Frantically, she eyed over the fur, the paws, the blood pooling from each fox's mouth. Twenty-eight foxes for the 'Sacred Twenty-Eight' - a nickname for the twenty-eight families with the purest of blood dating back centuries. She recalled a book being written about them, titled: Pure-Blood Directory. Amongst them were the Blacks, Ollivanders, Greengrasses, and the Malfoys. It couldn't be a coincidence that the foxes matched in numbers. What she couldn't understand was why this was significant. Not every family in the 'Sacred' group had been followers of Voldemort. The Weasleys were shining example of that. So, if what Lucius Malfoy said that night in confidence was correct, then the attackers were only coming after the families of Death Eaters. So what was the connection?

Her head swimming, Hermione dashed back inside and charged over to the floo, determination set in her brow. She gathered up a bit of floo powder, shouted, "'Ministry of Magic!' and was gone, just like that.

The room hummed in her silence as the green fire she disappeared through crackled and fizzled out.

Draco's first impression of the still sleeping Victoria Crabbe was that she didn't look at all like her elder brother. Where Vincent had worn a scowl even in his sleep, Victoria looked like any normal child. And considering the entire Crabbe family were known for pudgy faces and double chins, it surprised him to see that the eleven-year-old was quite thin, with a head of wavy jet black hair and thick eyebrows. Well, at least that she had in common with her family - otherwise, Draco might have assumed she was adopted. If he squinted his eyes just right, he could maybe see it in the wider bridge of her nose…

"We gave her a sleeping draught to calm her nerves," McGonagall told him, approaching the side of the child's infirmary gurney. "Same with Mr. Parkinson."

"When are they expected to wake?"

"Very soon, I should say. Perhaps you'd like to get acquainted with your lodgings while you wait?"
Draco shook his head. "If it's all the same to you, Headmistress, I'd like to try to have a look in her mind while she's relaxed."

McGonagall nodded. "I shall inform Miss Crabbe's family, then. They must be kept informed if I'm to let an Auror rummage through their child's mind."

"Do what you have to."

Much to Draco's surprise, McGonagall placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, squaring him up. She was far more wrinkled than he recalled, but her eyes still glimmered with that hint of roguishness she used to carry as his Transfiguration Professor. It always frightened him the way she never cracked under the pressure, though he admired her for it.

"Speaking to you as your former teacher and not as the Headmistress of the school," she began, breaking out into an impish smile, "I am very proud to see how far you have come, Mister Malfoy. An Auror. Quite impressive, I should say."

Receiving praise should have been something that stoked his ego, but right now, in the moment, all he could feel was a sense of shame. He hadn't become an Auror to receive compliments. He'd done it to bring in Bastian Cane and to make up for all of his wrongdoings. He forced a half-smile to appease her and mumbled, "It's nothing. Really."

McGonagall winked at him. "Did you catch a spout of modesty in your growing up, too? Be careful, now. My old heart can only take so much shock." Removing her hand, she stepped away and approached Lindy. "Good to see you again, dear."

"You as well, Headmistress."

Draco watched the elderly witch leave through the door. He'd really lost his edge lately, hadn't he? Since when did he treat compliments as if he didn't deserve them? What was going on in his head? This entire case was shaking him down to the core.

"What shall I do, sir?" asked Lindy, settling their bags on the floor.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Well, for one, you could change into something fitting for an Auror instead of a walk at the beach." He nudged down to Lindy's bright yellow jumper and floral sunhat. Her cheeks darkened a few shades.

"Sorry, sir. I had just a little time off, and I thought I'd take the chance to enjoy it with my boyfriend…"

"This would make it the second time you've said that. I don't really care. -And to be honest, I don't care what you do, so long as you stay out of my way and sight. Got it?"

"Y-Yes sir." Lindy tucked a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. "But I do think I could be a better help to you if you just let me-"

"-I don't need anyone's help," he snapped, agitated. He knew he was taking his frustrations with the stone, Diggle, and the threats on his family out on her, but he didn't have anyone else to bully, so she'd have to do. Lindy's first mistake, he noted, was being submissive to his commands. If she had a backbone to tell him off, he might respect her. But as it were, all he could see her as was a pretty decoration to add to the ambience of the room. Pretty—and annoying. "Why don't you go knit a scarf, or whatever it is you repressed witches do when you aren't making lists." It wasn't his best sneer, but it'd have to do.
He thought for a moment Lindy might snap—her eyes narrowed, and her shoulders fastened back as if snapped together by a harness, but she simply gave a firm nod and said, "I'll go change into my work robes. Will you be fine on your own for a moment?"

"Just go."

He heard her rummage through her bag, pull out her clothes, and when he was sure the door had clicked shut once more, he snatched up a guest stool and took a seat next to Victoria. The first year stirred as if sensing his presence. Her eyes fluttered open, pupils like needle points against the sea-green colour of her irises. Her eyebrows twisted up in fright, and Draco quickly raised both of his hands in peace.

"Who are you?" she sneered.

Draco acknowledged her question with a quirk of his eyebrow, thinking while she didn't look like Crabbe, she certainly carried his arrogant tone. "I'm Draco. I'm an Auror for the Ministry of Magic."

"An Auror?" Victoria glanced about the room, but couldn't see much due to the fabric screen drawn around her hospital bed separating her from the rest of it. "Are... are you here to arrest me?"

"No." He narrowed his eyes. "Why? Have you done something to warrant being arrested?"

She shook her head vigorously, eyes wide. "N-No! I... I just mean... well, isn't that an Auror's job? To throw criminals in Azkaban?"

"Are you a criminal?"

"No..."

"Then I think we'll get along just fine." He extended his hand between them. "Nice to meet you."

Before having a child of his own, Draco had never been patient with children. He always thought them whiny, grubbing little beasts with sticky hands and spoiled attitudes (yes, he knew how ironic that sounded). But now, after two-and-a-half years of changing diapers and soothing fevers and falling asleep snuggled on the couch, he had a soft spot for anyone with a spout of innocence. Maybe that's also why he loved Hermione so much.

The young, female Crabbe eyed his hand suspiciously before taking it and giving it a firm shake. A bit too firm—ouch! Did she know what sort of grip she had? "I'm Victoria."

"Pleasure," he drawled.

"So, if you're not going arrest me, why are you here?" Victoria released his hand and sat up straight in the bed.

"I hear you've been having... dreams."

The raven-haired girl paled, and she nodded slowly. "They feel so real."

"Can you tell me about them?"

The door behind him swung open, and Victoria jumped. Her eyes softened when she realized it wasn't something from her dreams and only a petite, blonde haired woman wearing the same work-regulated robes that the Auror in front of her wore, and she relaxed her shoulders, scowling. "Who's she?"
"I'm Auror Malfoy's partner, Auror Bolt." Lindy replied, strolling up to Draco's side and offering a stiff hand out to the eleven-year-old. Victoria did not take it, instead trailing her eyes back over to Draco.

"Malfoy…?" Her scowl turned to a full blown grimace. "You're a Malfoy?"

Fucking Merlin's saggy left testicle, if he could hex Lindy six ways to Sunday, he would, and he would do it happily. But, because he had made a sacred oath to the Ministry, he wouldn't do anything to her -now. No, he'd wait for the right opportunity to sabotage her life. Fucking big mouth that Bolt had…

With a clueless tone in his voice, he sneered, "You have a problem with the Malfoys?"

Victoria crossed her arms, turning her head away from him. "My mum says that my brother died because he was under the thumb of a Malfoy."

"…Is that so?"

"Yeah."

Anger clawed inside his chest, and Draco rose to stand. He turned on his heels, purposefully stepping on Lindy's foot -hard.

"Wait!" Victoria shouted behind him, suddenly sounding very frightened. "W-Where are you going?"

"Oh, so now you're willing to accept help from a Malfoy?"

"Auror Malfoy," Lindy scolded under her breath, "She's just a child."

"Hmph." He leered in Lindy's direction. "Why don't you butt out of business that isn't yours, Bolt?"

"Am I missing something?"

"You're him, aren't you?" asked Victoria. Her voice sounded distant, but that could have been due to all the blood pulsing in Draco's ears as he struggled to keep his temper in line. "You knew my brother, didn't you?"

He sighed, closing his eyes. He knew he'd get here; he just didn't expect it to happen so soon. "I am. I did."

"C-Could you… could you tell me about him?"

Draco turned his head in the direction of Victoria, mouth still holding his distasteful sneer. He saw the timid expression on her face, and, without warning, she burst into tears. Draco's eyes went wide, and he exchanged glances with Lindy, mouthing, 'Now what?'

'What did you do?' she mouthed back.

'Me?'

'Yes, you!'

He stomped his heel into her toes on the way back to Victoria's bedside, taking his seat once again. "Stop that," he snarled, and the first year swiped quickly at her tears, lower lip pouted out. Just when it looked like her crying had ceased, she exploded into a fit of tears that had her sobbing into her
"I'm sorry," she whispered, rubbing her nose on the back of her sleeve. "I… I just… My mum says never to trust a Malfoy, and I…"

Lindy quickly crossed the room, pushing herself into Draco's personal space as she clutched the child's hand and smiled. "You're confused. We understand. But I promise you, Auror Malfoy is a trustworthy, upstanding individual. You can trust him."

"Really?" Victoria asked.

'Sure,' Draco thought irritably, 'Just have a conversation like I'm not in the room. I'm one bloody foot away!'

"Really," Lindy nodded, turning her head and eying Draco over. "He might be a bit gruff and seemingly unpleasant, but he's a hero. Despite what your Mum thinks about the Malfoys, remember; he works for the Ministry, and if they can trust him, so can you. And right now, he's your only shot at getting those visions of yours to stop."

"Visions?" Victoria careened her head towards Draco. "I thought they were just dreams?"

"Lindy. You have possibly one of the loosest set of lips I've ever met. How many ships did you sink in your day? Hundreds? Thousands?"

Lindy blushed a brilliant shade of scarlet and sat down at the foot of Victoria's bed, silent as the grave. Draco smirked to himself. Good. At least something shut her up. Draco scooted his chair closer, measured Victoria's nervous glance with a cool stare, and said, "Look, I'm going to level with you, Victoria."

"My friends call me Vicky."

"Yeah, we're not friends." He smirked. "I'll make you a deal. I'd like to teach you a few tricks to make the dreams go away. In return, I'd like you to let me into your mind."

"In my mind? What for?"

"To see your dreams first hand. If I can understand them, I can help you to keep them at bay. But I won't force you." I'm not legally allowed to do that without your parent's consent, and I doubt the Crabbe family would grant that considering it is -me-. It had been a low blow to the gut to hear the Crabbe family held him personally responsible for Vincent's death. Especially after they'd grieved with him at the funeral… He would stew about this later. Now, he had a mission.

"If I do… you promise to make the dreams stop?"

"I'll do my best."

Victoria chewed on her upper lip, thinking it over. "Would you do one more thing for me?"

"Demanding, isn't she?" Draco quipped to Lindy.

Victoria glared, crossing her arms. "If I do this, can you show me memories of yours? Like… ones of my brother?" She gave a small sigh, hands shaking as she brushed at her wet cheeks. "I… I just want to know… what he was like, you know? Can you do that? Is it possible?"
Draco’s tongue weighed like lead in his mouth, and he struggled to find his voice. His answer came in a soft mumble. "I could show you a couple."

"Really?" Victoria’s eyes lit up. "Oh, thank you, Auror Malfoy! Thank you!"

He rolled his eyes, sliding his chair back. "Yeah, yeah. I know. I'm amazing and all." He snapped his fingers at Lindy, pointed to the bags, and brought his attention back around to the youth. "We're going to get settled in, and I'll be back after dinner. We can begin then."

Nodding, Victoria leaned back in her bed. "Great. Maybe I could get some sleep tonight."

"Maybe." He cracked a smile just as the door opened yet again. Draco would recognize that straggly hair and stubbled chin any day -sure, he aged a bit, but that was definitely Filch approaching him with a stamped envelope.

"Post for Auror Malfoy." Filch grumbled, eying the blonde up as if he were sickened at the sight. "Never thought I’d see the day…"

Draco snatched the letter up, gave a venomous smirk, and flipped the letter over to recognize the Ministry seal. He tore the letter out at once, and as his eyes scanned over the words, his heart dropped down into the pit of his stomach. He stumbled back, eyes wide, tearing his gaze around in every which direction before finally settling them on Lindy. "I… I need to… Goddamn it!"

"Language, Auror Malfoy!"

"Bugger language! My son's been… he's… I need to see the Headmistress at once."

Draco tore out of the room in a flash, the sound of his footsteps bouncing off the walls as the door slammed firmly behind him.
Sorry this chapter has taken so long! I wanted to give you guys a fleshed out story, and had a few details to sort through. Now I can get the ball rolling, and hopefully have all of the updates quickly. Again, I'd like to thank a very special WayMay for editing this chapter for me. She always finds the time, even when I know she doesn't have it.

I'd like to recommend a fic, if I could: My friend LightofEvolution wrote an adorable fanfiction titled: Branches. It is now complete. Go check it out if you have the time, and experience all the feels. Also, there is a pretty interesting first chapter of a story titled: The Spectacular Now (by acci0dramione) -I feel like this author wrote something wonderful, and deserves more than my one review. Please, go give some love?

Onwards, and upwards. We're now at the top of the roller-coaster, and as we look out we can see the vast expanse below. Are you ready?

~A.

You can't bring me down
Already had my life turned upside down
I ride a downward spiral round and round
But I keep flying, I keep fighting
You won't ever bring me down

"Hater" by Korn

His entire world fractured the moment Draco stepped into his son's infirmary room at St. Mungo's. To see the object his world gravitated around sleeping in such a large, white bed, paler than a Malfoy should ever be, with dark circles painted under his eyes… it didn't feel real. This was some poorly drawn caricature of Draco Malfoy's life. It had to be, because to accept the fact that some dark magic dared touch his son at such an early age made the father want to overturn every bit of the Earth until he found the culprit responsible. And then… oh then, he wouldn't use magic. No. Magic would be too good for the bastard that attacked his son. Knives sounded quite spectacular. Knives and razors and pliers to rip out fingernails…

"Draco," Astoria greeted him as he stepped through the threshold, throwing her arms around him. They hadn't hugged like this since the night Tori asked him for a divorce. It felt like a stranger's arms tangled around his torso and not the woman he created such precious life with. Draco felt cold, detached.

"Is he…?" He choked on his words, fighting back the urge to cry. Malfoys didn't shed tears. They cast spells and revenge.

"They say he'll make a full recovery," she told him, burying her face in his chest as small teardrops trickled down her cheeks and stained his robes. Astoria was not a Malfoy, so she could let herself give way to emotions. He envied her at that moment.
Draco looked around the room, spotting Jameson sitting in a hard, wooden chair in the farthest corner. Their eyes met, and both men shared a silent understanding; justice would come. And it would come soon.

"Where's Hermione?" he asked, and felt Astoria stiffen in his arms.

"She didn't come," she whispered back to him, "Stayed behind to report to the Ministry."

His eyebrows furrowed, and he looked over to his son. "That's not like her…"

"It's my fault." Astoria swiped at her tears and pulled away from him. "When Scorpius was seizing in my arms, she touched him. And he just… stopped. Just like that." Her eyes searched his, reminiscent. "I don't know how she did it, and it frightened me. So I snapped. I think she's too afraid to come anywhere near us right now."

Draco kissed Astoria on the forehead, forgiving her. Even if their flames of love had died out years ago, he still would always feel the pull of parenthood driving them together. He pushed past her, then, and stepped up to Scorpius's side, taking the small child's limp hand. He spoke to Astoria, even with his back turned to her. "Hermione will forgive you. She's like that, you know."

"I know." Tori inhaled a shaky breath, fighting back more sobs. "I… I should have thanked her. I don't know how she stopped the seizures, but…"

"Has he woken yet?"

"No. They gave him a sleeping-draught to rest. He won't wake until tomorrow."

"I see…" He bent forward, placed a kiss on his son's forehead, and stood up straight again to turn towards Jameson. "Look after them."

"Of course," Jameson responded, nodding with resolve. "Auror Malfoy, I want to apologize. If I had known that this would happen-"

"You did what you could under the circumstances," he dismissed him. "Don't apologize to me. Just keep them safe."

"You have my word."

Draco turned back to Astoria. "If Hermione comes by, tell her to come to Hogwarts. I need to speak with her."

"I will," she nodded quickly, and, with a melodramatic snuffle, thrust herself back into his arms. Draco stood ridged, attempting to keep it together instead of breaking down like he desperately wanted to. Stay strong, he thought. Don't give in to this. That's what the enemy wants of you. "Please, Draco. Can't you stay a bit longer?"

He tightened his jaw and shook his head. "Believe me, Tori. I want to. But if I'm going to put a stop to this, there are some things I have to attend to."

"What sort of things?"

"Never you mind." He pried her off of him and looked her square in the eyes. "When that boy comes to, don't you shed a tear. Do you understand me? We're his parents. We have to be strong."

"I… yes, you're right."
"No offence, Mister Malfoy, but you're wrong on this one." Dean crossed his arms, sitting across from the elder Malfoy in the Malfoy Manor study in one of the plush chairs provided. "They're a great match. You'll see."

"My son… to marry a muggleborn." Lucius scoffed. "Cissy, tell me this disease has spread out and I'm to die before their ceremony?"

"Oh, you hush up." Narcissa threw her husband a scathing look as she stepped into the room with a tray of tea. She handed a cup to Dean, and another to Lucius, and sat down beside her husband, a cuppa for herself in her fingertips. "It's bad enough we've come to this point in our lives, Lucius. I'm not to hear a word of your death, do you hear?"

Lucius Malfoy rolled his eyes and glared over at Dean. Despite his arrogant attitude, he didn't look too well. His eyes were worn, tired, and his skin sallow. "Why are you fidgeting?"

"I promised Hermione I'd run her cat back to her house… two hours ago. I had no idea you were going to be released from St. Mungo's so soon."

"So go." The sneer on Lucius's face was prominent. "We don't need you skulking about."

"Sorry, Sir, but I have my orders."

"Your orders, then, are to watch a grown man die a slow and painful," he began to hack, and as he covered his mouth, Dean saw spots of blood splatter the back of his hand, "…death."

"What did I just say?" Narcissa scolded. Dean thought she might offer him a napkin, but instead, she jerked the tea cup out of his hand and slammed it down on the coffee table to her left. "You're incorrigible, Lucius."

"Isn't that why you married me, dear?" The smirk painted across his face as he wiped the back of his hand on his robes was eerily similar to Draco's. It sent a shiver down Dean's spine to know that's where his friend had gotten it from; this prideful, xenophobic man with eyes as cold as ice. "Give me back my tea."

"No. Not until you do as I say and stop talking about such dreary things."

Dean snorted a small chuckle, and the Malfoys looked at him in confusion.

"Is something funny, Auror Thomas?" asked Narcissa.

"I… I just… you two bicker just like they do." He gestured between them. "Draco and Hermione, I mean."

"I assure you, we are nothing like them," scoffed Lucius quietly.

Dean shrugged. "Sure. Whatever you say, Lu – er, Mister Malfoy." He corrected himself when he saw Malfoy Senior look as if he might leap out of his chair and strangle him. "Maybe you two would like to come with me?"

"So we're to run errands with you, now?" Lucius rolled his eyes. "What next? Shall we all dine at dinner together and converse about our day? Perhaps we could pick out some flowers for your funeral as well…" Narcissa smacked him on the arm. "His death, Cissy, not mine."
"I only meant it might give you an opportunity to see Scorpius," Dean offered, palms out. "I know you and Draco don't get on that well. But if you accompany me so I could do this, it might give you the opportunity to see your grandson."

Narcissa threw a disbelieving look. "You would do that for us?"

"Look, I've gotten to know Draco over the last two years. He tries to shake it, but he still has mad love for both of you. Even if he's shut you out of his life, that doesn't mean you're out of his heart. And if you're in his heart, there's always a way back in. I lost my father a few years back. Hurt hard. I don't want him making the wrong choices. I never got to say goodbye, you know?" He scooted back in his chair. "I became an Auror to make a difference. Not just to take in the bad guys -which let me tell you, is Hella fun…" He noticed Lucius's glare and added, "Not that you want to hear about that. Only saying."

"Well, what do you think, Lucius?" Narcissa asked her husband, hope in her voice. "Would you feel up for a day out?"

There was a cold, meticulous way Lucius scowled evenly around the room, weighing the pros and cons of taking advice from a half-blood. Finally, he straightened his posture, gave another subtle cough, and nodded. "For the sake of my grandson, I will accompany you with your errand. We can't let the child be without his new pet, can we?" He cast a smirk, earning a side hug from Narcissa and a kiss on the cheek.

"Good for you, Lucius," she told him. "I'll just go fetch your coat."

"I'll fetch it myself," he told her, bringing himself to stand. "I'm still capable of movement, Cissy. Stop treating me as an invalid."

The blonde socialite pursed her lips but said nothing as she watched her husband cross the room and out to the hallway to gather his coat and cane.

"He's become so stubborn," she whispered, more to herself, Dean imagined, than to him. She must have realized her mistake, because she cast Dean a contemptuous look and added, "You're not to breathe a word of this to anyone. Understood?"

"Missus Malfoy, I wouldn't have anyone to tell," Dean smiled at her warmly, attempting to thaw her frozen heart.

"Didn't I read you were dating the editor of the Quibbler?" Yes, Dean was still dating Luna.

"I just want what's best for my friends. That's all."

"See to it that it is all. I'm sure Lucius could still find a few connections to tear apart your world if word got out about either of his conditions."

"What is exactly wrong…" Dean motioned to his chest. "You know. In here?"

"Besides my husband's calloused heart?" She sighed. "Muggles call it bronchogenic carcinomas. In layman's terms."

"Lung cancer." Dean nodded. "Yeah. My step-dad teaches pre-med at University."

"I thought you said your father died?"

"My real one, yeah. I didn't know him much. He left my mum when I was little. Thought he was
"protecting her during the first war."

"How did he die?"

"Murdered." Dean grew quiet for a time and avoided her gaze when he finished his thought. "By Death Eaters."

Narcissa Malfoy shifted nervously in her seat, hands shaking as she set her cup of tea next to her husband's. "I see. This can't be easy for you, then."

"Ma'am?"

"Being here." She waved her hand about the room. "Protecting us. It can't be easy."

Dean bit down on the inside of his cheek, thinking his thoughts out before he spoke. "No ma'am. It's easy as pie. -Your husband didn't kill my Dad. Just like Draco didn't kill Dumbledore. I'm not here to judge people based off of a tattoo on their skin. I've made my fair share of mistakes myself."

"Did you ever find them?" she asked softly. "The ones who murdered your Father?"

Dean nodded. "Yeah. Greg Diggle was the one who brought them in. He inspired me to become an Auror."

"Indeed, Auror Thomas. I seem to be learning that a bit too late in life."

Lucius Malfoy stumbled in the doorway, propped up against a cane with his coat in hand. "If you two hens are done sprucing your feathers and clucking, I'd like to get a move on."

"Will it hurt?" asked Victoria, looking between Draco and Lindy as she sat across from them on the floor of an abandoned Potion's room. McGonagall had guaranteed them privacy while they worked, as this part of Hogwarts had been shut down two years ago due to faulty plumbing. If they wanted to make any bathroom breaks, they'd need to climb three sets of stairs and take a shifting staircase to find the nearest public loo.

Draco shook his head, assuring the child. "No. It'll feel odd, and you're going to want to fight against it. Trust me when I say this will go smoother if you relax. Take a deep breath in," he set an example, inhaling a deep breath, "and out." He released it, watching Victoria (and Lindy) do the same. "Right. Now I need you to focus on the very first dream you had. Can you do that?"

Victoria pinched her eyes closed, nodding. "Yes. Alright. I'm focusing."

"Great."

Draco closed his eyes, pulling down that magical metal shield he almost always enveloped his mind in to keep curious minds out. It was work, always being guarded, but if he wanted to guarantee the safety of others around him from his scientific knowledge, he couldn't take any chances. He wasn't particularly comfortable being around Lindy, but he forced himself to swallow his pride and trust in her. She just better not betray that trust, or he'd rip out her tongue and shove it down her throat.
"You're going to feel a slight prickle. Go with it."

"O-Okay."

A full moon glared against the darkness of the night somewhere off in the distance, casting its pale luminescence through the branches of the trees surrounding Victoria Crabbe. He could feel her anxiousness, her drive to escape the woods. She took off on foot, quickening the pace as she began to dash over logs and branches. A second set of footsteps followed her, snapping branches with their heavy steps.

'No!' Victoria shouted, tripping over a set of devil's snare vines. They wrapped around her foot, locking her in place as someone stepped out of the shadows - someone taller than Draco with a slender frame and a white wolf mask adorned over his face. This was most definitely a man, Draco noted, by the body style, and the cold, unfamiliar voice that whispered, 'Fly.'

"No!" The real Victoria screamed, trying to slam her mind closed.

"Stop it," Draco scolded her, "You're doing well, Crabbe, don't muck it up now."

"I… alright."

"Think of the second dream."

Her mind shifted, and now she was standing out by the lake near Hogwarts, her toes dipping in the cold water as she read a book. Her head popped up when she caught something white out of the corner of her eye - a white wolf standing at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. It bared its teeth, and she screamed. 'Come out and play, little dove!' a deep, ominous voice rang through the air.

"Good, Victoria. Now the last dream. Show me the newest one."

"Please, Auror Malfoy. Please don't make me."

Her eyes shot open, and Draco was thrown from her mind at once. He pried his eyes open, glaring. "What the Hell is wrong with you?"

"Auror Malfoy!" Lindy scolded him. "That's no way to talk to a young lady!"

"Show me the last dream," he snarled. "Now."

"I can't." She shook her head over and over again.

"Do you want those memories of your brother or not?" Draco snapped. Victoria's face softened, and she nodded meekly.

"But… The last one. It was so frightening."

He sighed, knowing his anger was getting the best of him. He tried a gentler approach. "My son was attacked today, Victoria. Attacked, in his home, the way you've been attacked night after night. I can't stop what's happening to either of you unless you show me everything."

"How old is your son?" she asked. "What's his name?"
"Scorpius is two." He bore his eyes into hers. "Do you understand, now, the urgency? I vow to you, Victoria, just as I've vowed to him - I'm going to stop this madness. But I can't do it alone. Help me." He gave out a long, disgruntled breath. "Help me, please."

The room was silent for a time before Victoria nodded and closed her eyes back shut. "Alright. Let's do this."

Draco smirked. "That's the spirit."

Victoria stood in a small, disorderly room that smelled thick of dust and rotted wood. The wallpaper looked peeled from years of abandon, and there were bits of broken furniture scattered about the room. The windows were boarded, leaving the only way in or out to be a wooden door, where a tall figure in flowing white robes stood. From here, the look of the mask was clearer - it wasn't just painted to look like a wolf, but shaped that way as well, with a snout that protruded outwards and slanted holes for eyes. The man behind the mask tilted his head, standing silent as the grave.

'What do you want!?' Victoria shouted at him, stomping her feet. 'Leave me alone! Tell me what you want!'

'I want you to come and play, little dove. Won't you fall from that nest and learn to fly already?'

'What does that even mean?'

The man began to change; his body hunched over as his robes transformed to fur and his mask became the actual face of a large, white wolf that bared its fangs and snapped its teeth at the child. 'I grow tired of this! Fly!'

Victoria jumped backwards, tripping over a broken table leg and falling back on her elbows. 'I don't know what that means!' she sobbed as the wolf approached her. She threw herself back in fear, and her head smacked hard against the rotted floorboards. The wolf climbed atop her, golden eyes boring into her soul. 'I will find you,' that same threatening voice vibrated through the room. 'You will come. And when you do, I will show you.' The wolf lunged forward, teeth bared and ready to sink his teeth in-

"Ahhh!" the real Victoria screamed, and Draco brought himself back out of her head just as Lindy threw her arms around the girl to comfort her. Thick sobs spilled from Victoria, and she pried her eyes open, looking hopeful. "Did I do it? Did you get what you needed?"

Draco rose to stand, turning the vision this way and that in his mind. "Yes…" He nodded, smirking down at her. "You did wonderfully, Crabbe."

"What now?"

"Now, Auror Bolt and I need to have a little chat to ourselves."


Draco offered his hand out and tugged the girl to her feet, patting her head. "Auror business first. Then, I give you my word that I will uphold my end of our bargain."

"Truly?"
"I wouldn't lie to you, Crabbe," Draco smirked, reminiscent of all the times he'd said that to her brother, knowing good and well it was a lie. But not this time. This time, he spoke only the truth. "Now off you get to bed." He brushed some tears off her cheeks with the back of his sleeve and ushered her to the door. "Ah. Almost forgot." He pulled out a small phial from his pockets and handed it to her. "Sleeping draught of my own concoction. You'll sleep dream free; I can promise you that."

"Really?" the girl took the bubbling green liquid, hope filling her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"I've had a nightmare a time or two in my life. Eventually, I had to get over them, but in the meantime, this helped. You'll wake up fully refreshed and ready for a new day."

"Th-Thank you, Auror Malfoy." Victoria beamed at him. "You're nowhere near as bad as my Mum said you'd be."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Crabbe, we should work on what you believe passes as a compliment next go-around."

"Sorry." Her smile didn't falter. "And tomorrow, you promise to show me how to get rid of these dreams? Once and for all?"

"If you promise to get a good night's rest."

"Yessir!" She wrapped her arms around him, knocking Draco off balance with the sheer force of her hug. He looked over to Bolt, who gave him an encouraging smile, and he patted the eleven-year-old on the top of her head. She released him and waited as Lindy gathered her things to walk the child back to her dormitory.

"What's the plan?" Bolt whispered to him as she passed.

"Meet me by the Great Lake in twenty."

"Yessir!" Lindy gave the same enthusiasm that Victoria had and waved goodbye to him as she and Crabbe left, shutting the door behind them.

Draco waited a few minutes until he knew that they'd be gone, gathered up his things, placed them into his satchel, and headed up the winding steps of the dungeons, sorting through his thoughts. If he was right about this, it could change everything.

"Hermione, I don't feel comfortable with this," Harry muttered under his breath as followed her down the long corridor. "You shouldn't be here."

"I have to be," she told him. "I can't sit around and let everyone do the investigation without me." She couldn't bring herself to go to St. Mungo's. Not after the sweeping glare that Astoria had given her. She couldn't join Draco at Hogwarts. She couldn't do anything but this. This was what she could contribute, and she'd do it, Harry be damned.

"Hermione-"

"Harry! Let me do this!" she all but shouted at him, and he fell silent as she turned the brass knob of the interrogation room and stepped inside.

Across the room, seated at the opposite end of a long, wooden table, arms crossed and eyes trained on the door as it opened, sat Gregory Diggle. "Well, well." He smiled, uncrossing his arms to place
them on the table, palms up. "They told me I'd be receiving some new visitors. I had no idea it would mean you."

"That's not entirely true, is it?" She took a seat at the chair closest to her as Harry filtered inside and shut the door behind him. "I think we both knew it would come to this, eventually."

Diggle flashed her his set of pearly whites, emerald eyes glistening back at her. "I wouldn't say I knew, but I had hoped."

She slammed her hand down on the table and thrust her other hand out to Harry. "The letter." Harry gave it to her, and Hermione placed extended it out for Greg to see. "Your letter, to be precise, Diggle. You gave it to Draco to take with him when he left, do you remember?"

"Of course," he nodded. "I had no idea it would reach you so soon." His eyes told a different story. "You haven't opened it."

"No." She crossed her arms. "And I won't. Not unless you tell me everything. And I mean it, Greg. Everything you know about this white wolf."

"That wasn't the agreement," he nearly sing-songed.

"Wrong. The agreement was that I was to receive a letter, and only I was to read it. Well, I'm choosing not to open up this letter unless you spill the beans. And not just that trivial trite you'd settle on if I weren't here. All of it. Now. Or I'll light this on fire so fast you'll be breathing in its ashes before you blink."

She brought out her wand and touched it to the edge of the letter. Diggle straightened his back and narrowed his eyes. "I wouldn't if I were you." He offered out his cuffed hands. "I'll talk, alright, Hermione? Just… don't burn it. Please." He looked almost defeated. "I've spent many-a-night in the last two years thinking about how I wanted to tell you. Please." His voice softened to a whisper. "Please, just read it."

"Talk."

"Alright." He folded his hands and wrung them together. "Alright, Hermione. You win. I'll tell you everything. But I warn you -you won't enjoy what I have to say one bit."
Get ready for some big reveals, some bigger questions, and an ending that will have you chewing your nails. This is Chapter 10: Diggle's Confession.

Special thanks to WayMay for listening to all of the spoilers and giving this plot an A-OK! She also, very generously, has taken the time to edit this chapter. THANK YOU WAYMAY!

~A.

All my friends are heathens, take it slow
Wait for them to ask you who you know
Please don't make any sudden moves
You don't know the half of the abuse

"Heathens" by Twenty One Pilots

"I want to tell you a story, Hermione. A story of a man, and a story of a stone." Gregory Diggle blinked, waiting for a reaction from the object of his obsession, but Hermione wouldn't budge an inch. She sat as rigid as a statue, eyes fixed on his and a hard expression written across her brow. When it became apparent she would not counter, he continued. "Once, there was a man. He was handsome. Successful. He coveted a woman that wasn't his, but that's a side note that only needs to be applied later." Greg smirked as Hermione's lips pursed. He'd procured some form of response, and that was good enough for him.

He resumed his story.

"Now, this man had been hurt. His father stripped from the world, and with him, the last bit of sanity for the poor hero of our story."

Hermione stopped him. "You're no hero, Greg Diggle."

"Oh, I wasn't speaking of myself." Diggle's smirk widened. "Though I suppose the person I speak of wasn't much of a hero, either. More of a villain, I should say."

Her wand touched the letter, and his smirk faltered.

"I speak of Lucius Malfoy."

Hermione stared evenly at him, ranging if he, indeed, told the truth.

"I wouldn't lie to you, Hermione. I've always been forthcoming with you, even when it wasn't in my best interest." Greg's green eyes glistened peacefully at her. "I was honest with you about my involvement with your husband. I was honest with you about who I was as Cane."

"Not from the beginning," she noted, coldly.
"No. But I was still honest. -I could have fed you a thousand different ways in which your husband
died, and I was not at fault. But that wouldn't have been truthful, and I don't want you to go through
your life led by lies. You're better than that. You always deserve the truth."

"So, what is the truth, then?" Hermione raised her eyebrows, wand still poised to destroy the note
she should detect a hint of deception.

Diggle noticed this, and offered his hands out, palms upwards towards the ceiling in a single act of
submission. "The truth, Hermione, lies in my own faults. And with Lucius. And in Abraxas
Malfoy."

Abraxas… Hermione had heard that name before, though it was hard to remember where. She began
the meticulous journey through her memories of the Malfoy family tree that spread across the wall of
the drawing room of the Malfoy Manor. At the edge was Scorpius, further in Draco, then Lucius,
and then… "You speak of Draco's grandfather."

"And bingo was his name-o." Diggle's face lit back up once again. "After all, it was Abraxas Malfoy
who came into possession of the Pandora Stone from his father, and his father before him. But it all
begins and ends with Abraxas and Lucius, I'm afraid."

"You're lying," said Harry, pushing up off the wall he leaned against. "Draco's report states that
Lucius procured the stone from a Dark Artifacts collector in Turkey."

"And you truly believe a word that comes out of that bastard's mouth?" snapped Diggle, eyes trained
on Harry with the force of a well-trained Auror. Which he had been, before he'd been sacked and left
to rot here. "He killed my father, Potter. I shouldn't have need to remind you what sort of a man
Lucius Malfoy really is."

"So now it's Potter, is it?" Harry quipped back, crossing his arms.

"It's always been Potter." Diggle narrowed his green eyes. "If we're being perfectly honest, I never
cared for you."

"Greg," Hermione said, bringing his attention back to her, "Abraxas and Lucius."

"Of course." He nodded his head, smiling sweetly at her. It frightened the witch to see him go from
confident, to angry, to gleeful all within a moment. He felt like a loose cannon ready to fire at any
Very sad way to go, actually."

"What does that have to do with any of this?"

"Patience, my beautiful witch, is a virtue held most precious." Greg tilted his head to the side, then
gave an exaggerated cough. "I'm terribly parched. Could I trouble you, Auror Potter, for a glass of
water?"

"If we're being perfectly honest, no," replied Harry.

Hermione wasn't one to miss the connotation; Greg wanted to speak to her, alone. There was
something he felt he couldn't say in front of Harry. Or maybe, he refused to say. Either way, if she
wanted her full answers, she'd have to get Harry to leave the room. "Actually, Harry, I'm a bit thirsty
myself. Would you mind?"

"You can't be serious, Hermione," he stared at her, dumbfounded. "We're in the middle of an
interrogation."
"Harry, please." She gave him her best puppy-dog eyes. The ones that she knew he couldn't say no to. "I've had a rough go of it, today. What with Scorpius…"

She felt terrible for manipulating him this way, but she'd be damned if she was going to miss an important detail because of Harry's presence. She was on a mission to never let Scorpius come under fire again, and she'd do whatever it took to make that happen.

Harry caved. "Fine. I'll get you a water." He sent dagger-eyes towards Diggle. "You can go without." He left the room abruptly, leaving just Hermione, Diggle, and the burly Auror guard at the door.

"Whatever you have to say, Diggle, spill it."

"You really are the brightest witch of our generation," Diggle grinned.

Draco squared himself at the appropriate distance from the Forbidden Forest beside the lake, staring up at the full moon. No doubt, werewolves would be running rampant tonight inside that tree infested woods. He paced as he watched the glow from the moon. He thought of Scorpius, of how tiny his hand was as he held it in his own. Of how, just yesterday, they were digging into sweets and snuggling up on the sofa with Hermione to watch 'Star Wars' for the umpteenth time. Now, his son sat in a cold infirmary with his mother, no doubt, crying beside him as he slept a dreamless sleep. And he had no idea where Hermione was… he could sure use her calm demeanor right about now. It felt as if the world was swallowing him whole.

He anxiously awaited Lindy's arrival, ready and willing to share his thoughts. If Hermione were here he might not need to, as she usually figured things out seconds before him. But as it were, Draco was stuck with perfectionist Lindy Bolt who, while scoring excellently on her exams, wasn't at all creative when it came to her thoughts. Black. White. There was no gray in that head of hers. It irritated the shite out of him. As a way to pass the time, he tried to imagine what it would have been like if he'd been paired up with Bolt in Auror Training. No doubt, he thought, he'd have either offed himself or gone to the dark, if no other reason than to get away from the yammering witch with a filter roughly the size of a toothpick.

"Hello, Auror Malf-"

"Holy shite!" Draco nearly jumped out of his skin as he spun around on his toes, wand drawn, to meet the intimidated eyes of Lindy Bolt. "Bolt, you daft-headed moron! You don't sneak up on an Auror!"

"I wasn't sneaking, sir. I tried to greet you."

"Yes, but you greet from a ways off," he sneered, lowering his wand and rolling his eyes, "Not when you're right up on the person."

"I did try to greet you when I approached," Lindy said, placing her hands on her hips, "But you were lost in your own world."

"Oh." Had he really been so lost in his thoughts he'd tuned her voice out? "I… my apologies."

"No need, Sir." She smiled warmly. "I'm just excited that you're finally including me in the mission."

"Yes, seeing as I don't get a choice in the matter, I figured I might as well pull my resources, so here you are."
"Why do you do that, Sir?"

"Do what?"

"Shut me out." Lindy flickered her eyes up towards the moon. "I don't recall a time I ever betrayed your trust."

"I don't recall a time you ever earned it, either."

Her jaw tensed, but she still kept her eyes trained on the glowing orb in the sky. "Do you want to know why I became an Auror, Sir? It was because of you."

Draco's heart jerked in his chest, and humility crashed over him like an ominous wave. Every muscle in his body tensed as his eyes flickered over to the sandy-blond witch. She stood there for a time, silent, before she traded glances at the moon for a serious stare towards Draco.

"I'd grown up hearing about the Malfoys. About their dedication to the Dark Lord, and about their deflection at the end of the War. I always found it brave of your family, backing out of the battle and refusing to continue the tyranny."

Draco snorted a laugh, though he found no humor in her words. "Bravery? Is that what you call the most cowardly move in my family's history?"

"It wasn't cowardly. What would have been cowardly would have been to stay under Voldemort's thumb out of fear, of death." Lindy turned her eyes back to the sky, the moonlight spilling across her delicate features. "I'm not particularly brave myself. I was a Hufflepuff, here, at Hogwarts. Do you know what we're known for? Particularly good at finding things." As if that made us sound worthy of something. We aren't the smartest, or the bravest, or the most cunning. But we form friendships that last lifetimes, and we always try to see the bright side of things." She tucked her arms behind her back. "I remember reading about your accomplishments in the papers. How you brought down Bastian Cane and saved the Ministry."

If only Bolt knew the truth that hadn't been put in the papers about Draco's involvement; he doubted she'd find him accomplished then. "I didn't do it alone," said Draco, humbler than he'd ever sounded in his life. "I had Auror Potter, and Auror Thomas, and... Hermione." A lump settled in his throat, but even swallowing couldn't push it down. Merlin, how he needed her tonight. "But you were there. In the thick of it. And, despite your dark past, you didn't give in. You brought down one of the most dangerous criminals in Ministry history, and after refusing to submit to Voldemort. You're a beacon of hope that some of us only wish we could live up to." Lindy pursed her lips, and, unexpectedly, swiped at her cheek. Was she crying? "I have no ulterior motives, but you constantly distrust me. When Auror Potter told me I'd been assigned to you, I was so excited! Working with the famous Auror Malfoy! But all you've done is talk about how I'll never live up to your girlfriend and how much of a muck-up I am. It's discouraging, to say the least." She closed her eyes, and two more tears escaped down her cheeks. "I only wish you'd trust me, just a little. You'd find I'm loyal to the cause, and I could be more help than you think."

Draco's ego deflated so that it felt as if all the air in his lungs had escaped him. It never occurred to him just how cold and calloused he'd been towards Bolt. It was just his nature to lash out when things turned to shite. To think someone looked up to him as an Auror baffled him. Why would anyone want to look up to such a broken man?

He gave a heavy sigh, finding the ability to breathe again, and stepped up next to Lindy, placing a firm hand on her shoulder. "Alright, Auror Bolt. I'll give it a try."
Lindy turned her head towards him, prying her eyes open. "You… you called me Auror Bolt."

"I did." He smirked. "Best not ruin the moment by talking about it."

"Sir." She gave a nod, and wiped the last bit of tears from her face. "So, what did you ask me out here to discuss?"

"Right." He removed his hand from her shoulder and almost tucked it in his pockets- but he remembered the stone last moment and caught himself. "When I was sifting through Victoria's visions, I found one thing in common."

"What's that, Sir?"

"Besides their obvious involvement with our white wolf, they show very distinct scenery. The first one was in the Forbidden Forest. The second, here, at the lake."

"And the third?"

"The shrieking shack." Draco sorted through his thoughts before he spoke again. "I think the white wolf wants Victoria to join him for something, but for what I can't be sure. He's showing her specific places. Places she could identify and possibly go to. He's trying to lure her out of Hogwarts."

"He'd have to have a reason."

"He does." Draco looked to Lindy. "Victoria's an animagus. Or at least, has the potential to be."

"She is?" she gasped. "How do you know?"

"Because, I have reason to believe that our white wolf is one as well. And if I'm correct, he's not too far from his prey, which means… how would you feel about a wolf hunt this evening, Bolt?"

"Listen carefully, now, Hermione, because what I have to say is important." Greg nudged down to the envelope clutched in her fingers. "What I've written in there will explain how I came about what I'm to tell you next."

"Which is?"

He leaned closer, careful. Precise. "I did something no other wizard has ever been able to do. I brought someone back from the dead."

"Sir, are you sure we should be doing this?" Lindy asked, her wand glowing from the tip as she and Draco trudged through the wooded shroud of the Forbidden Forest. "We should have written to Auror Potter, at the very least."

"Come on, Bolt. Where's your sense of adventure?" Draco smirked, hopping over a log. "You shouldn't be afraid of a forest like this -wasn't this part of your training?"

"What? Taking a midnight stroll through a werewolf and centaur infested forest? No, sir. Never."

Draco stopped in his tracks, reminiscent of his last visit here, two years ago. "You mean your trainer never made you run laps through here?"

"Absolutely not!"
He knew there was something off about Diggle's friendly little promenade with his Auror trainees. "Sounds like I had a tougher trainer than you."

"Wasn't it Auror Diggle?"

A howl pierced through the trees, rendering the Aurors silent. Draco doused out the light of his wand, and with a silent motion, encouraged Bolt to do the same. The two of them stood quietly within the woods, eyes adjusting to the darkness.

"Do you think that was a werewolf?" Lindy whispered.

"No." Draco shook his head. "That was something else." He took a couple of steps forward, wand pointed out, pupils finally attuned to the black abyss of the woods. He thought he could see something move up ahead, but perhaps that was wishful thinking. He nudged his head, and Bolt followed him as he trudged on, careful to shift his weight evenly amongst his feet to not break the twigs beneath his feet. 'Come on,' he thought, 'Come and show yourself, you bastard.'

"Sir… Sir, I don't think anyone's out he-

There was a sound. A sound that would haunt Draco Malfoy for the rest of his life; it was somewhere between a thunk, a squish, and the crunch of metal grinding against bone. He turned his head, and timed slowed to a crawl. Lindy Bolt looked up at him, eyes wide in surprise, clutching at a spindly arrow that ran through the left side of her chest.

"Bolt-" Draco took off towards her at once, but he wasn't quick enough. No matter how hard he pushed his legs, he didn't make it to her before she collapsed to her knees as blood pooled from her mouth. Draco threw himself in front of her, eyes as big as saucers, chest heaving up and down as he struggled for breath. Lindy stared at him, confused, before her eyes trailed down to the arrow. "Bolt." Draco thrust his hands out and braced her by the shoulders. "Don't move, Bolt. We- We'll figure this out. You're going to be fine."

"S-Sir…" Crimson leaked out of her lips and down her chin. "I… I…"

"Don't talk." He felt her begin to fall, and turned her so that she fell back into his lap, head against the lower part of his stomach. She blinked up at him, coughing. Blood splattered onto his face. "Bolt… Lindy…" He raised his wand, sifting through spell after spell, but he couldn't think of one that would stop her lung from filling with blood. Lindy reached up towards him, hand grasping for his face, before the light drained from her eyes, and the world turned without her. "Bolt… BOLT!" Draco shook her. "Don't you… you can't die on me!" Her head fell to the side, lifeless. "Shite. No. NO!" Panic spread through him, and he set her gently down on the ground, preparing to lift his wand and go after the son of a bitch who killed his partner, when he heard someone begin to clap, slowly, from behind.

Clap. Clap. Clap. "What a performance! It had bravery! It had merit! Sure, a side character takes a hit, but what's a good story without a bit of drama?"

Draco jerked around, wand ready to cast a spell, and came face to face with an arrow to his temple. Behind it, gripping it tight, was a hooded figure dressed in black, and beside them, a short, petite girl wearing robes the color of burnt orange that offset her olive complexion. There was no doubt in Draco's mind that this had been the person to clap and jeer only moments ago. She twirled a strand of her short, brown hair and smiled at him happily.

"I wouldn't piss him off, if I were you," she said, nudging over to her hooded friend. "He's trigger happy." She jumped up on her tip-toes and patted the man on the head. "Good boy, Bruno."
A low voice from inside the hood responded. "If you don't want to end up like the spare, here, I'd take your mitts off of me."


Draco couldn't answer - his body was too busy shaking from the shock and horror of witnessing Lindy's death. He knew he should be casting spells or making death threats, but all of that was lost on him as he glanced over at Lindy's body.

"You didn't actually like her, did you?" She strolled over next to Lindy and kicked her limp corpse. Draco snarled. "Oh? You did? Pity."

"Get the fuck away from her!"

"Shut it." The man with the bow and arrow pressed the tip of the arrowhead into Draco's forehead. "No talking. Get up. Walk."

"I'd listen to him, if I were you. His arrows never miss. He bewitches them that way."

Not wanting to join Lindy in the grave, Draco carefully rose to his feet as the girl walked up behind him and snatched his wand.

"Good boy." Before Draco knew what had happened, thick manacles slipped over his wrists behind his back and drew together by magic. "Now, let's get to walking, shall we?"

"What... what are you saying?" Hermione whispered. "Are you actually implying that you successfully performed necromancy?"

"Implying? No. Stating it plain as day."

"That's impossible."

"You and I both know that nothing's impossible where the Gray is concerned."

Hermione's chest tightened at the same time Harry emerged through the doorway with a bottled water. He sat it down on the table in front of her forcefully, showing his apparent irritation for being asked to leave the room. "Did you two have a good talk? - Let me make sure I'm caught up. Diggle says he brought someone back from the dead?" Hermione glanced up at him, and Harry waggled his eyebrows. "I'm the Head of the Auror Department for a reason, Hermione. You think I don't know when something's up?"

"I... I'm sorry, Harry. I just was worried he wouldn't talk with you around."

"He's right here, you know," Diggle muttered from across the table, disgruntled that Harry outsmarted him.

"Back to business, then," said Harry, smiling from ear-to-ear. "I say he's full of it again."

"I'm full of hurt at your accusation that I'd lie about something like that," quipped Diggle.

"Greg, what does any of this have to do with the white wolf?"

Diggle stared at her.

"You... you don't mean to say... you created him?"
"Created isn't the word I'd use."

"Talk." Harry slammed his hands down on the table. "Or I swear to Merlin himself, I'll burn the bloody letter."

"I brought a man back from the dead."

"On a whim, or…?"

"I wanted to see if it was possible." Diggle's eyebrows knitted together, and for the first time that evening, he looked pained. "I wanted to see… because I wanted -no, I needed to know if it was possible." He clenched his fists. "Lucius Malfoy took everything away from me. My father. My family. -My mother was never the same after my father's death. I thought if I… If I could…"

"You wanted to bring him back." Hermione, despite her obvious hatred for Diggle, understood that emotion. That want.

"Indeed." Diggle attempted to gain composure, tilting his head side to side to loosen the tense muscles in his neck. "But I was afraid to attempt it without testing the theory first. What if I brought back a soulless corpse? I couldn't… I couldn't do that to my family."

"How the Hell would you even go about doing something like that? Gray magic is powerful, but it has to feed off of magic that already exists," Harry said definitively.

"The answer to that, Auror Potter, is simple. I found the resurrection stone."

Draco wasn't sure how far they walked. It seemed like hours, but by the judgment of the moon overhead, it couldn't have been long at all. His feet ached. His stomach had spilled vomit miles ago, leaving him shaky and weak, and his head throbbed. The cuffs dug into his wrists, subduing any wandless magic. Finally, the arrow pressed between his shoulder blades lifted away, and he was shoved to his knees.

"Am I allowed to speak now?" he sneered as the young girl twirled his wand in front of his face.

"Hmmm… I suppose you can. But no funny business. I'll go let the boss know you're here."

"Oh, if you'd be so kind." Draco's words oozed with sarcasm.

He watched the girl skip off into the woods, leaving him alone with the archer. He thought about making a death threat, but the sound of rustling from behind the trees caused him to fall silent. Moments later, he saw two golden eyes flickering through the brush. A fox scurried out, ran up to Draco's knee, and bit it. "OWW! Fucking Hell!"

The archer drew his arm back. "Shut it. He approaches."

The wolf stepped out from behind his tree, the white of the fur catching Draco's attention first. It looked like freshly fallen snow on a winter morning, and just as soft. Two golden eyes glistened back at him, pensive.

"What the Hell are you looking at?" Draco growled, fighting against the cuffs. "If you're going to kill me, kill me!"

The wolf approached him, eyes trailing over Draco's hair, his eyes, his chin. It sniffed his shoulder, baring its teeth, but still, it did not attack.
"That's impossible." Hermione gasped. "That's… the stone was lost during the war. Harry, tell him."

"Where did you find it?" Harry asked, his voice measured.

"In the Forbidden Forest. That's where you were rumored to have dropped it, was it not? I used the Gray, and I found it."

Hermione sifted through her thoughts. "If… if what you say is true, then who did you bring back?"

Diggle stared at her blankly.

"Who did you bring back, Greg!?"

"I had to test my theory, Hermione. I had to see if it would work. -And I thought, maybe, if I tested on someone that it wouldn't matter to me if it went wrong…"

Hermione gasped. "Tell me you didn't."

"Did what?" Harry looked between them. "What did he do?"

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I've vowed complete honesty between us now. I'm sure you've figured it out by now. Who I thought would be expendable if it went wrong, and who would work to my advantage if it went right…"

The wolf snarled as it sniffed at Draco's left arm, and backed away. Could it sense his Dark Mark?

"I know who you are," he said, wriggling his wrists as he tried to slip his hands free of the manacles. "I know you attacked my father. I know you're behind the attack on my son and Victoria Crabbe! So why don't you quit hiding behind your mask and show yourself!"

The wolf blinked at him, then let out a howl that vibrated through Draco's eardrums. Before his eyes, he saw the change -the fur and the frame transfigure to a man with pale skin and long, white blonde hair that shrouded his eyes. He stood before Draco, naked, and walked over to a knapsack tucked beside a nearby tree. He turned his back as he dressed, and when he was clothed, he turned back around and brushed the hair out of his face.

"It seems my associates went out to catch themselves a dove and returned with a dragon…It's been a long time, Draco."

Draco blinked. "Gr… Grandfather?"
Puffy-Eyed Goldfish

Chapter Notes

I've been running behind this week. Took on a lot more workload. So, I promise, next chapter I will reply to all reviews. Please, forgive me.

~A.

P.S. Waymay rocks my toe socks. XD

By the way, WayMay and I have a fic! Called Empire, found under WayMay penname. Please, go check it out and review! She worked really hard on it, and I think you all will be impressed. Link can be found on my author's page!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Look at you now - you don't talk so loud
Your eyelashes have all run out
From making them wishes
and pulling them out
Screaming so loud,
Why don't you save me
Just save me tonight
I'm on your side
"Save Me" by Bob Bradley

Highly recommend this song on youtube before or after you read this chapter.

Draco stared into the cold, unimaginable eyes of Abraxas Malfoy, crestfallen and bewildered. No. This was impossible. This had to be some sort of trick; this person must be a Metamorphagus. Because there was no way in Hell that Abraxas Malfoy, his grandfather, could be alive, standing before him at this very moment. Especially since he appeared only a handful of years older than Draco himself. The similarities between the generations were startling: Draco never noticed how many of his genetic traits he inherited from his grandfather until he saw them all in the prime of his life; same sharp nose, same shape to their eyes. Even their high cheek bones ran strikingly similar. He forced himself to close his eyes and push down another spout of vomit that threatened to make its way up his throat, breathing heavily through his nostrils. "Impossible," he muttered to himself. "You're not real."

He heard the Abraxas imposter give a chuckle that so resembled Lucius Malfoy's; it was frigid and held contempt in every tone. Then there was a shuffle around the dirt in front of him, and he felt cold fingers grab at his jaw and force his face upwards. Fingernails dug into his cheeks as he opened his eyes once more, meeting the silver flecks in Abraxas's irises. "I assure you, my grandson, I'm as real as you."

Draco's eyebrows drew together, and he searched over the ivory skin of Abraxas's face, looking for any imperfection that would give the imposter away. He found none. An exact copy, down to the scar at the tip of his chin (obtained from a Quidditch accident when he was sixteen.) Whomever this
pretender was, he was good. Too good. Draco snapped out and sunk his teeth into the skin between Abraxas's thumb and pointer finger. The older man cried out in pain and backhanded the Auror across the cheek. Draco welcomed the pain; perhaps it would wake him up from this nightmare.

"I don't know who you are, but I'll have you know it's bad form to take on the appearance of a dead man."

"Even if I happen to be said 'dead man'?" Abraxas sneered.

Draco smirked as his cheek pulsed with pain and blood. "As I said: impossible. No such magic exists."

"I grow tired of this," his grandfather grumbled, running his long fingers down his face in frustration. "When you were seven years old, you came to my doorstep, covered in mud and grime, and your father's broomstick broken in half. I didn't have to ask you to know you had stolen it. You were sobbing, and I called you my puffy-eyed goldfish. Do you remember, Draco?"

Draco's heart sped up, but he dared not speak.

"Your grandmother was out for tea, and I took you in. We went to Diagon Alley, replaced Lucius's broom, and then I gave you your first shot of fire barrel whiskey and a chew of taffy to calm your nerves."

Despite his apprehension, Draco felt a subtle smile slip across his lips as he stared down at Abraxas' feet. "It was licorice flavored taffy, as I recall. Awful stuff. I think I preferred the whiskey to it."

"Yes." Abraxas' voice softened. "Your grandmother, gods rest her soul, was cross with me for a month…" He chuckled. "Tell me, how would I know that if I were not Abraxas Malfoy?"

Draco shrugged. "Pensieves are wonderful looks into an individual's memories…"

The elder Malfoy's mood changed in an instant, and he snarled. "I am me, Draco. And that is it." He crouched down before his grandson and searched over his face. "You've grown into a handsome man. As do all Malfoys." Abraxas gave a gentle smile. Gentler than Draco ever recalled him. "And you've done the Malfoy family proud. A pureblood heir."

If it were two years ago, Draco would be proud of that statement, but… now, it felt irrelevant if his son was pureblooded or not. "Leave Scorpius out of this."

"Scorpius… yes… a fine name, as well." Abraxas wore a smirk worthy of Lucius Malfoy. "He will make a fine addition to my pack."

"Your… pack?" Draco searched his eyes around the woods, to the archer and the little fox he could only assume was the annoyingly sadistic child. "You mean this bunch of brats?"

"Brats or not, they are family."

He snorted a laugh. "Family? What do you know of family?"

"Seeing as how we are bound by blood, I would say quite a bit."

Taking his time with his words, Draco wracked his brain for something intelligent. "A pack. Of Animagi, you mean."

"You catch on quick," Abraxas said pleasantly, joy dancing in his eyes. "Though I suppose, that's
how one becomes an Auror, yes? Quick thinking. Fast reflexes. A cut above the rest. But I do recollect a phrase my father passed down to me, and I passed down my son, and he to you. Do you recall, Draco?"

Fear strummed along Draco's heartstrings. "Aurors never age."

"Aurors never age. Yes." Abraxas tucked his arms behind his back and began to pace a straight line in front of his grandson. "It is the reason why our family has stayed out of Auror affairs for centuries. We are self-preserving. Tell me, what example do you set for your boy if you were to die in the name of some great justice? Do you think he'd believe you a martyr?" He laughed. The bastard all out laughed in Draco's face. "We both know you are not innocent. After all, you sold your soul to the devil, didn't you, to try to rid yourself of some vanity on your arm?"

"How do you know about that?" Draco whispered, glaring. At the end of the Takeover, Potter had guaranteed Draco's immunity to the courts and buried his sins with Greg Diggle as a means of thank you for stepping up and giving information. It still haunted Draco to this day, owning the fact that he was indebted to Potter for the rest of his life.

"Because I, too, have been in the fires of the devil's hold, and come out victorious. -It was he, after all, who raised me from the dead. Bastian Cane, I mean to say."

"Where is the stone now?" Harry's voice was grave. "What did you do with it once you realized you could bring people back?" Diggle stared hard at him, never speaking a word. Hermione could feel the table shake, and knew he was fidgeting with his knees in apprehension. "Damn it!" Harry slammed his hands down on the table beside her, making her jump. "Do you know what kind of chaos you've unleashed by doing this? Who else knows about this?"

"No one," Diggle said tersely, "Well, aside from Abraxas Malfoy, of course."

"That better be fucking all," Harry snapped. "Do you realize what kind of Hell you could have unleashed if someone found out? Imagine if someone brought Voldemort back!"

"Harry!" Hermione interjected, throwing a warning glance. "Calm yourself."

"I'm sorry, Hermione. It's just… Jesus!" He cast his hands up in the air. "Gregory fucking Diggle, you'll be the greatest thorn in my side yet."

"I wanted to bring my father back," Greg said coldly. "Surely, you can understand that, Potter."

"The messed up thing is; I do! I do know where you're coming from." Harry fought to calm himself. "But that doesn't give you the right to play with people's souls. -Tell me. Where's the stone?"

Greg gave his answer quickly -too quickly, Hermione noticed. "Destroyed."

"Destroyed?" Harry's eyes glistened with disbelief. "There's no way."

Diggle shrugged. "Believe me or don't. It's the only answer you're going to get." His eyes flickered over to Hermione, and then down to the letter. Pointed. Telling. "And besides, you have bigger fish to fry, don't you? Now that Abraxas is out and about, you're going to have to deal with him, and his plight."

"But it doesn't make any sense," Hermione said definitively. "Abraxas is a pureblood. The white wolf clearly wants to make an example of Death Eaters. What's the connection?"
"Tell me, Hermione. Are you proud to be muggleborn?"

She furrowed her eyebrows. "Of course."

"Are you proud of Hitler, or any of his followers?"

"Of course not. I don't condone a mass genocide of people who are different than myself."

"And there, you now understand, is the epitome of Abraxas Malfoy."

"Why does it always come back to Gregory fucking Diggle?" Draco sneered, after having just listened to Abraxas Malfoy's tale of being risen from the dead. Of course Diggle would be involved. Of course he would. Because why not? Why wouldn't Bastian Cane be the reason for Draco's adult destruction every. Single. Time.

"Yes, I heard he worked under an assumed alias. I've only known him as Cane, but you knew him on a personal level, didn't you? Building weapons against muggles. I have to say, quite impressive."

Draco's face flushed with heat; shame filled his core and made him grit his teeth. "Don't assume to know me."

"Oh, I don't, Draco. I don't. I only know what I've been told, and what I've seen. And that's why you give me such confliction in my soul. I'm not sure whether to sing your praises or reprimand you for your foolishness." His voice grew cold. "Lucius was foolish."

"Ha. Tell me something I don't know."

Abraxas' palm smacked Draco hard across the face. "Never speak ill of your parents, Draco." His eyes glared daggers down at his grandson. "Have you forgotten traditions?"

"Oh, but you can talk about the bastard any way you want?" He snarled.

"Of course I can. He's my son. -And what a disappointment he turned out to be. I'm brought back from the dead to see my legacy left crumbled in ruins. To see that the Malfoy name besmirched in the eyes of all wizards…" Abraxas trailed off. He was silent for a time. "I never raised him to be a coward, to cower in fear before the Dark Lord as if he was some commoner. Traitorous… it's no wonder the Dark Lord looked at him as muck beneath his feet."

Mixed emotions stirred inside of Draco. He'd thought the same words time after time when the War ended, but hearing it said aloud made it sound wrong. "Is that why you attacked him? You think him weak?"

"I know him to be."

"How did you do it?" Draco thought of the stone tucked safely inside his pocket, and a question burned inside him.

"Do what?"

"You stripped him of his powers. How did you do it? You had no access to the Pandora Stone."

Abraxas raised his eyebrows, and a smirk played across his lips. "My dear boy, did you think there was only one?" When Draco didn't reply, Abraxas strolled over to the tree and plucked a walking cane from the side. He removed the capstick from the hilt to reveal a glowing, blue stone held in a setting. Holding it out before him, he approached Draco, stone outwards, threatening to touch him.
Draco flinched and turned his head as the stone grew brighter. Abraxas held the stone there, at the tip of his cane, and chuckled. "Oh, my. You have the other, don't you?"

"No," Draco said, too quickly to be convincing. Abraxas pushed the stone into Draco's personal space, inches from his cheek.

"Give it to me. Unless you'd like to receive the same fate as my son."

"I don't have it!"

"Do you really want to test my resolve, Draco?"

"You're going to do it, either way. Why should I make it easy on you?" He smirked, eyes glistening heatedly back at his grandfather.

"I don't want to harm you. I want to help you." Abraxas pulled the cane back, placed the bulb back on the top, and leaned against the cane like it was intended for. "We share a common interest, you and I."

"Yeah?" Draco snorted a laugh, disbelieving. "What's that?"

"To restore the Malfoy name from the ashes your father left it in."

"How long has he been alive?"

"Three years. A bit more." Diggle turned his hands this way and that, observing every line and crease of his skin.

"Three years?" Harry choked out. "He's been alive all this time, and he's only now coming out of the woodwork?"

"In all honesty, I thought him dead. I locked him away, you see. Once I realized my experiment was a success in bringing the body back, I needed to know if the mind was sound."

"You kept him prisoner," Hermione said quietly, and Diggle nodded. "That's barbaric."

"Is it? Tell me, should I have let him loose on the streets, my sweet Hermione? To roam? To be recognized?"

"And caging him was any better?" she snapped severely.

Diggle conceded, nodding his head. "I'll admit, perhaps my methods were a bit... harsh."

"Harsh?" She laughed. "You're lucky there are laws protecting you, because if there weren't, I'd mop the floor with you right about now."

He grinned, chuckling. "I love it when you go all threatening on me." He blew her a kiss, and Hermione singed the bottom corner tip of the letter with just a thought. Diggle's smile immediately dispersed, and she patted out the fire with the back of her sleeve.

"You keep it up, Greg. See what happens."

"My apologies," he replied quietly, shifting dejectedly in his chair.

"So you cage him up," Harry said, finally finding the time to chime in, "Abraxas, I mean, and throw
away the key? That doesn't sound like you at all."

"I tortured him, alright? Is that what you want to hear?" Diggle snapped, losing to his anger for the first time tonight. "I showed him how far his family had fallen. I told him all of the things I was going to do to those who detested muggleborns. I wanted to break him down to use him as a weapon against his son, when the time was right." He shook his head, eyes in a daze. "But he wasn't one to be broken. No matter how hard I tried, he stayed true to the only mission he deemed worthy."

"And what was that?"

"Restoring his family honor. -Not only his family, but all of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. -He made me a promise; if he were to ever escape, he'd take down every individual who tainted his legacy. I, of course, am now at the top of that list, seeing as how I threatened his grandson and great-grandchild. When you arrested me, I had no choice but to leave him caged away to stew in his own madness. I have no clue how he escaped, but I can guarantee you one thing." He leaned forward, casting glances to Harry and Hermione. "He'll come for me. Mark my words. It's just a matter of time until I'm dead."

Hermione swallowed hard, fidgeting with the sleeve of her robes. "You don't mean that."

"I do." Diggle nodded. "Why do you think I made that offer to Draco to give up the stone? It's your only way of defeating him." His eyes traveled down to the letter. "I've made my peace. What I've done is unforgivable. I'll welcome death, when it comes for me." He looked longingly over Hermione's face. "I only hope I can make amends for my misdeeds."

She turned her eyes down on the letter, suddenly very curious. Her eyes flickered back up to his. Chocolate met emerald. "I will never forgive you for killing Ron." She stood up, tucking the letter in her pocket. "I take it all back, Diggle. I can't forgive you. Not after knowing all you've done."

"Hermione…" he pleaded, but she pointed her wand at him, and he fell silent.

"If Abraxas Malfoy does have his way with you, perhaps you'll finally receive true justice." She felt the tears trickle down her cheeks. She didn't mean it -she only wanted him to hurt, the way he had hurt her time and time again. "I have to go. I need to warn Draco." She turned to leave, but Harry caught her by the arm and stopped her.

"Hermione, you're not going to Hogwarts."

"Of course I am," she replied, brushing tears from her eyes, "I'm going, Harry Potter, and there's not a damn thing that you can do about it."

"What about training? Or have you forgotten about tomorrow?"

She sighed, the tears now freely falling. "Give it to Dean. I'll take over watching the Malfoys. They can… they can stay with us, until this is all through." She felt Harry's arms wrap around her, and felt him kiss the side of her head.

"Mione, I'm right here with you. You're not going through this alone." He spoke as her best friend, and not as the Lead Auror. "But I know you. Maybe this isn't the way you want to end this conversation with Diggle."

She cried into his chest, shaking her head and whispering, "You're right." She choked back a few hard sobs, wiped her cheeks on his robes, and pulled away. "You're absolutely right." She turned on her heels, stormed right up in front of Greg, and thrust out her left hand- or, more noticeably, her engagement ring. "Draco and I are getting married. I love him, and he loves me, and we're going to
be a family."

Diggle's eyes fell on the ring, his eyebrows furrowing together. "You're going to marry that twat?"

"Hey," she snapped at him, "That twat is my fiancé. Watch your tongue.- We'll get through this. We can get through anything. And when it's over, and we've married, I'll be sure to send you pictures of the wedding." She spun on her heels, smiled to Harry, and said, "You coming?"

"Lead the way," he smiled back.

"Well, Draco?" Abraxas narrowed his eyes. "What say you?"

Draco stared at the forest floor, mulling over his grandfather's offer. "And you'll leave Scorpius out of this? You won't try to recruit him anymore?"

"You have my word," Abraxas nodded.

"I want immunity for Victoria Crabbe, as well."

His grandfather sneered, but said, "Fine. The girl as well."

"I want to take Lindy's body back with me. She… she deserves more than what your minions did to her."

"As you wish." Abraxas nodded to Bruno, the archer, and Draco felt the shackles around his wrists slacken. His arms fell forward, and he caught himself before he hit the ground. His arms ached, but it was nothing next to the pain in his stomach from horror and dread. "Do we have a deal, Draco?"

Draco Malfoy glanced up at his grandfather, silver meeting silver. "Of course, grandfather. You have my word."

"Your word will not be sufficient, my boy. You know what I require."

Draco closed his eyes. "I do."

"Then go. And see that it's done in three days' time. Until then, I'll keep your wand. Call it…an insurance policy. -And should you fail, know that I will unleash the fury of my wards down on you just as I will all of your weak-minded brethren." He gestured down to the Dark Mark hidden beneath Draco's robes. "Now, up on your feet, Auror Malfoy. You have a Ministry to con."

McGonagall jumped as Harry and Hermione unexpectedly arrived through her floo, and she slammed her quill down on the table, agitated. "Another Auror, Potter? By all." Her eyes softened when she realized- "Miss Granger. Oh, how good to see you dear." She stood from her chair and offered her hands out. Hermione smiled, crossed the room, and hugged the elderly woman with adoration.

"It's wonderful to see you, Minerva," she said, "It's been too long."

"It has, child. That it has." McGonagall peeled Hermione off of her to get a proper look at the young witch, and then trailed her eyes over to Harry. "Did you bring her to me as a gift to make up for all of the unexpected guests in my school?"

"Actually, she's on duty," Harry replied, shuffling his hands in his pockets. "We're here to see Auror Malfoy."
"Auror Malfoy? I haven't seen he or Auror Bolt since they escorted Miss Crabbe back to her room."

Hermione exchanged worried glances with Harry. "Do you think they're sleeping?"

"Argus said he saw Lindy leave out towards the lake."

"The lake." Hermione nodded. "Excuse me, Headmistress." She left out the door at once, surprising McGonagall by her boldness. Harry pointed in Hermione's direction, smiling apologetically.

"I'm just going… to follow her out, then…"

Draco cradled the lifeless body of Lindy Bolt as he stepped out of the woods, eyeing the lake and the moon that reflected back in it. His legs ached, and he'd already stopped twice to vomit (carrying a dead body could have that effect on someone.) He shuffled his feet, numb with the cold, eyes heavy with the need for sleep. He heard someone shouting off in the distance, but all he could do was glance down at Lindy's blue lips, resisting the urge to cry.

_Stupid, Draco. You're such a fucking idiot. This was all your fault._

"Draco!"

He heard his name, but it hardly registered. He collapsed at the side of the lake, Lindy's body in tow, and set her gently down on the grass. "I'm so sorry…" he whispered, moving his fingers over her eyelids to shut them. "I fucked up, Bolt. I'm sorry." One tear came, and then another. "I fucked up bad."

"Draco!"

There was his name again. He turned his eyes forward, though his vision grew blurry. "Hermione?" He pushed up off his knees and stood straight, stepping over Lindy's corpse. He squinted, tired and hungry and in so much pain -not just physical, either. Someone was coming towards him at an alarming speed, and, suddenly, someone ran smack-dab into his chest, arms encasing him like a vice.

"Draco. Oh, my God. What happened? Is… is that Auror Bolt?"

"Hermione." He closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around her. He buried his face in her curly brown hair and inhaled her perfume. "I fucked up." And for the first time in a long time, Draco began to cry.

Chapter End Notes

We will catch up with Dean, Lucius, and Narcissa, not to mention Astoria and Scorpius, next chapter!

Much love,

A.
Distraction

Chapter Notes

Thank you, Waymay, for all of your help!

Remember, nothing is ever as it seems, so if you feel frustrated, that's great, but know that I have got you.
~A.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Permanent jet lag
Please take me back (please take me back)
Please take me back
I'm a stray dog sick
Please let me in (please let me in)
The mad key's tripping
Singing vows before we exchange smoke rings

Give me a pen
Call me
Mr. Benzedrine
But don't let the doctor in
I wanna blow off steam
"20 Dollar Nose Bleed" by Fall Out Boy

Draco sat inside the interrogation office of the Ministry, his head throbbing with pain. The only image that resounded behind his eyelids was the lifeless body of Lindy Bolt as Ministry Officials zipped her body up in a black bag and carried her away to the morgue. With shaky hands, he reached out to the bottle of water next to his hand, but hesitated at the last moment and stopped. His mind revoked the idea of nourishment in any form; he wanted to suffer. It would, in a sick way, give him something to feel as atonement for his sins; past, present, and future. Hermione was asked to stay outside of the room while the Ministry questioned him and took statements. He knew there was nothing he could do to alleviate the trouble in her mind, no more than he could his own. It was as if he could sense her presence on the other side of the door, and that gave him comfort.

Potter entered from another door to Draco's left, carrying a quill, ink, parchment, and dark circles under his eyes. He sat down, pulled the stopper from his ink, and inhaled deeply. "Please state your name, for the record."

"...Draco Lucius Malfoy."

"Start from the beginning."

Draco glanced quickly down to his hands, still covered in dried blood. "I told Bolt to meet me at the edge of the Forbidden Forest after she escorted Victoria Crabbe to her dormitory."
"What were you doing before then?"

"You know bloody well."

"I have to ask you. For Ministry records." Potter looked worn, but firm in his resolve. He carried all the grace of a lead Auror. "Now, state it for the record."

"I used Legilimency on Victoria Crabbe to search the vision she'd been having about a white wolf. Her visions led me to believe that the assailant was hiding out in the Forbidden Forest, so I took Lindy with me to investigate."

"What did you find? In the woods?"


"More specifically."

"More specifically, a tosser with a hood shot Lindy through the chest with an arrow. Is that what you want to hear, you sod?" Draco snapped, tearing his eyes open. "I watched it happen. I watched her die, in my arms! Is that what you want to hear?!"

Potter scribbled down on his parchment, face void of emotions. "Go on. Tell me about this person in the hood."

"There was a girl with him. She called him 'Bruno.' I didn't get much else than that. He had darker skin and a deep voice. The girl couldn't have been more than fourteen, if that. Short. Brown hair. Olive skin." He tried to recall the color of her eyes, but all he could see was the golden flecks of the fox she'd turned into. "I don't remember much else about them."

"Was there anyone else?"

Draco knew this part of the interrogation was where it would count. "No one else. They… they cornered me in the woods. Took my wand. I used wandless magic to escape, and…" The guilt from lying bubbled away in his chest like acid, rotting his conscience away. "I grabbed Lindy's body and got the Hell out of there."

Potter glanced up from his parchment, his green eyes glimmering from behind his glasses. "And that's it? They didn't say anything else?"

"I didn't give them much of a chance." Draco stared definitively at his superior, and Potter nodded.

"I see." He nodded once. "If you're sure there's nothing else…” Potter allowed his voice to trail off. Draco and Harry shared unspoken words, and Draco nodded in response. "Very well. Are you sure this is the way you want to play it?"

Draco raised a cautious eyebrow. "Do you doubt my intentions?"

Harry stared at him for a time before responding. "Of course not." He blew on the parchment to dry the ink, curled the scroll back up, and gathered his things. "Go home, Auror Malfoy. Get some rest. I'll send Auror Garrison to… inform Lindy's family…"

Draco tore his eyes away, back to the table. "I should do it."

"No." Potter shook his head. "Your obligation, at this moment, is to Hermione. She's a nervous wreck out there." He sighed, running his hands through his jet-black hair. "Hermione will fill you in
on what we've uncovered at Azkaban. -I've been told your son has been released early and sent home."

Draco gave an appreciative nod and found Potter's eyes once more. "Thanks."

"Welcome." Potter left him, and Draco sat his forehead on the desk, soaking in the silence for a few more minutes before he would have to bold-face lie to his fiancé. He wasn't sure he could stomach it, but he'd have to try. For Scorpius. For Victoria. For Hermione, herself.

Hermione held the envelope between her fingers, seated on a Ministry bench in the hallway of the interrogation hall. It killed her to think of Draco crying the way he did when he'd brought Lindy's body from the woods, and it was all she could see when she closed her eyes. It was to the point where she hardly dared blink. Staring at Diggle's letter, she mulled over if now would be as good a time as any to read it. Her emotions were in a tizzy, and she had no idea how to fix anything. The feeling of helplessness was what drove her to tear open the side of the letter and remove it parchment within.

Diggle's handwriting was neither messy or neat. One could deduce the sense of purpose behind the quill that wrote this, as if life hung in the balance. Glancing from one end of the hall to the other, ensuring she was alone, Hermione began to read.

'Hermione,

If this message should find you, it means that you have found it in your heart, in some way, to allow me to right my wrongdoings. And before you tear this message apart, know that I do not presume to know what is in your heart. But I do know what is in mine: remorse. Remorse, and a want to gift you with what I stole from you.'

She stopped reading momentarily, furrowing her brows. What did that mean? she wondered.

'But before I begin my quest to atonement, I must tell you how dreadfully sorry I am for everything. You have to understand when I began my quest for retribution, I never intended to wield the grey magic in such a way as to hurt anyone. My endeavors with Malfoy were, in the beginning, purely out of the want to protect muggles. But with time, and the gray magic, my heart became twisted. I couldn't see past my own selfish practices, and for that, I am sorry. Truly.

You deserve to know the truth, and I will always strive to give it to you.

Inside this letter, I have left clues for you to obtain the resurrection stone, as well as instructions. These will, should you decide to, give you back what I have stolen from you: your husband, Ronald Weasley. As I'm sure it is in the open by now, you know as well as I do that this feat is possible, but I do not sway you on either side of your journey to a decision. Your heart belongs to you, and you must decide how you would like to proceed in life. You, no doubt, see yourself with Draco Malfoy in the future, but I offer you another option. Take back the life that was stolen. Right my wrong, should you want to. Unfortunately, I cannot give you any clues as to how to decipher my instructions, but you're a brilliant witch, and I have no doubt that you will figure it out.

All of my unrequited love,

Gregory Diggle'

There were no words to describe what Hermione Granger felt in that moment. She simply stared at the parchment, reading and rereading the words as if they would melt away into some other worldly nuance. …Bring Ron back from the dead? Was it possible?
Of course it was. Abraxas Malfoy would be a shining example of that. But where was the proof? How could she know, in her heart of hearts, if what Diggle said tonight was even remotely possible? Maybe he was trying to lead Harry and her on a wild goose chase? She had no clue what to think, so she tucked the paper back into its envelope and stowed it away inside her robes. Later, she told herself, when she could think on it properly, she would. But not now. Not with Draco on the other side of that wall.

Draco.

What would he make of all this?

As if fate called to her, the door to the interrogation office swung open, and an exhausted, grief stricken Draco emerged, carrying his letter for release and a look of pure humility as his eyes connected with Hermione's.

"Draco," she whispered, tearing across the hall and throwing herself against him, arms around his torso and face buried in his chest. "You're alright. Merlin, you're alright. -What happened? You hardly said a word to me since Hogwarts. I have so many questions. What happened? What did you find in the woods? How did Lindy-"

His expression pained as he cut her off. "-Not… right now. Just. Please. Not right now." He allowed his arms to drape over her. "I promise, I want to talk about it, but… for now, let's go home."

"Alright." She nodded, knowing when to back down. "Let's go home."

Home, it turned out, was anything but where Draco Malfoy wanted to be. Expecting to come home to an empty house, he was surprised as he stepped out of the floo to be met with Dean Thomas, Astoria, Auror Jameson, his Mother and Father, and a grey kitten that curled up on top of the armchair of the sofa.

"Draco! Mate!" Dean shouted at once, his voice vibrating in Draco's eardrums and making him wince. "Sorry. Erm… hi!"

Hermione stepped out of the floo next, and as her eyes cast around the room, she blanched. "Oh my… um… hello." She immediately turned to Astoria. "Scorpius?"

"Sleeping upstairs," she replied, a hint of humility in her voice. "Hermione, I really should apologize. I reacted poorly, earlier, and-"

"There's no need," Hermione said quickly, throwing her hand up. "You were scared. We all were. I understand."

"Well I don't," said Draco at once, glaring to each and every soul in the room. "What the bloody Hell is everyone doing in my home?"

"It's a long story," said Dean, apologetically. "See, I offered to bring Hermione's kitten to Scorpius this morning, and-"

"-I don't care about that," Draco said crisply, throwing his hand up to silence his friend. His eyes rested on Lucius and Narcissa, his heart filling with ice. "What are you doing here?"

"I invited them," Astoria said, standing from her seat and looking Draco challengingly in the eyes.

Astoria ran her hands down the pleats of her skirt, and she curtsied to everyone in the room before walking past Draco, a poise of dominance glowing from her as she sauntered out of the room, Draco on her heels. He couldn't believe she would have the audacity to make this decision without him. His nerves were already worked to the quick from Lindy's death to Abraxas Malfoy to lying to all of the people he cared about, and this was the last thing he needed at the moment. When they rounded the corner near the kitchen doorway, he started in, his voice harsh and chastising.

"You brought my parents into my home? Around Scorpius? Without consulting me first?"

"What was I supposed to do?" she snapped back, crossing her arms, her superiority gone within an instant. "Auror Thomas showed up at St. Mungo's with your parents in tow! What would you have me do? Throw them out?!"

"Of course! Obviously!" He threw his hands up in frustration.

"You weren't there to make that choice. I was." She stiffened her posture. "And after I let them into Scorpius's room, we received orders from the Ministry that we're all to stay at the Malfoy Manor for the time being. So, frankly, it was out of my control."

"Orders? What the-"

"That would be my fault," Hermione said softly from behind them, and the two turned around to find her standing a few feet away, hands tucked behind her back and a look of remorse upon her face. "I gave Dean the Auror Training, and took over watch on your parents…"

"This is your doing?" Draco snapped, watching Hermione's face turn into one of pure frustration.

"If you need someone to blame, I suppose it is."

Draco threw his hands up into the air for a second time, and, without thinking, punched the stone wall next to him. Pain surged up the muscles in his arms, and he bit his tongue to keep from screaming out. Waving his offended knuckles, he muttered, "Fuck…"

"You should talk to them," Astoria offered.

Draco met her gaze and shook his head. "No. Not tonight… tonight I…" He glanced down to his shaking hands, and Astoria followed.

"Is that blood?" She gasped. "What happened?"

"I'll tell you later," Hermione said at once, "But right now, I think Draco needs to sleep."

Astoria looked between the two, nodding. "You look like you've been through Hell."

"Something like that," Draco admitted. "Just… keep my father out of my sights for the time being." He felt Hermione's arm wrap around his own, and he allowed her to lead him away from his ex-wife and up the spiraling staircase that led towards their bedroom. It took everything in him not to break down crying again when they slipped into the room, but he kept his cool demeanor as he took a seat on the chaise lounge.

"I'm going to run you a bath," Hermione told him, kissing him on the cheek, but she felt miles away. So wrapped up in his own thoughts, Draco could only nod in response, glancing down to his bruised knuckles. Time pressed on slowly, the sound of a bath being run was the only thing filling his perceptions as he closed his eyes. It wasn't until Hermione returned, tapping him on the arm, that he allowed himself to feel anything again. As his grey eyes met the warmth of her brown, he felt himself
anchor to her calm nature. "Come on. Up you get." She pulled him up by the arm, draping it around her shoulder and guiding him towards the bathroom.

"I snapped at you," he said quietly, furrowing his brow. "Why are you being nice to me?"

"Don't sour it up by commenting on it," she quipped, giving him a lopsided smile. Once in the bathroom, she began to peel off his clothing layer by layer. He let her, leaning in to the way her fingers grazed over his skin, hot like electricity. "Draco, your grandfather… Diggle told us some things."

"I know," Draco replied, quiet. "I… please, not now." He turned around wash his hands in the sink, scrubbing off Lindy's blood. He couldn't stand to look at it a moment longer. When he finished and dried his hands on a towel, he turned back to her.

"Alright."

Her hands went to his buckle, and he overlapped his fingers across hers. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Hermione." He slipped a hand under her chin and tilted her head up to look at him. "I mean it. I love you, more than myself. You mean the world to me. You and Scorpius." He needed her to know, before what came next. Before her perception of him changed entirely.

"I know," she whispered, smiling sadly. "You don't need to reassure me. I know."

She went back to work on his buckle, slipping his belt from around his hips and tossing it to the floor. Next, she removed his pants, and with tender movements, his underwear as well. And even though he physically stood naked before her, he never felt more guarded. Swallowing down a hard lump in his throat, Draco shimmied his ankles out of his pants and made his way to the tub. One foot, and then the other, he slid into the bath and sighed a breath of relief as the healing herbs tingled his skin. It was too bad they could never mend the irreparable damage done to Draco's emotional state.

"Should I… go?" Hermione asked, standing awkwardly on the other side of the room. Draco responded by extending an arm over the tub's edge. She understood, and walked up to his side, kneeling beside the bathtub.

They said nothing for a time, simply staring into each other's eyes and occasionally glancing off in other directions. Finally, Draco said, "I watched her die, Hermione. There was nothing I could do… she just…" He closed his eyes, forcing himself to stay his tears. "I keeping replaying her face as she dies over and over again in my mind. I can't stop it. Nothing I do…" He reached out and traced her jaw with his thumb. "Help me, Hermione. I need…"

"A distraction," she offered, voice solemn. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Yes." He tightened his jaw to keep from sobbing like the blubbering idiot he'd turned into this evening. "Please."

He felt her pull away, and his eyes opened, expecting her to have retreated towards the door, but instead found her standing above him, eyes firm with tenacity. She wiped a stray tear out of the corner of her eye and reached up to her robes, unclasping them. Draco knew it was unfair to ask her in the first place, but he couldn't think of anything else that would distract him from the pain he felt in his chest and heart. Guilt was a fickle bitch, but if he could divert his attention for even a little while, he could breathe again. Piece by piece, Hermione removed her clothes, and, after tossing them far from the tub, she climbed in with him, resting her legs on the sides of his hips, settling into his lap.
Draco felt his pulse race as he took in the sight of her perfectly supple breasts and taut stomach that led down to the crease between her thighs. Merlin, she was a beautiful woman. And she deserved so much better.

Her brown eyes glistened back at him as she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his, calming and steady. It grounded his emotions to this one physical act; he could please Hermione. His hands scooped the sides of her face as he coaxed her mouth open with a lick to the apex of her lips. As the flesh of her tongue met his, he couldn't think of anything else but how exquisite she tasted, and how much he wanted to show her his love for her. He didn't care if the entire house full of people would hear her moan in pleasure, as long as he could give it to her. As long as he could tell her, once more, before it all went to shit, that she meant the world to him.

One hand slipped down between her legs, and without hesitation, he traced delicate circles along her clit, stirring a soft moan from Hermione's lips. Despite all of the pain he'd endured tonight, his cock still lit to life at the sound, betraying and selfish. He leaned forward, taking a nipple into his mouth while pressing his middle finger into her. Hermione gasped, eyes falling closed, and it was glorious.

He built her up until she moved against his hand in earnest, and when she could take it no longer, she begged him, "Please, Draco."

In a slur of moments, he removed his hand, positioned himself beneath her, and sunk her down onto his length. Hermione's gasp was music to his ears, and he began to rock her hips in slow, meaningful grinds against his pelvis, lost in the way her eyes fell closed in bliss. Gone were his terrible thoughts, if only for the time being, and all that mattered were Hermione's breasts as they bounced and the moans that escaped her lips.

An hour later, with the water cold and their brains pulsing with oxytocin, Draco sent Hermione into her fifth orgasm, head falling back as he finally allowed himself the luxury of release along with her. His head leaned back against the tub's headrest, his eyes never leaving her face as she shuddered above him, pink tingling her cheeks in a stunning display. When she came down from her orgasmic high, her eyes came open once again, and she fell forward, leaning her face into the crook of his neck.

Draco embraced her tightly and whispered, "Thank you."

She nuzzled into his neck, yawning. "How are you feeling?"

"Numb," he answered her, honest. "You?"

"Same."

Draco sat up in the tub, taking her with him, and met her face, nose to nose. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"For asking this of you. For..."

"Don't." She shook her head. "We can get through this, alright? We can get through anything. I know it. Let's get you into bed. We'll deal with it all in the morning."

"You deserve so much more than me."

There was a pensive stare before she said, "Don't talk that way."

Draco nodded slowly, pressing his lips to hers, the guilt rising to his chest again. He wanted, so
desperately, to tell her all that had transpired in the woods, but to do so would sign a death warrant to her name. No, he would have to face these demons alone. He would have to face Abraxas alone, and he would need to keep Hermione out of it. For her sake, and for his.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so pleased to announce that I was offered a 'Meet The Penname' day on the facebook page 'Granger Enchanted Survivors 18+' on September 16th, 2016! I was given a list of interview questions about my work 'How To Train Your Auror', and they will feature my works for an entire day on their page! INCLUDING any fanart related to my stories! I'm so speechless and honored. And so, I'd like to offer: If you'd like to make any fan art, whether it be photoshop or drawings for HTTYA, Sex Ed, or any of my stories to be featured this day, please PM me! I'd be honored if anyone wanted to feature their art with a theme of my stories.

~A.
Chapter Notes

I wrote this in a perfectly bleak mood, and I think it carries well with the story. I didn't know my father growing up. I've only recently met him. He came to my wedding. He introduced me to his family. -Recently, my father has fallen off the bandwagon. His sins have come back to haunt him. I feel for him, but I feel for his lovely wife more. I feel so much like Draco in the story, learning the truth about our fathers' sins, come to roost. Stay strong, I tell myself. I am not my father's sins.

~A.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's a leak in this boat
Someone toss me a rope
And a headrest for my, headrest for my soul

There's a leak in this boat
How the hell will I float
With this headrest for my, headrest for my soul
I got a headrest for my, headrest for my soul

Let the whispers unfold
And darling do what you're told
Headrest for my, headrest for my soul

"Headrest For My Soul" Awolnation

Day One

Hermione awoke with to the sun on her face and a pain in her chest. Last night's dreams felt so real this time… Ron, standing across the platform from her, shaking head to toe as he said, 'I do.' Hermione, in her yellow sundress and favorite black flats, carrying a bouquet of daisies. Not some grand wedding like Molly Weasley wanted, but it fit, saying their vows at Platform Nine and Three Quarters. It was where they began their adventure together, and it would be where they would start the rest of their lives. Harry, pretending he had dirt in his eye to save face because he was crying. Ginny, openly, grinning from ear-to-ear.

The guilt ate at Hermione like eroding acid. She shouldn't have been dreaming about Ron like he was still alive. It hurt her heart to know that, tucked inside her robes on the other side of the room, held the secret to bringing him back. And it was even worse, Hermione realized, when she didn't want it. What Greg Diggle had given her was not redemption -it was torture. Inmitigable torture. To bring Ron back would be to tear apart the very foundation she'd built her life on after his death. No, this wasn't Greg Diggle attempting to free himself of guilt. If anything, this was his way of planting a seed of doubt into her head, to tempt her into destroying her relationship with Draco. Even now, Greg Diggle was a diabolical cunt.
She rolled over to her other side, expecting to find Draco sleeping soundly next to her, but instead met the cold, empty space of blankets and loneliness. Last night, making love to Draco felt like some otherworldly dream. It didn't feel real - like she had watched it through someone else's eyes as it happened. Their love making didn't used to be so... solemn. So detached. An entire weekend had shifted their entire dynamic.

And Merlin, was it ever depressing.

"Draco?" she whispered, sitting upright and glancing around the room. He was nowhere to be seen. Hermione pried herself out of bed, first one foot, then the other, and padded her way to the closet to dress. Her hands shook as she filtered through the variety of outfits Draco had gifted her with over the years. She hardly saw any of her old clothing here, there were so many new. Each one had been met with a statement from Hermione how she didn't need new clothes, all while Draco scoffed and told her to suck it up and wear the damned thing. She wished she hadn't been so unthankful. Each outfit was so very pretty.

She settled on a blue button up blouse and black slacks, slipping a pair of two inch heels on afterwards. This morning, she would walk Dean through his first day as the new Auror Trainer before he set off to the Ministry. It felt wonderful to have some purpose, considering everything else was up in the air. Clearing her throat, she went to the bathroom next, attempted to fix her hair, and then slipped her engagement ring back on her finger. Hermione couldn't sleep with jewelry on.

She took the stairs carefully on her descent to the kitchens, and found Astoria and Scorpius (still no Draco) seated at the kitchen counter, a plate full of pancakes each.

"Hello," Astoria said quietly, nodding in Hermione's direction. Both witches were reserved, to which Scorpius took notice of immediately.

"Mummy okay?" Scorpius tugged on Astoria's sleeve. "Okay, Mummy?"

"I'm alright," she told the child at once, eyes turning back to him, "Mummy's just lost in thoughts again."

Scorpius, bless his soul, turned his grey eyes on Hermione next. "You okay, Mummy?"

"Of course I am," Hermione grinned, crossing the room and bundling Scorpius up in a hug. "How are you doing? You had quite a... a sleep."

"I good!" Scorpius chirped. "Mummy gonna take me to Hum-in-y-dooks!"

"Honeydukes? Again?"

Astoria shrugged. "Auror Jameson's idea. Thought Scorpius could use the fresh air."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Hermione asked, furrowing her brow. "To be going out in the open? So soon after...?"

"I think," Astoria sighed, setting her fork down on her plate, "At this rate, I'm in no less danger here than I am out there. I can't continue to live my life shut away simply because Draco always finds a way to throw himself into his work."

"You're not blaming Draco for this?" Hermione suggested.

"Aren't I?" The witch narrowed her eyes. "I never asked to be involved with Aurors. Never. I married him thinking that we would live a safe, peaceful life. All of this excitement... I never wanted
Hermione nodded, understanding. "I've been in your shoes. When Ron said he wanted to stay on as an Auror, despite his promise to only stay in for two years... it broke my heart in two." Her voice grew quieter. "If he had gotten out when he promised, he never would have..." She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be talking about this. I've just been having these dreams lately..."

"Dreams?" Astoria raised an eyebrow.

"I assure you, that's all they are." Hermione sighed. "It's just... hard. Sometimes. The closer it gets to the anniversary of his death, the more frequently they come. It's like my body keeps wanting me to relive each and every moment I had with him, even though it knows it's painful. Almost like, my subconscious is afraid if I don't force myself to remember, I might someday forget."

Astoria smiled softly, placing a hand on Hermione's. "There's nothing wrong with remembering the good times, Miss Granger. Excuse me... Almost Missus Malfoy."

Hermione's lips turned up as she blushed. "Do you miss it? Being Missus Malfoy?"

Astoria looked down at Scorpius, who completely tuned the two women out, relishing in drenching his pancakes with syrup. "The only things I miss are what could have been. -But, I am glad he has you. That they both do." She turned her eyes down to the floor, pensive. "I feel I should share something with you... Something that I've asked Draco to keep secret." She rose from her chair and motioned Hermione to follow her to the stove, across the room.

Hermione did, and in a hushed whisper, she asked, "Is everything alright, Astoria?"

Astoria's eyes fell on Scorpius, and her voice shook as she whispered back, "My family... they haven't always been as open minded as me. One of my ancestors was a nasty witch. Nasty enough to bind our family in a blood curse. It's filtered out through the generations, however..." She pursed her lips. "I've begun to show signs..." She rolled up her sleeve, where the veins in her wrist were quite visible, dark purple in shade. "It works slowly."

"Astoria..." Hermione gasped, taking the witch's hand and running her fingers down her wrist. "Oh my... I'm so sorry... what I can-"

"-There's nothing to be done. It's a curse. Irreversible. Draco knew, before he married me, the risks that the curse could be passed down. I didn't care. I feared that this might one day happen, and that he might be left all alone, and I... I couldn't leave him that way." Astoria pulled her arm out of Hermione's hand and rolled the sleeve back down. "Scorpius means the world to me. I'm so very glad he has you, should I one day..."

"Don't speak that way."

"Shouldn't I?" Astoria wiped a stray tear from her eye. "I have years." She nodded, repeating, "I have years..." Her voice trailed off. "Please, Hermione. Take care of them. Both of them."

"Of course." Hermione nodded, taking Astoria's hand and squeezing it. "But alongside you. You take care of them, too. We're all family here. And I'll be damned if you're giving up now."

Astoria's eyes still resting on Scorpius, she turned her lips up in a thankful smile. "Draco's in the gardens. I saw him through the window this morning." She looked back to Hermione. "What happened last night?"

"One of our newest Aurors, Lindy Bolt... she was murdered. In front of Draco."
"What? That's... that's awful! Oh, no wonder he was such an ass..."

"I have to talk to him. He's shut me out, but I won't let him."

"No. You most certainly won't." Astoria gave an encouraging nod. "Go on, then. Off you pop."

Both witches hugged each other, and Hermione gave Scorpius one more hug and a giant kiss on the cheek (to which the toddler detested) and made her way out the front doors heading towards the gardens. Dean would have to wait, momentarily.

She found him seated at the edge of one of the fountains scattered about the obnoxiously large acreage, hands folded in his lap and head hung low. He didn't even raise his head when Hermione approached and sat down beside him.

"You're up early," she said, nudging him in the arm with her elbow. Draco remained stoic. "I think we need to talk."

"Yeah..." he whispered. "We do." His face tilted up, and his silver flecked eyes met the brown of her irises, rendering her still. "Hermione, I know what you're going to ask me to do. And I can't." He swallowed, hard, and tore his eyes down to the ground again. "I can't relive it."

"I'm not asking you to," she said, feeling such sympathy for Draco that she placed an unwelcome hand on his shoulder, to which he scoffed at. "I have a few things to talk to you about. All you have to do is listen."

"Alright."

"I visited Diggle."

Draco's body tensed beneath her hand, but he did not speak. He simply listened, as requested.

"Harry and I did," she said, hoping the mentioning of Harry would lessen his agitation, "And Diggle told us about the white wolf."

"Yeah. I know all about him." Draco pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes. "The white wolf is my grandfather."

"You know?" How? Had Harry briefed him? "It's a long story."

"I have all the time in the world." She tried to remain patient, but anxiousness crept through her bones. So many questions dangled at the tip of her tongue, begging to be released. "Tell me."

"I... I can't." He shrugged her hand off and stood. "Hermione, I just can't let you in on this one."

"What?" She didn't understand. Her patience grew thin. "Draco, we're partners. We've always been partners. You've never kept anything from me before."

"Yeah? And how about what you've kept from me?" he snapped suddenly, and Hermione stared at him in disbelief.

"Why are you acting this way?" Draco dug through the pocket of his vest and removed a folded piece of parchment. It took Hermione only a moment to recognize it. "Did... were you going through my things?"
Draco thrust Diggle's letter out between them. "Why did you hide this from me?"

"I wasn't hiding it," she shook her head. "I wasn't. Really. You were so worn last night, and I didn't want to rattle you-"

His eyes were like two boulders boring down on her. "-Are you suggesting I have something to be rattled over, Hermione?" He took a step closer, the letter still out for her to take. But it was a taunt. If she took it, the situation would only grow worse. "You should have told me. The moment I walked out of that door. You should have told me."

"I know…" She nodded, her voice quiet. "And I'm sorry I didn't. I only wanted to spare you-"

"-Spare me? How about you spare me the pity party, Mione." He narrowed his eyes. "I'm not some pygmy puff you picked up in a local pet store. I'm your fiancé. Something like this…” He glanced down at the parchment in his hand. "The Resurrection Stone. -Does Potter know it still exists?"

"Greg told him it was destroyed."

"But you know it isn't." Draco challenged. "Did you share that bit?"

"I've barely begun to wrap my head around the possibility!" Hermione snapped. "Forgive me if I don't go running to Harry until I know all of the facts!"

"Facts! The fact is, Hermione, you found a way to bring Weasley back, and you didn't tell me."

"That's not fair! I don't even have the Resurrection Stone!"

"But you'd use it, wouldn't you!?

"I don't know!" The words tumbled out of her mouth before she could retract them. Her hand flew up to her mouth as it snapped shut. They both stared, wide eyed, at each other for what seemed like eternities. Finally, she removed her hand and whispered, "I didn't mean-"

"-No. Don't." Draco crossed the distance between them and shoved the paper into her hand. "Just don't." His eyes traveled over her shoulder, past her. "We'll talk about this later. Alright?"

Hermione's voice shook as she nodded and said, "Alright."

To her surprise, Draco leaned down and kissed her cheek. Feather-light, but still full of love. As he slowly retracted his face from hers, he stared evenly down into her eyes and whispered, "I love you."

"I… I love you, too."

"I need to speak to my father. We can talk about this tonight." And with that, he stepped back, giving him enough space to walk around her. Hermione spun on her heels, following his direction as Draco pushed past an overly-tired looking Dean Thomas, who stared between Draco and Hermione as if he'd caught two cats in an alley.

"Hey, mate," he muttered, to which Draco nodded his head and stormed around a hedge, out of sight. Dean's eyes focused on Hermione, and he tried his best to grin, though it looked rather forced. "Hey, Hermione."

"Hi, Dean," she attempted a smile herself, finding it tasted bitter.

"Er…" Dean looked back at the hedge, then forward, then shook his head. "I'm not even going to attempt it… -Right. You ready to walk me through the first day's lesson?"
Hermione's face softened into a real smile this time, and she nodded. Thank the lord almighty, Dean didn't want to get involved. "Yes. Let's."

Guilt. So much guilt weighed heavily on Draco's heart as he tore off towards the Manor once more, itching for an excuse to turn back around. But he hadn't left anything behind, and, besides, he needed to keep his distance from Hermione as best he could for this to work. Still, he wanted nothing more than to hightail it back to the Gardens, tell Dean to bugger off, and spill of his secrets to Hermione before making love to her in the fountain. Fantasies like that, however, would have to stay right there in his head. Real life was much more complicated.

He found his father in the library and wasn't at all surprised to find him nose-deep in a thick book. Draco inherited his father's love of literature, along with his mother's sense of fashion. The best of both worlds. And speaking of his mother, it was to his relief that he did not find her here, because he wasn't entirely sure he could do what needed to be done in her presence.

Shutting the door audibly behind him startled his father, who glanced up from his reading at once. "Draco." He raised an eyebrow, slowly, and placed the book in his lap. "I was told to stay as far away from you as humanly possible. So, forgive me if I ask why you've come seeking me out?"

Draco scoffed, placing his hands into his pockets. "I think we both know why I'm here."

"I'm sure one of us does. But, alas, it is not me." Lucius smirked. "Go on, boy. Have at me. I can see it in your eyes, you're chomping at the bit."

Draco squared his jaw, forcing himself to draw the moment out. Ever since leaving the Forbidden Forest, Draco had three goals in mind, one of them being to tell off his son-of-a-bitch father. No, not a son-of-a-bitch. Grandmother was far too nice to be associated with the likeness of Lucius Malfoy.

"I know." He said, finally. Lucius stared inquisitively back at him, so Draco continued. "About the white wolf. I know you know who it is."

Lucius's face still feigned confusion, but the tells were there. The slight twitch in the left corner of his mouth. The narrowing of his eyes. The tighter grip on his book. "I haven't the foggiest clue what you mean, Draco."

"Lying. Why am I not surprised?" Draco quipped as he began to pace back and forth in front of the door. He wanted to remain close to it, should he hear anyone approach. "You lied to me most of my entire life. I don't know why I expected you to do differently now."

"I never lied to you-"

"Mudbloods are vermin? That wasn't a lie?" Draco snorted a bitter laugh. "I've got two years worth of shags from my fiancé that proves you wrong." He relished in the disgust on his father's face. "Does that make you uncomfortable, Father? That I'm going to marry a muggleborn?"

"The idea that you would bed that woman..." Lucius scoffed under his breath. "It's positively revolting."

"No it isn't -but you want to know what is? Murder. Murdering innocent people because of Goddamn blood status!" Draco stopped his pacing. "You're the disgusting one in this family. Not Hermione."

Lucius's face grew cold. "To what do you presume to know about my life, Draco? Did you live it?"
"I know enough."

"Do you? I have never been a fan of repeating myself, but I fear it needs to be said once more, so: I have never lied to you."

Draco felt the anger like a lightning bolt in his chest, sharpening his resolve. "Let's talk about the white wolf. About Abraxas Malfoy."

Time crawled to a halt as both men played their cards, each with a distinctive poker face. Draco tucked his hands behind his back, firming his posture, while Lucius remained as still as a lamppost. Draco wanted desperately to say something, but to do so would be to give himself away, and he wasn't ready to give up the ghost just yet. Not with the truth dangling out there on a thread, begging to be grabbed.

Finally, Lucius Malfoy sighed. "He found you."

"I found him."

Lucius's eyebrows rose, impressed. "And yet you still stand before me, untouched. How is that?"

"Unlike you, Grandfather appreciates a want for peace. The fact I never wanted the cursed mark on my arm might have a hand in why I have my powers, and you do not."

"And does the Ministry know of your Grandfather's leniency?"

"The Ministry has no say in matters of my family," Draco stared complacently. "And you would be wise to keep this between us."

Lucius turned his nose up at the thought. "I might be dying, but I am no fool. -So what have you come here to do today? Gloat? To mock me for my transgressions? Or have you come to finish the job and put me down like a mutt?"

"Oh no. I'm going to enjoy watching you die. Slowly. In pain." Draco approached the armchair across from Lucius and took a seat. "You deserve it, you senile old man."

"I'm hardly old. Or senile. And you'd best watch your tongue, boy. I am still your father."

"What kind of a father puts his son through the kind of torture you put me through year after year? Tell me? Do you think filling me up with xenophobic notions did my childhood any good? Did you think it would make me a better man?"

"I know it did."

"Ha." Draco rolled his eyes. "I was an arrogant little shit in looks for a pissing contest anywhere I went. And then you convinced me to get the Mark. A Mark that might as well signify me as a Nazi or Ku Klux Klan socialite." Draco reached for his left arm instinctively. "No, I'm so very glad Grandfather put you back in your place. You can die knowing you'll never touch magic again."

Lucius's face did not give an ounce of emotion, but his eyes said it all; Draco's words cut him deep.

"Gloating, then? Is that why you've come?"

"No." Draco leaned forward. "I came to give you a message. From Grandfather. He sends his regards, first and foremost. And he wishes me to tell you... your secret remains safe with him. And with me."
"Secret… what secret?"

"I'm sure it's hard to recall, seeing as you have so many." Draco reached into his pocket and removed a small, moving photograph of a young girl with raven black hair and sea-green eyes. "Did you, once, ever consider telling me? Or Mother? She deserves to know." He revels in the shock painted across Lucius's face as he stared down at the picture of Victoria Crabbe. "She's a lovely little thing. Spritely. Full of life. Despite our sociopathic father." And with that, he sat the picture down on Lucius's book, smirking as he turned and walked out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, that is EXACTLY what I've just done. Now we know why Victoria Crabbe is being recruited as a Sacred 28 member, when Crabbes are not part of the Sacred 28. Because she's not a Crabbe. Well, only half. ;D

Yes, that was a Cursed Child reference above. Enjoy it.

~A.
A very special thank you to Waymay for editing/enjoying this chapter as much as myself. My heart goes out to you, Way. Empire, Chapter 3 up! GO CHECK IT OUT!

Also, I have posted a one shot story, Pitch, also a Dramione. Feel free to give it a look
Unraveling The Loose Ends

Chapter Notes

My amazing friend, waymay, always knows just what to say to make my day brighter. Thank you, way, for editing and believing in this story. You know what's to come, but I also haven't told you a secret... hehehe... ;D Can't wait for your oneshot!

As always, thank you to everyone who believes in this story. This is the final chapter with some downtime for a while, so enjoy it while you can. Next chapter? Oh. It's going to be a Hell of an adventure by the end of it.
~A.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So hard to sign my own surrender
So hard to do what I've intended
So hard to leave what I've defended
So hard to separate what's blended

If I could breathe, I'd be free
And I'd get high, I'd turn water to wine
If I could be, I'd breathe free at last
And I'd get high, I'd get so high
I'd get so high
"Repeat After Me" by KONGOS

Day One, Cont.

*(*)*

Hermione sat at the base of the fountain well after Dean left, her hand still clutching Diggle's letter as if it were the written word of God; she shouldn't have it, but she did, and she didn't know what to do with it. To throw it away would be to throw away Ron. She just couldn't bring herself to do that. Draco had been so furious with her for her words, and she could hardly blame him. It's why she sat here, now, wondering why she'd said it all.

"That's not fair! I don't even have the Resurrection Stone!"

"But you'd use it, wouldn't you?"
"I don't know!"

The words echoed in her ears, over and over, repeating like a broken record meant to torture her. She wiped away some stray tears from her cheeks, solidifying her reasons as she sorted them out. To throw this letter away would mean to turn her back on not just Ron but his family. Harry. Everyone who ever loved him. If she brought him back, it wouldn't be for her. Hermione, no matter how much she loved Ron, couldn't just destroy her relationship with Draco. She loved him. Needed him like the Earth needed the Sun to create life. He was her constant, her best friend. But -and she hated to admit it – Ron had been all of those things, too. He'd also been her first love. A love like that… it never went away, even when the loved-one was long gone.

She knew the reason, if she decided to bring Ron back, would be for his family. For Molly, Arthur, Ginny, George… all of the Weasleys. And not just them. Harry. He wasn't the same, since Ron's passing. He threw himself into his work the moment he learned of Ron's murder and hadn't stopped since. She knew bringing Ron back would go against every earthly law; the dead were meant to stay dead. Would Ron even want to come back? Would he hold her in contempt for the rest of his new life if she did? Or would he thank her for giving him a second chance? Would he expect them to start where they left off? Would he concede to her love for Draco? No, Hermione thought dully, Ron would never do that. He'd fight for her; it would be his Gryffindor nature. Would Draco fight back? He was stronger, now, emotionally, than he had ever been, however… Draco was also timid. If he thought Hermione might have a chance to be happy with Ron again, he would bow out. Even if she chose Draco. He wouldn't allow her to; he felt so much guilt over creating the Pandora Box which took Ron's life in the first place.

There was so much she needed to get out into words, but she couldn't. If she could just talk to Ron. Just once. Ask him what he'd want.

If she found the Resurrection Stone, she could do just that. She could summon his image and… no, that would be a very dangerous temptation. She knew the story -one might go mad from seeing their loved ones but not being able to touch them. And Hell, she didn't even know where the damned stone was.

Angrily, she crumpled up Diggle's letter and threw it across the gardens into the rose bushes. Half a moment later, she crawled over to them, plucked it out, and smoothed out the edges. Tears ran down her face as she cradled the letter to her chest, and she sobbed quietly to herself, muttering, "What should I do, Ron? I don't want to hurt Draco… but if I give up on you…” She wiped her snot-filled nose against her arm and sighed, knees drawing to her chest. She rested her head against them and closed her eyes. "I loathe Gregory Diggle. If I ever see him again, I'll kill him."

Draco’s heart slammed wildly in his chest as he shut the door to the library and leaned against the frame. It took everything in him not to break down after revealing to his father that he knew about Lucius's affair with Irma Crabbe. Even now, the thought sickened him to no end. Crabbe's mother wasn't nearly as ugly as her husband, but, when compared to Draco's mother, she could hold no candle to Narcissa's accolade. Why his father would stoop so low was beyond him, but, then again, War did crazy things to people. Got in their heads. Destroyed their resolves.

"You lie."

"Do I?" Abraxas shifted weight on his feet as he crossed his arms. "Dear me. I wasn't aware you were so stubborn to hearing truth."

"Father would never…” But even as Draco said the words, he knew them to be false. Just as Diggle
told him about Lucius's involvement in Douglas B. Diggle's death, this, too, rang out with merit. Draco sat quietly for a time, before he finally asked the question that weighed heavily on his mind. "Why?"

"Why does anyone do anything? Selfish pleasures."

"How did you know? About Victoria?"

"I can sense my own. It's in my nature. Being an animagus came – comes naturally to me. And a wolf can always sense his pack."

"She doesn't look a thing like us," Draco muttered.

"No. But she does quite resemble your grandmother, no?" Abraxas offered.

Draco closed his eyes, trying to picture his grandmum. It'd been years since her passing as well. But he'd seen older photographs -he knew her to be pretty, with jet black hair and green eyes. Yes... it made sense. Especially since the Malfoys typically only conceived male children. Had for generations. Their dominant traits of white blonde hair and silver eyes might only be passed down to the men. Though, it was hard to tell. There weren't woman heirs. Why was that? Draco didn't want to dwell on it. It frightened him to think what might have become to the generations of female heirs, if they had been born before a male... His family lineage was not known for being kind.

"Why tell me?"

"You deserve to know. You have a sister, Draco. A sister you never knew about."

Draco flinched at the words. His heart hurt for his mother, whose heart would break at this news. She loved Father with every bit of her soul, the way Draco loved Hermione. He couldn't imagine ever ruining that. "Mother must never know," he said quietly.

Abraxas nodded. "I've always admired Narcissa. Such a strong woman, even when she married a coward like Lucius. She was brave, for the both of them. I've heard rumors it was her lie to the Dark Lord that brought his reign of terror to an end. That she lied about Potter's death to protect you. To find you again."

Yes, he remembered Potter's testimony at the trials. How Mother had lied and told Voldemort that Potter was truly dead, even when he wasn't. Draco would never been as brave. His mother, truly, was a formidable woman with amazing character. He now regretted the way he chewed her out at St. Mungo's. None of this was her fault. It was Lucius's. Not hers.

"So," Draco said finally, "That's why you came after Victoria. And Scorpius."

"Their lineage to the Sacred Twenty-Eight is poetic, is it not? To us? With my genetics coursing through their veins, they're naturally gifted to be animagi, like myself."

"And me?"

"Yes. You, too, carry the genes. However, I died before I could help you awaken the natural gift. It lies dormant within you. Children are much easier to teach. Like a second language - the older one gets, the more difficult it is to grasp."

"But I possess it, yes?" Draco turned his eyes up to Abraxas. "Yes?"

"Yes, Draco. You do."
"Then... use me. Instead of Scorpius. Use me in his place."

A demented smirk crossed Abraxas's lips. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Draco?"

A soft, feminine voice jerked Draco Malfoy out of his memories and back to reality - he twisted his face in the direction and met the serene eyes of his mother, who stood at the end of the hallway, perplexed as she stared at her son. Draco didn't know why until he looked down - his fists were shaking at his sides. He did his best to steady his trembling arms and ran his fingers through his hair like he did when he was nervous.

"Mother," he acknowledged her before kicking off of the wall and crossing the hallway to her. There, he scooped her into a vicious hug that nearly knocked the breath out of them both.

"Draco..." she said again, even more gentle than before as her arms folded around him. "My boy, what's wrong?"

Draco was a grown man - had been for a while now, but cradled in his mother's arms this way, he felt like he might be as old as Scorpius. He couldn't remember the last time he'd embraced her this way: full of love and respect. "I've missed you," he whispered into her hair.

Narcissa's arms tightened, and he heard her crack into a sob nearly instantly. "Oh, Draco. I've missed you, too. My boy..." She kissed his cheek and hugged him tighter still, until he nearly suffocated at the hold. He immediately pried himself away, embarrassed and angry with himself. He thought he could be stronger, but no. Narcissa neatly wiped the tears from her cheeks and patted Draco's face thoughtfully. "I always hoped you'd come back to me."

Draco's heart wretched at the secrets buried in him, and he shook his head. "No, Mother. Don't say that."

"Why ever not?"

He sighed, withdrawing himself. "I'm about to do something terrible. Something..." his voice trailed away. "Can we come back from it? From the terrible things we do?" He asked his question with sincerity, though he sounded miles away in his own mind as he spoke.

"Of course." Narcissa nodded. "But whatever it is you think you have to do, Draco, remember - you don't have to do it alone. Or at all. There's always another option."

Draco's right hand absentmindedly traced his left forearm, over his Dark Mark. "I'm not sure that's true."

"Of course it is. What is this about? You can tell me."

Draco shook his head and turned away from his mother. "Stay away from Father," he told her. "He puts the snake in the Slytherin mantra. - And... when it's all over with, take care of them." His fingers traced the wall beside him as he fully turned his back to her. "You were always the strong one in this family. - And whatever you do, listen to Hermione. Even if you don't like her, listen. She's the brightest witch I know."

"Draco -"

But he'd already taken off down the hallway, his boots clacking against the marble flooring as he
I love you, Mother’ he thought. ‘I'm sorry it will come to this. You deserve so much more than the husband and son you were dealt.’

Dean inhaled a deep breath as he set Hermione's business case down on top of the desk and fished out her notes. His fingers trembled as he addressed the new recruits, but then his eyes settled on a post-it stuck to the top of the notes and he laughed.

'Team Trio! Go get them, Dean.' It was scribbled in Hermione's handwriting.

He smiled, bringing his eyes back to his new recruits, and said in his best impression of Auror Gregory Wallace Diggle: "Hello. I'm Fourth Ranking Commanding Officer, Dean Benjamin Thomas. I'll be training the sodding lot of you most days, and the days I'm gone, Aurors Malfoy or Granger will sub for me." He walked around his desk, leaned against it, and crossed his arms. "It took me three bloody years to become an Auror, so don't think for a second I'll go easy on any of you. You want this? You earn it." He flashed a set of pearly white teeth. "Let's get started, shall we?"

Draco's second loose end to tie up before shit hit the fan was found tucked away in the den, carrying a Quidditch action figure and shouting as he spun it around the room, "Go, go, go! Get snitch! Get it!"

"Scorpius," Draco called, trying his best to hold a pleasant tone as he addressed his two-year-old son from across the room. Auror Jameson sat in the corner, wand in his lap. Dark circles shrouded his eyes, and he looked as if he hadn't slept a wink the night before. His eyes stayed trained on the toddler, even when ran across the room and threw himself into Draco's arms.

"Daddy! Daddy! I caught snitch! I did! You see?"

"I did," Draco laughed, taking the Quidditch figure of Viktor Krum and flying it over Scorpius's head playfully. Scorpius reached up to grab it, and Draco let him. Still cradled in his arms, Scorpius kissed his father on the nose and grinned ear-to-ear.

"Mummy gonna take me Hon-ee-ducks!"

"Honeydukes? Again?"

"My idea," offered Jameson.

Draco nodded appreciatively to the man.

"You come, Daddy?" Scorpius asked.

This might be the last time he'd get to spend moments like these with his son. Draco smiled ear-to-ear, just like Scorpius, and said, "Yeah, Scorp. I'll tag along."

"Yay! Hermummy come too?"

"You want Hermione to come?"

"Yus! Both Mummies!"

His heart panged with guilt, and he set the toddler down to the floor. "Yeah… I'll ask Hermione if she wants to come, too." He ruffled Scorpius's hair and watched as the toddler bounded over to
Jameson and sat on his lap with a 'plop'. Jameson looked thoroughly horrified, but kept perfectly still, even when Scorpius reached up and pulled both his ears. Stoic. That was the word to describe Jameson.

"Look, Daddy!" Scorpius laughed gleefully, tugging on Jameson's ears and pulling them outwards. "Monkey!"

Draco smirked. "Go on, Auror Jameson. Make the sounds. You're a monkey, after all."

Jameson narrowed his eyes. A man of few words, he gave a contemptible sigh, but still managed to mutter, "ooh ooh, ah ah."

"Monkey! Monkey! Again!" Scorpius shouted.

Draco left the den in hysterical laughter, relieved he could still find the will to laugh. Especially when he knew, after today, things would be much different for everyone in the Malfoy Manor.

Hermione wasn't aware she fell asleep until warm hands scooped under her legs and behind her back, cradling her as she was lifted from the ground. Her eyes darted open immediately, and her arms flung out, frightened -she made a fist and threw it out.

"OI!" Draco's voice hit her ears before her eyes focused, and she came face to face with him, her fist still connected against his cheek.

"Draco?" She stopped flailing about and rested in his arms, withdrawing her fist immediately. "Oh, God. I'm so sorry. I hit you, didn't I?"

"You *think?" he sneered crossly, rubbing the side of his face on his shoulder. "Merlin's hat, Hermione. You've got some powerful fists, you know that?"

"I said I was sorry," she muttered, looking about the garden. "I fell asleep."

"Thank you, captain obvious. Anything else you'd like to point out? Did you know the sun is actually a star?" He stuck his tongue out childishly at her as he began to carry her down the garden path towards the Manor.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said at once.

"You've said that already."

"No. I mean… for earlier." She wrapped her arms around his neck, seeing Diggle's letter still clutched tight in her fingers. "I didn't mean to say it. I was frustrated, and tired, and I really didn't appreciate you going through my things…"

"Don't apologize," he said, kissing her cheek. "You had every right to be angry with me. -And…" His silver-blue eyes connected with hers, and his face softened. "I shouldn't have gone through your robes. I'm sorry for that. I wasn't thinking clearly."

Hermione rested her head against his chest. "You can set me down, you know. I'm capable of walking."

"Nonsense," he told her, "After all, I'll be carrying you across the threshold of our home one day. And you'll be my wife." He beamed down at her. "Scorpius wants us to go to Honeydukes with him and Astoria."
"He does?" She was glad to hear it, but also confused. "I don't want to fight with you."

"Nor I you. Which is why we won't." His foot hit a rock, and he stumbled as he cursed, "Ah! Fuck it all!"

"Set me down," she said at once as Draco caught his footing and fell back in step.

"No."

She rolled her eyes. "You'd rather us both fall?"

"We won't fall. It was just a rock." He continued to carry her. "We'll talk about it tonight. Over dinner. Alright? -Until then, let's enjoy the day off with Scorpius while we can…" his voice trailed off in a saddening way.

"Draco… what happened in the woods?"

Keeping stride, he fell silent.

"Draco." Hermione tried to reason with him. "I can tell when something's wrong with you. You're not telling me everything. What was in the woods?"

Draco stopped his brisk pace for a moment, turning his eyes down to her, pensive. He blinked.

"Hermione, please leave it alone. You want to know what's in those woods? Two frightening teenagers, Bolt's death, and a lot of bad memories for myself. You can read it all in Potter's report when you go back to the Ministry. But, please. Don't make me live it again." His face was challenging, as if he dared her to question him. Hermione knew that look -he'd worn it the first day in training. He was hiding something -something monumental. It frustrated her to no end, but she knew when to push and when to concede… for now. Nothing about his explanation gave her comfort. But if he was going to keep secrets from her, she'd play his game.

"Alright, Draco," she said evenly, making sure to conceal her doubts. "Whatever you say."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

The rest of the day was spent wandering through Hogsmeade. Draco bought his son nearly everything he begged for, even when Astoria scolded him for spoiling the boy. Draco didn't care. He wanted Scorpius to have the world, and he'd gladly give it to him. After all, this might be the last chance he'd get to.

He made sure to stay close to Hermione, an arm around her at all times, stealing kisses every chance he got, and even surprising her with a new quill and ink set from Flourish and Blotts that she had her eye on for a while. He bought Astoria a new coat, and Jameson a bowler hat Astoria picked out for him. His mother received new jewelry, but his father received nothing. He didn't want to bring the insufferable fool along at all, but, seeing as how Hermione was his personal detail, the choice was not up to Draco.

They spent the better part of the afternoon licking the wrappers clean off of the candy they bought, resting in the middle of the square on the benches.

"Who dis?" Scorpius asked, holding up the card he received in his chocolate frog pack.
"That's Dumbledore," Hermione grinned, picking up the card thoughtfully. "Your Daddy and I knew him. He was a good man."

Draco turned his eyes down to the ground, remembering Dumbledore's death as plain as day. How Snape took the moment so Draco wouldn't have to. He knew, now, that it was their plan from the beginning. But it still haunted him… How many terrible things would he need to endure in the name of his family before he was allowed to rest?

He curled his fingers around Hermione's hand and gripped it tightly. Tonight, he would be allowed one last hurrah of love and merriment. Tonight would be the final nail to his coffin of heroism.

Hermione gripped his hand back and smiled. "I love you," she whispered.

Draco nodded, the guilt eating at him. He loved her very much, too, but he couldn't bring himself to say it back. Instead, he leaned over and kissed her chastely on the lips. One last hurrah before the final countdown. One last hurrah before the descent into the abyss. He only hoped he could crawl back out, once it was all said and done. He never wanted to let his family down. Not then, not now, not ever.

Chapter End Notes

A little more Dramione next chapter. Can't wait! XD OFF TO WRITE IT!

~A.

Please leave a review in your wake? Let me know your favorite part of this chap, if you could.
Waymay cracked me up today during editing. Omg. Thank you so much for listening to me rant on and on about my past. I swear, I'm not as self-centered as I seem. And thank you, LightofEvolution, for the words of encouragement.

It's going to hurt a little here, but don't worry -Dramione will come back, and with a swift force! Just trust me, alright? XD

SAM WALLFLOWER made some AMAZING fanart for How To Train Your Auror. Link can be found on my author's page! THANK YOU IRIS! I love it!

Hours pass, and she still counts the minutes
That I am not there, I swear I didn't mean
For it to feel like this
Like every inch of me is bruised, bruised
And don't fly fast. Oh, pilot can you help me?
Can you make this last? This plane is all I got
So keep it steady, now
Cause every inch you see is bruised

"Bruised" by Jack's Mannequin

Day One: The Final Hours
*(*)*

When the subject of dinner came up that evening, Jameson insisted they all stop at a local café near his home, where they made 'the best damn roast beef on rye on the whole damn planet.' Astoria scolded him for language, and Hermione chuckled under her breath as she watched Theodore Jameson turn the color of a plum and resign himself to silence for most of the evening after. Scorpius seemed to take to him quite well, which, to Astoria, seemed to nearly make her smitten with Jameson. Or, perhaps, that was just the act. Hermione couldn't be sure -she looked so comfortable with her arm snaked around Jameson's as she scooted closer to him in the dimly lit booth and nibbled on a few potato crisps from his plate.

Lucius and Narcissa sat in a corner table of the establishment, away from the younger generation, with the insistence from Narcissa it would be alright. Everyone knew she was only trying to delay the inevitable eruption of a fight between Draco and his father, and hoped to keep it at bay until they were tucked inside the Manor. The two had exchanged agitated, sometimes furious, glances all afternoon, but they hadn't said a word to each other.

Seated on the other side of the booth, Hermione rested her head on Draco's shoulder as she watched Scorpius attempt to pick Auror Jameson's nose with a spoon. He wore an expression worthy of Snape: that was, to say, expressionless.
"Have you two looked at floral arrangements?" Astoria asked Draco and Hermione as all three parents ignored Jameson's silent cries for help as the toddler began to stuff his collar full of sugar packets.

"Floral?" Draco raised an eyebrow, using his free arm, that wasn't leaned on by Hermione, to pick up his cup of coffee and take a sip.

"For the wedding, of course." Astoria frowned. "Don't tell me you've already forgotten you're engaged."

"It's been four days, Astoria. The papers haven't even gotten their talons in a column on it, and you want to talk about flower arrangements?"

"Well, excuse me. I thought I was helping." She tucked her face into Jameson's shoulder, hiding it from view. Hermione now understood why the wedding was so important to Astoria: with the blood curse beginning its course, she felt as if this might be her last chance to be involved in a wedding. But she'd said she had years, right? Hermione certainly hoped so.

"You are," Hermione piped up, attempting to alleviate the tension between the exes. "Draco's just being an ass."

"Ass?" Draco quirked an eyebrow. "Am I the only sane one at this table? There's a criminal running around threatening to destroy our family, and all you women want to do is talk flowers. Jameson, help me out here." He looked to the Auror, but found it useless; Scorpius was now trying to shove a salt shaker in Theodore's mouth, so his lips were clamped tight.

"Scorpius, dear," Astoria scolded sweetly, "Give Theo a break, yes?"

"Theo?" Jameson managed to mutter out of the corner of his mouth as the toddler let up on his relentless assault with the shaker.

"Yes. Remember, you're my newly acquired boyfriend. It would be odd to call you 'Theodore' all the time. You could call me 'Tori'. Go on! Give it a go!"

Jameson squinted his eyes, pleading with Hermione for help, but she simply brought her cup of tea to her lips and sipped. Eventually, Jameson, when he was sure he wouldn't have salt shoved down his throat, cleared it and said, in his driest, most monotone drawl, "Tori is correct. Flower arrangements are an important part of any wedding inventory."

"You're whipped," Draco chided. He slowly placed his coffee mug back on the table and turned to Hermione, whispering, "Care for a stroll?" She knew why he asked it – he'd promised a talk about Diggle's letter, and this might be the only chance they could talk about it without being overheard by the rest of the family.

"That sounds lovely," she said in her best casual tone, turning her attention to Theodore. "Would you be alright keeping an eye on the Malfoys on your own for a moment?"

"Certainly," Jameson nodded. "We're in a public setting -It isn't within the white wolf's M.O. to attack with witnesses."

"Always on duty, aren't you?" Draco quipped, scooting out of the booth and ushering Hermione to follow. "Really, Theo, learn to lighten up." His hand slipped in hers, and Hermione's heart lit to life; Draco had a way of making her feel his love coursing through them just like the magic that rested inside of their bones. Why Astoria had ever wanted to give something like that up was beyond her… but, perhaps, they hadn't shared a connection the way she and Draco did now. They'd been through
so much together; school, hate, War, indifference, training, friendship, love, and Greg Diggle. If they could get through that, they could get through anything.

"We won't be long," Hermione insisted. "And we'll stay close by, should you need us."

"They'll be fine, Hermione," Draco said, and he sounded as if he knew. "Come on." He guided her past Lucius and Narcissa and out the door into the crisp evening air. Hermione shivered, withdrawing her wand and casting a quick heating charm over both of their skins. She watched Draco eye her wand with envy.

"They took your wand?" she said quietly, looking down to her own.

He tried to feign indifference as he looked out into the street. "Yeah. Snapped it in half."

"Why haven't you gone today to look for another one?" It burned her inquisitive side to know, and once again she found his eyes filled with secrets as he shrugged in response. "Yeah, I'm not buying it." She began to walk, and he followed suit.

"Buying…? I wasn't aware I was selling anything."

"No, you're right. You're hiding your entire arsenal." She slipped her wand back in its holster and removed her hand from his with insistence. Draco looked pained by it, but Hermione wouldn't be budged. "I'm sick of the secrets, Draco Malfoy. You either come clean to me right now, or…"

"Or what?" His voice challenged. They kept in perfect stride beside each other as they turned the corner down a less busy avenue.

"I haven't decided yet," she muttered, prying her eyes from his.

"Or you'll bring Weasley back from the dead?"

"Stop it. You're being childish."

"I'm being childish, is it? I think touching on the subject of bringing your late husband back from the dead instead of pussyfooting around the subject seems like an entirely adult way of going about it. But yes, do tell me how I'm childish."

"Because you're throwing it at me like the decision's already been made!" She snapped under her breath, curling her arms around herself to keep from shaking. "I'm not the one keeping things from you. It's out in the open."

"Because I made it out in the open."

"That's the only thing you've been open about. -And for the record, I was going to tell you. Just not the night that you watched your partner get brutally murdered in front of you. Excuse me for trying to be a fiancéé to you instead of throwing one more burden on your shoulder. But you insist on wearing them, don't you? Your burdens? You used to share the load, and now you shut me out like it's the only way to go about it."

"Hermione…" He sighed, resigned in shoving his hands in his pockets, dare he reach over and comfort her. "I've told you. I can't let you in on this one."

"And why the Hell not?"

"Because you have enough to deal with without me thrusting my problems onto you. Because what
I'm about to do is going to hurt, and it won't do you any good to trust me after tonight." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Because Abraxas Malfoy is a cold, calculating man who has eyes and ears everywhere he goes."

Hermione stopped her walking, feet catching like she'd stumbled over a rock. But it wasn't a rock. It was Draco's words that tripped her. "He was in the woods, too, wasn't he?"

Draco took a deep breath and held it, turning on his heels to face her. "I haven't a clue what you're talking about." But his eyes said it all. They wanted her to know. "Stop spouting out crazy talk and let's keep walking." He offered his hand back out to her; this time, she took it. Fingers laced with fingers, and then they began to walk their leisurely pace again, this time in a much more crowded section of Hogsmeade. Hermione remained silent for a long time, mulling over his subtle confession.

Finally, she came up with a solution. "Is there anything I can do?" she asked, and when he gave her foreboding eyes, she added, "About your wand?"

He was a smart man, and it took him only half a second to pick up on her meaning. "No." He shook his head. "I'll handle it myself."

"You shouldn't have to. I could come with you-to get a new one."

"It's too… taxing… to get you involved with replacing my wand."

"But-"

"No, Hermione." He stopped, suddenly. "The less you know about my wand purchase, the better off you'll be. You're going to have to trust me that I'll make an adequate purchase."

"You said earlier that you were about to do something that would hurt. Hurt me, you meant."

He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed along the knuckles. "You really are the brightest witch I know."

"Draco-"

"I'm going to need something from you."

Hermione's heart leapt in her chest. "Anything."

Draco reached over, sifted through the pockets of her jacket, and removed Diggle's letter. "I need you to find the resurrection stone."

"What?" She stared at the letter, and then at him. "But… I'm not even sure if bringing Ron back is a good idea. You're going to have to trust me that I'll make an adequate purchase."

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"What?" She stared at the letter, and then at him. "But… I'm not even sure if bringing Ron back is a good idea. She watched the hurt expression on his face, realizing. "You weren't talking about for Ron."

He shook his head. "Good to know, though, that you're still considering it." His tone was icy.

"Don't be that way," she scolded him. "What would you do, given my circumstances?"

His nostrils flared, and he fisted the letter as if he wanted to rip it up. Instead, he rested his hand at his side and turned his head towards the brick wall beside them. She could tell he was resisting the urge to strike it with his fist. "I haven't a clue," he answered her honestly. "It's unnatural, bringing someone back. Weasley's been dead for years."

She knew it wouldn't be good to say it, but it needed to be said. "Abraxas is back. Did he… was he
His eyes shifted over to her, and in a stern voice, he replied, "I have no clue what you're talking about." He swallowed hard, and threw his fist -it connected with the building. She could hear the knuckles crack upon impact, and he let out something between a groan and a slur of curses. His hand, now bloody, shook as he brought it up to his face and stared in horror at it. Hermione reached to take it, but he stepped back, withdrawn. "Don't." He shook his head. "Don't touch me. -I'm dangerous, Hermione."

"Why do I need to find the Resurrection Stone?" she snapped, taken aback by his shift in attitude. "Tell me that much, at least!? What am I supposed to do, Draco? Why do you need it?"

"Drop it."

"At least let me tend to your hand-"

"-Stop." He stared coldly at her. "Would you bring him back, Hermione? Weasley? Would you do it?"

She paused. It was only half a moment -surprised by his bluntness. She knew her answer would be no, but a half a moment was all he needed to draw his own conclusions. He, unexpectedly, thrust his fist out again at the wall and connected with it. This time, a snarl of pain escaped his lips. Hermione stepped back in disbelief. Where had her soft, gentle Draco gone? Who was this man that stood before her?

He closed his eyes and muttered, "Keep the ring."

She blinked. "Why wouldn't I keep the…” His eyes met hers. "No." She shook her head. "No, you're not doing this to me. To us. To Scorpius-"

She watched the sadness etched across his face as he interrupted her. "-Don't you dare bring him up right now." Blood poured from his hand and onto Diggle's still fisted letter. Softly, he tossed it to the ground as if it were yesterday's newspaper. "I'm doing this for my son. He doesn't need to be attached to someone who will just go and leave him-"

"Oh, don't make me laugh!" Hermione shouted at him, stomping her foot and catching Diggle's letter before it blew away with the wind. "You're doing this because you're being a coward! You're too afraid to tell me what's wrong! Too afraid that something will happen to me! But I'm a big girl, Draco!" She shouted, even though passerby's sent her agitated glances. "You're my partner! You're supposed to talk to me about this! We're supposed to be there for each other!"

Draco took a step back, turning away.

"Don't you walk away from me!" She grabbed at his arm and spun him back around, finding tears in his eyes. There were some in hers too, and down her cheeks, falling neatly to the pavement below. "Too bloody long I've put up with your silence and secrets! Don't shut me out! I love you -we can get through this – we can get through anything-"

"Keep telling yourself that," he brushed her arm off and radiated with superiority. Hermione wouldn't have it. She grabbed his arm again, turned him full around, losing her foot on Diggle's letter. She didn't care.

"I love you." She said again, gentler, as she cupped his cheek. "I know you're only doing this to push me away. So, please. Don't."
Draco closed his eyes, leaning into her touch. But when they opened, they held nothing but ice, void of the man she fell in love with. "Let me go, Hermione."

"No," she told him stubbornly.

"I said let go."

"Talk to me. I'm right here-"

A hint - a glimmer of the man – but then he was gone once again as he spat out, "Merlin, woman! You sound just like Astoria! When will you get it through that thick skull of yours that I'm done? I said let go of me, you filthy mudblo-

SMACK!

Hermione stared in bewilderment at her hand, and then at Draco's now reddened cheek. Her eyes widened, and she released his arm immediately. She watched him draw his hand over the imprint on his cheek, and then he smirked. He smirked at her. Like he was satisfied it had come to this.

"Draco. I… I'm so sorry."

She waited for his response, but his smirk simply widened as he plucked Diggle's (now bloody) letter from the ground and handed it to her. "Don't be." He casually tucked a lock of hair behind her ear as if she hadn't just assaulted him moments ago. A tear streamed down Hermione's cheek as he leaned in and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry," he whispered. Then, as he backed away from her, he said, much louder, "I'm so very glad I came to my senses before I subjected myself to the likes of you."

His eyes danced over her, scrutinizing her. "Have your things out by the end of the week." And, then, as suddenly as he came into her life, he left it, turning abruptly on his heels and gone with a solitary crack of Apparition.

Draco landed with a thud into the alleyway behind Honeydukes. As soon as his feet connected with the cobblestones, he crumbled against the wall, hands on his face as he struggled to control his breathing. He wouldn't cry. He wasn't a bloody crybaby. Fuck. Why were his hands so wet? Was it the blood or the tears? He welcomed the pain from his cheek, hoping it would leave a mark. He deserved it. He deserved every bit of it.

A small bit of gray fur jumped up on the alley trashcan next to his head, and a soft meow screeched shrilly in his ears.

"I'll know if you betray me, Draco," Abraxas said, pacing in a circle around his grandson. "I have eyes everywhere. Your muggleborn fiancé… that'll have to go."

"What?" Draco shook his head. "Hermione has nothing to do with this. How -how do you even know about our engagement?"

"I have my ways… but you need to get rid of the mudblood if you want my forgiveness for your… transgressions." Abraxas motioned to Draco's left arm. "I know the mark was given to you against your wishes. But this muggleborn obsession you have… it ends."

"Why?" Draco narrowed his eyes. "I've already given the Malfoy line an heir. What does it matter?"

"It brings our name shame."
"And what you plan to do? That doesn't?"

"Get rid of her, Draco. See to it that it's done before you proceed with the rest of our plan. We don't need her mucking about in our affairs. Hermione Granger is an intelligent mudblood -you need to distract her. To break her."

"And if I don't?"

"I'll know. And the grace I've granted your son and sister will be nothing more than a fleeting idea, fluttering in the wind."

"It's done," he muttered, wiping the confounded tears from his eyes. "You can tell him."

Hermione's tiny kitten jumped off of the trashcan and landed at his feet. It tilted its head, meowed again, and rubbed against his heel.

"Stop that," Draco grumbled, shifting his foot. "Don't act like you care."

The kitten sat down by his foot and blinked. "Meow."

"Why don't you just reveal yourself, hmm?"

It fluffed at its whiskers with its paws and began to groom itself. "Meow."

"I know. I know. I'm getting to it." Draco stood up and tried to flex the fingers of his right hand. They wouldn't move. Shit, he'd done a number on it, hadn't he? "I need my wand for what comes next. Did you bring it?"

"Meow." The kitten jumped up and jumped back on the trashcan.

"In there?"

"Meow."

The feline made a beeline for his arm and scratched all the way up till it rested on his shoulder. Draco snarled in response, but the kitten simply rubbed against his cheek, almost apologetic. "Are you even a man or a woman in there?" Draco sneered quietly, and the kitten scratched his cheek. "Guessing female." He pried the lid off the trashcan and found it -his wand. Carefully, he retrieved it and flexed it in his left hand -his magic tingled in response, happy to have its counterpart back once again.

"Right. Get off my shoulder."

"Meow."

"You're not coming."

"Meow!"

"Goddamn it! I don't need a mangy feline tagging along! It's no place for something like you. Get off me." The kitten dug its claws into Draco's shoulder. "Fuck! Fine! You can go! Just… stop that…"

The kitten's claws loosened grip. "You know where we're headed right? To Azkaban?"

"Meow."

"He wants to make sure I do the job, doesn't he?"
Draco sighed, resting his head against the wall. The kitten's purr was the only steady constant in his liquefying world. "Hermione… I'm so sorry…" He sighed, straightened himself up, and forced down his pain. "No use crying over spilled milk, right?" The kitten blinked. "Oh, come milk? You get it. It's funny." Another blink, but that was the only response. "You have no sense of humor."
As always, the lovely Waymay deserves all the shoutouts for proofing this chapter for me! I am so excited about this one -it gets the ball rolling on the plot, and, even though we hate him, we get to spend a little time with our dear Gregory Diggle once more. XD

I just posted a new one-shot titled 'A Touch of Bourbon'! Give it a go! You'll be glad you did. All Dramione.

~A.

If you knew, knew what the bluebirds sang at you,
You would never sing along
Cast them out cause this is our culture
These new flocks are nothing but vultures

Because they took our love and they filled it up
Filled it up with Novocaine and now I'm just numb
Now I'm just numb
And don't mind me, I'm just a son of a gun
So don't stop, don't stop until your heart goes numb
Now I'm just numb

I don't feel a thing for you

"Novocaine" by Fall Out Boy

"Well, here we are…" Draco stepped out of the Ministry Floor designated for coming and going Aurors directly at the end of the floo network set up in the Ministry's atrium. Most of the other floos were closed now, shut down for the day, but Draco took no notice of them as he walked subtly across the floor, his boots clacking as he walked. He approached the front desk, greeted by an elderly witch; the same one who, two years ago, nearly died as a result of Greg Diggle's seize on the Ministry. "Aeris." Draco nodded his head to the elderly witch with half-moon spectacles perching delicately off the tip of her nose. "Pleasant to see you this evening. You're looking rather… glowly. Husband sticking it to you right and proper?"

Secretary Aeris's lips turned up in a half amused smile that she managed to snuff out in a second, returning to her predatory glare. "Auror Malfoy. You're in late this evening."

"Aurors never sleep," he smirked. Aeris looked up to the kitten perched on Draco's shoulder but said nothing, clearly not interested in whatever explanation he could possibly give for bringing a kitten into the Ministry.

"I thought the saying was 'Aurors never age'?” Aeris quipped, returning her eyes to her paperwork.
"Whatever it is you're up to, I didn't see you."

"No, it's alright, Aeris," he assured her. "You can see me, just the once."

That caught her attention. Her eyes pulled back up to him, and her drawn on eyebrows flittered upwards in shock. "You really stepped in it this time, didn't you?"

Draco strummed his fingers atop her desk and smirked. "A whole mess of it, I'm afraid."

Aeris reached down under her desk, pulled out a small tin, and pried open the top. She offered it out to him. "Have a cookie, Auror Malfoy. You look as if you need one." He peered inside the tin, looking at an arrangement of cookies ranging from macadamia, chocolate chip, oatmeal, peanut butter…

"Are… those double chocolate fudge?" Draco's mouth salivated. Like a greedy Gregory Goyle at Christmas dinner, he reached into the cookie tin and pulled out a handful. The elderly witch gave him a reproachful look, until she noticed his other hand -the one bandaged and swollen.

"Whatever it is," she said, "I didn't see you."

"Aeris-"

But she cut him off with a wave of her hand, and his mouth magically snapped shut. "I didn't see you. Are we clear, Auror Malfoy?"

Draco nodded, and the spell released. He tucked a few cookies into his pockets, bit into the double chocolate fudge, and closed his eyes in pleasure. After breaking up with the love of his life, abandoning his family, and about to tear apart the fabric of his good name, he allowed himself the one act of kindness; the yumminess of a cookie. He chewed on it like it was his last meal, savoring it, relishing in the taste. When he opened his eyes, the cookie was gone, and Aeris was fanning herself, red in the face.

"Merlin's beard, Auror Malfoy. Do you always eat cookies that way?"

Draco smirked. "Amongst other things." He sent her a wink and bade her farewell with a wave of his good hand, the kitten still perched atop his shoulder.

Hermione shook from head to toe. He was gone. Just… gone. There was no other word to describe it but gone. Not just physically in front of her to the point where she had no earthly clue where he went, but gone. Her Draco had been snuffed out like a candle in front of her face, replaced with a cold, empty vessel of unknown resolve. And she'd struck him -clear across the cheek. What had she been thinking?

He was about to call her a mudblood. That's what.

Mudblood.

She reached for her arm automatically, to the scars there.

He hadn't meant it. Couldn't have. Draco would never return to that kind of pureblood ideology… she closed her eyes, memories flooding her like a broken damn crashing into the town below; the first time they'd made love, he'd kissed each letter on her arm like it spelled out the word 'beautiful' instead of the atrocious mark she was left with. She didn't want to remember -it hurt too much, but the memory came anyway.
She could remember every word he'd described her as.


Had Abraxas Malfoy been able to puncture his fangs into Draco, the way Lucius had as a child? - No, she thought. Surely not. He'd said the word to goad her. To get her to lash out.

"Because Abraxas Malfoy is a cold, calculating man who has eyes and ears everywhere he goes."

Was she being watched this very moment? Hermione curled her arms around herself, Diggle's letter, still doused in Draco's blood, clutched in her fingers. Damn it all. Damn it all to Hell. She wiped at her tears viciously and slammed her fist into the wall next to her. Damn. That hurt. But it felt good, too. She understood, now, why Draco released himself this way. She smashed her knuckles into the brick. Again. And again. She wasn't sure how long she stood there like this, but she welcomed each brutal strike, imagining it were Draco's chest. Diggle's face. Abraxas's stomach. Lucius's tenders. Over and over she slammed her fist until something warm wrapped itself around her hand and stopped her -a hand, she realized.

"Auror Granger," came a soft, comforting voice. It was familiar, but Hermione couldn't place it. She thrust her fist out again, but the hand kept a strong barrier between her and the wall. "Auror Granger." This voice was more forceful this time.

The first thing Hermione noticed when she opened her eyes were the freckles along his nose. Maybe that's why she said it, barely above a whisper, "Ron?" The slits of her eyes opened completely, and she came face with auburn hair. Hazel eyes. Not Ron. Auror Jameson.

"Your hand," he said quietly, glancing down. It was scraped -bloody, just like Draco's had been. Seeing it made a crashing wave of pain hit her like a current -the sting was crisp, cutting, like needles against her knuckles. She winced, drawing her hand out of his. Owwww… oh God, the pain was excruciating… Why had she done it? Why? "Where's Auror Malfoy?"

"Gone," she whispered, looking down to her feet. "He's… gone."

"Gone? Gone where?"

Hermione turned her head to the side, humility and embarrassment filling her stomach. Standing ten feet away from her, clutching his mother's hand, was Scorpius Malfoy. His lips curled downwards in a small frown as he released his mother's hand and ran a dead run into Hermione's side. "Hermummy! Hermummy hurt!"

"Oh… oh, Scorpius…" She immediately crouched down and scooped him up in a hug. "No, sweetheart. I'm just fine. See?" She tried to control her breathing, as well as her tears. "I'm fine…"

"Where Daddy?" Scorpius whimpered into her shoulder.

"Daddy…" Hermione looked up, meeting Astoria's horrified expression. Beside her, behind her, stood Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy. When Hermione's eyes connected with the eldest Malfoy man, she glared daggers, hoping he could feel her burning hatred for him all the way from where she crouched. "Daddy had to take care of a few things," she told Scorpius, her eyes never leaving Lucius's. "He told me to tell you he loves you very much, Scorpius. And he's sorry he had to leave you so unexpectedly."

"When Daddy come home?"

Someone was crying, filling Hermione's ears with tender sobs. Stop, she thought to whomever it
was. *Stop crying; you'll upset Scorpius.* It wasn’t until she reached up and touched her face that she realized *she* was the one crying. She scooped Scorpius up with her good arm, got to her feet, and kissed him softly on the cheek before handing him off to Auror Jameson. "Jameson, take them home."

"Auror Granger-"

"Take them home." She turned her eyes to him, her voice even and full of authority. She knew Auror Jameson had no choice but to obey her; she outranked him. "All of them except…" Her eyes turned to Lucius, and she stepped forward. "You. I have some things to discuss with you, Lucius."

Lucius narrowed his eyes. "I have nothing to say to you, witch."

Hermione reached for her wand in a flash, pointing it at the unassuming wizard. He stepped back, coughing but terrified. "If you don't speak with me, I will bring you in under obstructing of an investigation. Not to mention your involvement with a certain stone." Gone was the timid, in love Hermione Granger. Here, in her place, stood the confident, war heroine of yore. "Your call, Mister Malfoy."

"How dare you?" Narcissa started, taking a step forward. "That is my husband you're brandishing your wand at, Auror Granger!"

Lucius stepped forward, next to his wife, and placed a calm hand on her shoulder. "Easy, Cissy. I think I can handle a simple mudblood."

It was Astoria to react first, quickly drawing her wand as well, though it stayed at her side, subtle. "You will never say such degradation in front of Scorpius, do you hear me, Lucius? Or you will never see him again."

Lucius Malfoy paled, glancing over to the toddler in Jameson's arms. Auror Jameson shot Lucius a contemptible glare, putting a hand over Scorpius's ear. Lucius curled his lip up in a disgusted sneer and rolled his eyes. "I fear my hands are tied, Cissy. Be a dear and have a cup of tea for me when I return?"

"You should go back," Draco said to the kitten as it sluffed off his arm to a table in the Auror Division's portkey room. "They won't allow a kitten in Azkaban. You're here. You'll watch me touch the portkey. Tell him I'll have his prize to him within the three day window." He sighed. "I guess one of those days is mostly gone, isn't it?" The kitten didn't answer him, batting at a fly buzzing around its head. "Fuck, could you at least pretend to be a bit human? I swear to Merlin, if you hurt them while I'm gone…" The kitten stopped its attack on the fly and sauntered across the table, rubbing against his wrist with its cheek. "Stop that." He withdrew his hand at once. "Fuck it all. You're annoying." *Hiss.* "Well, you are. The least you could do is quit pretending to be a sodding kitten for five bloody minutes. What's your damage? Are you extremely ugly or something?" *HISSSSS.

The kitten jumped off of the counter, stretched its body, and sauntered off through the crack between the door and frame, no doubt to finish whatever task Abraxas Malfoy had given it as a side from monitoring Draco's movements.

Draco sighed in relief, his hand poised to touch the portkey at any moment. Any moment now, and he'd begin his life as a criminal... any moment... he could... "Fuck." He withdrew his hand and rubbed at his exhausted eyes. Hermione. He wanted Hermione here beside him. Needed her like the ocean needed the moon. "Stop it." He wouldn't do this right now. He had a mission. If he ever
wanted to see Hermione again, he'd need to try.

Carefully, with his wand clutched tight, he placed his damaged hand over the portkey and slammed down.

Hermione and Lucius stared each other down in the middle of Hogsemeade as Jameson escorted Astoria, Narcissa, and Scorpius down the road and out of sight. When Hermione was sure they were alone, she slipped her wand back inside her pocket and said, "Right. This way, Mister Malfoy."

Lucius raised a cool eyebrow, leaned against his walking cane, and followed her down the street. Hermione forced herself to keep a slow pace so that he could keep up, but still felt no pity for the man. He deserved everything he got—this was his fault, after all. When they passed a potions shop and her eyes caught hold of a children's potion set, her heart leapt in her chest. She remembered the very first time Draco had opened up to her entirely as they practiced his patronus.

"I was the only child of two wealthy parents. I received whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. You'd think that would make one happy, but after so long it becomes expected. Soon, the joy gets taken out of everything..." He grinned, suddenly remembering something. "But, there was this one time... I told my Mum I wanted this potions set for Christmas. It was one of those beginner packages, with herbs and whatnot. But Mum told me no because she said I wasn't old enough to be meddling with potions yet. It drove me bonkers, it did. I told Father, but he just sided with Mum. But when Christmas time rolled around, wouldn't you know—"

"-It was underneath the tree," Hermione finished, settling her chin in her hand and smiling.

"Damn straight it was. And I was the happiest ten year old on the face of the Earth, as far as I was concerned. The next year I went into Professor Snape's potions class and aced it with flying colors."

Hermione reached over the counter and patted his arm. "Give it a go."

"Draco admired you," she said quietly, refusing to look Lucius in the eyes. "You know that, don't you? Before you turned him into a tool for the Dark Lord to use, he only wanted to please you."

Lucius remained silent, keeping a fair distance between them but still eyeing the potions set she stared at with quizzical interest.

"Something's wrong. Draco is harboring secrets, and the moment he woke up this morning, he wanted to talk to you. Tell me, why is that, Lucius? Why would a man who detests his father so much want to speak to him so urgently?"

The older Malfoy raised an eyebrow, still refusing to pass her a glance. "I suppose," he drawled, "Draco takes great interest in childhood degradations. He gladly reminded me, this morning, of all my shortcomings."

"I know, you know," she said. "About the stone. About your condition."

The corner of his eye twitched, but he still smirked. "Is that so?"

"Tell me what you know. You might be my only lead to finding Draco."

"So, he's missing, then." Lucius tutted. "Such a sniveling little brat, that one."

"He's your son."
"A son I used to be proud of. He's proven himself to be less than adequate."

"Ha. You're one to talk. Draco's only shortcomings stemmed from having you as a father."

"This is quite an interrogation, Auror Granger. What's next? Some therapy and a good cry?"

"What's next is I take you into Azkaban unless you tell me what transpired between you and Draco this morning."

"Azkaban?" Lucius scoffed. "On what grounds? I've been exhumed of all responsibilities concerning my connections with the Dark Lord. If you recall, I spent two weeks in prison awaiting trial where I was, finally, presumed innocent of all crimes."

"Yes, I remember. And so did your wife. And son. They spent those two weeks locked in a cell as well, thanks to you."

"Hmph." Lucius turned away from her. "Are we quite through here?"

"Hardly." She grabbed at the man's arm and turned him to face her. Hermione's heart leapt unexpectedly. She'd never been so close to Lucius Malfoy without him adorning his Death Eater mask. He smelled of tea leaves and tobacco, and from this close up, she could see so much of Draco in his father. "I know you sold Diggle the stone. My husband's death -Ron's death- it was your fault, Lucius. I have enough evidence to turn you in, you know. You could rot out your last days in a cell, next to the boy of the man you murdered."

"Murdered?" Lucius raised a cool eyebrow, turning to face her. He looked daunting, towering over her with his cold eyes boring into hers. "I may be a lot of things, Auror Granger. But I have never been a murderer."

Hermione felt rage -blind rage, and she balled her fists to keep from slapping him. "Douglas Bastian Diggle. Does that ring a bell?"

It took Lucius only a moment to pale and his eyes to narrow. "Even so, I still stand by what I have said. Diggle's death was a sacrifice of war."

"Is that how you justify murdering a man in cold blood? Carving squib into his arm? You created Bastian Cane. Diggle would have never sought revenge if you hadn't killed his father all because you thought him beneath you!"

Lucius chuckled darkly. "You really are a clueless mudblood, aren't you?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It is true. I was there that night. Though what this has to do with anything transpiring with Draco at this moment…"

"Keep going," she demanded. She needed to hear it. "Don't you dare stop now."

"So you can incriminate me for a crime I didn't commit?"

"I can already incriminate you for your involvement with the Pandora Stone." She squared her shoulders. "So spill the beans, Lucius. Or, I guarantee you, you'll find yourself in Azkaban quicker than it'll make your head spin. Not to mention, I will tell the presses about your lack of magical abilities. Everything, out in the open. Now."
"Do you think any of this will truly help you with your quest to find Draco? I guarantee you, girl, you're in over your head on this one. He's slipped into the darkness -as a Malfoy, I can testify to the wonderful feeling of giving one's self up to it. No matter how hard you struggle, you will never pull him back. He's joined the white wolf, Auror Granger. There is no return from that dark, dismal abyss."

"Is that any way to describe your father?" She glared, watching his tells for any surprise. There wasn't any. So, he knew about Abraxas as well.

Lucius smirked, leaning forward. "Clearly, you've never met the man."

Darkness. That's what met Draco Malfoy as he landed inside of the portkey room just inside Azkaban's Auror entrance. It was so decidedly dark before he waved his wand and lit the waiting candles to life. He wouldn't have long, he knew, before he would be found out. Time was of the essence.

Quickly, he opened the door into the musty, mold-smelling hallway and placed a silencing charm to his shoes so that they wouldn't clack as he trudged down the corridor on his mission. After years of practice, he knew just where to turn until he ended up down one of the darkest corners of Azkaban. This was reserved for the worst of the worst; the murderers. The rapists. The life sentencers. And there Draco found him, curled up on his bed with his back facing the metal bars. Oh, how revenge was such a lovely dish. He remembered two years ago as Gregory Diggle looked at him from the other side of a set of bars similar to these. Raking his keys along the bars like piano keys. Draco did the same thing with his wand, stirring Diggle awake. He watched the brunette turn, his shaggy hair dusting over his eyes as he struggled to focus them. He scratched his beard, sat up, and blinked once at the blonde.

"Great. Another dream."

"Dreaming of me, Diggle? I'm flattered."

That caught Diggle's attention. His hands still bound by magic-dampening cuffs, he pushed himself up off the bed and walked the small space between the room to Draco. "Auror Malfoy. So you're real then. To what do I owe the pleasure?" He drawled, eyes glancing over Draco's attire. "Personal visit? No Auror badge being flashed in my face. This must be about the letter." He smirked. The bastard bloody smirked at him.

"Bold move, giving that to Hermione," he whispered, turning his eyes this way and that down the long hallway. No one present. Good. They wouldn't be able to stop him. He waved his wand, unlocking the gate to Diggle's cell. Diggle stared evenly at him, though he backed up a few spaces in the process. Draco stepped inside, closed the cell, and locked it behind him. "You're going to regret that letter, Diggle."

Greg Diggle sniggered, rolling his eyes. "Oh, come now, Draco. What are you going to do? Assault me?"

"Something like that." Draco smirked. "I'm going to enjoy this." He raised his wand directly at Diggle's chest and said, with conviction, "Crucio."

"Back to your accusations, Granger -I never killed Douglas Diggle. Was a squib beneath me? Of course. Did I detest him on every level? Absolutely. But I've never sullied my hands with blood."
"You lie. You're a liar. It's what you do."

"Clearly, you do not know me as well as you believe you do. Of course, what else should I expect from someone of your upbringing? Savages, the lot of you. -However, I do not wish to spend my last few days in a cell awaiting a trial that will take longer than my death. Perhaps a trip to a pensieve will persuade you otherwise?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "You'd do that?"

"To avoid a prison sentence? Of course. If it will stay your wand away from me, I'll gladly show you. Then, perhaps, you will leave these foolish notions behind you." He stood up straight, backing away from her personal bubble. "I will, also, give you everything I can on Abraxas Malfoy."

Hermione gasped. "That... would be most helpful. I'll call Harry-"

"-Oh, yes. Do involve the entire brigade, why don't you?" Lucius sneered sarcastically.

She felt around in her pockets, searching for her phone. Surely she hadn't left it back at the Manor? She sighed. Being so distracted by her problems with Draco, she must have. She sighed again. "Let's go, then. We need to get you back to the Manor, and I need to contact Harry."

"Oh, joy."

Diggle screamed. Draco didn't know a grown man was capable of screaming, but there it was, in front of him as he watched Gregory Wallace Diggle thrash on the floor, tears streaming down his cheeks. It was said the more someone meant the curse, the more painful the magic as it seared through one's veins. Draco contained years of built up anger, resentment, and frustration towards Diggle. He could see the torment written in the way his eyebrows turned in sheer horror, eyes closed, pain slipping down his cheeks.

Yes. This might have been the best part of Abraxas's plan.

He heard the guards stomping down the hallway, and smirked, releasing the curse. Diggle panted for breath at his feet, his green eyes staring up at Draco before he laughed. "Ohohoh... I have to give it to you, Draco. That was brilliant." He wiped at his eyes and began to throw his head back in uncontrolled laughter. "How'd you think you were going to get out of... ahaha... this one, you idiot?"

"Never planned to," Draco smirked, rendering Diggle still. All laughter died at his lips. The guards came. Draco put his hands behind his head, still staring down at his arch-enemy. He didn't try to fight it when the guards stepped in and removed his wand. All sounds drifted away into muffled silence as Draco found himself on the floor, arms behind his back, directly next to Diggle. The smirk on his face never ceased, even as he was hit with a binding curse. Even when the guards dragged him to his feet. Even as he was escorted out of the cell. He never stopped smirking.

Chapter End Notes

What is Draco up to? Find out in the next chapter of HTTYA2!

~A.
I had a lot of fun while writing this chapter. A little mystery, a lot of suspense, and a HELL of a lot of humor in store for this chap.

Thank you, Waymay, for laughing at all of my idiotic humor, and I'm so very glad you love Jameson as much as me. XD #TeamTheo! (But still... #TEAMDRACO)

~A.

You grip your hands around my throat
You strip the buttons off my coat
I choose the methods I do best
Thump, thump, the thumping in your chest

When you are close to me I shiver

You leave these marks up on my neck
And its still there... I know but I still check
Thump, thump, the thumping in my chest
As I lose the feeling in my fingertips

When you are close to me I shiver

"Shiver Shiver" by Walk The Moon
Let's see if you can figure out why I chose these lyrics. hehe.

Day 2: Early Morning Hours
*(*)*

"What do you mean Malfoy's gone?" Harry asked, stepping through the floo to the Malfoy Manor as he re-read the text on his phone. He found Hermione waiting for him, pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace, two vials of silver wisps tucked inside her left hand. Her eyes looked worn, and puffy- as if she'd been crying. Yeah, she'd definitely been crying. It had been a while since Harry saw that much distraught on his friend's face before: not since Ron's funeral. "Hermione... what's going on?"

"Abraxas Malfoy," Hermione said, staring at Harry with a pissed off expression. "He was in the woods that night with Draco."

Harry's face grew stern, and he removed his coat in haste as he asked, "Are you sure?"

"He couldn't come outright and say it. He hinted we were being watched." Her fingers grazed over the engagement ring on her finger, and Harry's gut instinct told him he was missing something detrimental -not to the case, but to Hermione's solemn expression. "Draco said he was going to do
something to hurt me -at first I thought it was him breaking off our engagement, but-

"-He what?" Harry balled his fists. "Oh, I'll kill him."

"Stop it," Hermione snapped. "It was a sham." She paused, unconvinced. "He didn't mean any of it."

His eyes skimmed over the engagement ring; his stomach burning with anger. Sure, he knew Malfoy to make reckless decisions, but breaking Hermione's heart… He'd not only kill Malfoy. He'd find a way to bring him back with the damned Resurrection Stone and kill him again. Nobody hurt his best friend. Nobody. But as he trailed his eyes up to hers, his resolve wavered and then crumbled completely. Hurting Malfoy, no matter how much joy it would bring Harry, would only cause Hermione pain. He sighed, ran his fingers through his raven tresses which stuck up at odd angles, and pushed his glasses against the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, well… he better not have." At Hermione's glare, he added, with an attempted half-smile to smooth it over, "Er… I still haven't been made best man yet."

Her eyes softened, and she gave a timid laugh. "Would you even want to be?"

"Not really, no." Harry grinned sheepishly, but shook himself out of the warm-fuzzies and put on his Auror hat. He asked again, "What do you mean Malfoy's gone?"

"We were in Hogsmeade," Hermione explained, taking a seat on one of the many sofas in the den and patted a cushion next to her. Harry took a seat and listened to her spin her web of a tale, all about Malfoy's odd behavior, the mention of the letter from Diggle, and his sudden fascination with conversing with his father. As he listened to her talk of Malfoy's betrayal and sudden disappearance, Harry wondered just what was contained in Diggle's letter. He'd ask her in a moment. Right now, he needed to focus. "And then I confronted Lucius," Hermione went on, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. "He admits to being involved with the Pandora Stone, but he denies anything to do with Douglas Diggle's death."

"That was a mouth full, Harry thought dully. "Do you believe him?"

"I didn't, at first," Hermione said, now slipping the vials of memories into Harry's hands. "But I took a look into his memories. This one," she pointed to the vial on the left, "contains memories of Abraxas Malfoy as Lucius remembers him. It could give us a lead into his personality- Where he might be hiding. And this one," she gestured to the second vial, "contains Douglas Bastian Diggle's murder." Her eyes met his. "He didn't do it, Harry. He didn't murder Diggle's father. He was there - he watched it happen. But he wasn't the murderer."

He could feel his eyebrows drawing together as questions bubbled at the top of Harry's brain like hot brew. "So… if Malfoy didn't murder Diggle's father…"

"His entire vendetta against the Malfoys was misplaced." She sighed, agitated. "Could you imagine what Diggle might have done if he knew?"

"I don't need to, Hermione. He would have done the same damn thing. His father's death happened, even if it wasn't by the wand of Lucius Malfoy." A sinking feeling hit his gut. "Ron's death was inevitable." The two sat in silence for a moment, and Hermione took his hand, squeezing it. "What's in the letter, Hermione?"

"Don't you want to look into Lucius's memory?" she asked, changing the subject. She was quite good at that, he thought, when she didn't want to fess up. She'd picked it up from Ron, no doubt. "We have a pensieve in the study."
"The letter," he said firmly. "Let me see it, Herms."

Hermione sighed. "Yes, yes. You're right. I don't know why I'm being so silly..." She removed it from her pockets and handed it over.

"Er... why does it have so much blood on it?"

"Draco punched a wall."

"Why does that not surprise me..." He plucked it from her hands and read over each sentence carefully. When he finished, he felt his stomach pull downwards towards the floor. "Diggle's one sick son of a bitch... You're honestly not considering this, are you?" No matter how much Harry Potter missed his best friend, the idea of bringing anyone back from the dead... it was perverse. He learned the hard way that they dead should stay dead. "Mione?"

She stared down at the letter, and then back up to Harry, her brown eyes swimming. She looked as if she were pulled under the current of her thoughts, taking her further out. He reached out, wrapped his arms around her, and felt as she finally broke down crying against his shoulder. He said nothing, just let her cry it out. It felt a bit awkward at first, but as he mulled over Diggle's letter, and the possibility of having Ron at his side again, but knowing at the same time he couldn't, he started to break down as well. Ron Weasley -Harry's first school friend. Harry's only real source of consistency since he started Hogwarts all those years ago. He never thought he'd walk the world without him. Harry couldn't even walk by a chocolate frog stand without tearing up.

"I miss him," Hermione confessed, slipping her arms around Harry and burying her face in his chest. "Every day. I miss him."

"I do too. It's alright to miss him."

"Is it?" She sniffled against his work robes. "When Draco came back into my life, I thought I could finally move on. I thought, 'This is it. I can rest my heart here.' But it just hurts." She cried harder. "And now I have no clue where Draco is, or what he's doing..." Hermione brought her face up, so close to Harry's that he went cross eyed for a moment. "I'm afraid, Harry. I can't lose someone else. I just can't."

Harry leaned forward and kissed Hermione on her forehead. "You won't, Herms. We'll find him." It was a big promise, he knew, but he would do anything for her. Their friendship was something he would never compromise. Not even his Lead Auror position would take precedence over his love for his best friend. He checked the watch around his wrist. Ginny was probably worried sick about him. He would have returned home from work by now if he hadn't gotten Hermione's text message. He really wished Ginny would use a cell phone. A landline could only work so much, especially since she wouldn't answer half the time.

"You hate him," Hermione muttered.

Harry patted the back of her head and pulled her against him. "I don't hate him. I just dislike most everything about him."

"I love him."

"I know you do. And that's why we'll find him."

The hearth of the fireplace lit to life in green flames, and a floating green head peered through the fire. It was Auror Kingston. "Auror Potter. Your secretary told me I could find you here." He looked between Harry and Hermione. "Am I interrupting something?"
The two scrambled out of each other's arms and shook their heads. "No," Harry replied, feeling very awkward suddenly. Not that he didn't love Hermione, but he didn't want others to get the wrong impression. Especially when he had a pregnant Ginny to come home to. "What do you need, Kingston?"

"Erm..." Kingston turned his glowing green face down towards the floor, hesitant.

"Is it Auror Malfoy?" Hermione asked immediately. Kingston brought his eyes back up.

"Auror Malfoy? No. Why? Has something developed?"

"Kingston."

"Yes. Sir. Sorry. -There's... there's been a breach at the Ministry."

"A breach?" Harry's heart sped, and he stood immediately. " Define 'a breach."

"That's just it, Sir. I'm not exactly sure what was taken... if anything was. But there was most certainly a breach."

Harry grew frustrated, and he sighed, rubbing his face down his hands, almost comically. He turned to Hermione. "I have to go."

"I'm going with you-" she started at once, but Harry shook his head, cutting her off.

"No." He pointed his finger at her. "You're staying here, Hermione."

"You're not going to stop me, Harry Potter." She stood as well. "What if it has to do with Draco?"

Harry glanced between Auror Kingston's floo message and Hermione's withering stare. There were two options: right now, he could be a friend and cave to her demands, but look weak in front of his subordinate, or he could take the reins as Lead Auror and forbid her from breaking a direct order. Both of them sounded damn near impossible. And, even though he promised himself Hermione came before his job, that still didn't mean she could boss him around. "Hermione," he said carefully, but still managed to command some authority, "You aren't coming."

She put her hands on her hips. "Excuse you, Harry James Potter. I am so coming."

He winced. "No. You're not. -Oh, Merlin, don't give me that look, Hermione! You still have an obligation to the Malfoys, and I have an obligation to the Ministry." He held up the vials between them. "As soon as I'm done, I'll floo you. I'll send an escort to accompany you and the Malfoys to the Ministry if I have to. But right now, your orders are to stay put." If looks could kill, Harry would be in the ground with Ron. The thought was morbid, yes, but very true. Harry backed slowly away from his friend, slipping Lucius's memories into his pockets as he approached the floo. "I'm sorry, Hermione. This is the way it has to be."

He turned his back to her, in more than one way, guilt shrouding him like a veil as he watched Auror Kingston disappear from the flames so that Harry could step through. He picked up a bit of floo powder from the mantle, threw it into the flames, and said, "Ministry of Magic."

Theodore Jameson had always been a man of few words, like his father, and his father before him. He didn't understand the way people babbled on about trite nonsense; the world had enough people in it without everyone talking at once. He only said things when they needed to be said, and that was that. And, sitting inside the drawing room of the Malfoy Manor as he watched Astoria Greengrass
pace back and forth while Scorpius Malfoy 'flew' around the room on his toy broom that would only levitate a foot above the ground, he realized this silence called for words.

"Miss Greengrass," he started, cordial like his mother taught him to be. He watched the aristocratic beauty stop mid-step, hover in place for a moment as if she weren't sure which foot to settle down on, and then, finally, stepped forward. Theodore watched her chestnut waves bounce around her shoulders, wondering how her hair always managed to stay so properly in place. Watched the way her green eyes flitted up to his, pensive and thoughtful. Theodore Jameson was a watcher. "I know it is not my place, but… perhaps you should stop pacing and:"

"-And what, Auror Jameson?" she snapped at him, suddenly, shrinking Theodore inside himself like a cashmere shirt being thrown in the washing machine. Perhaps he misjudged the situation? He often didn't. "What would you have me do? You saw the look on Miss Granger's face. Something's wrong with…" she glanced over to Scorpius, her lips pursing. "Have you noticed?"

"Noticed?" Jameson asked, folding his hands in his lap.

"Scorpius… he hasn't had a single…" she approached him, her voice lowering to a whisper, "A single convulsion since his arrival back."

Yes… that had crossed Theodore's mind. It was odd, considering the initial reports he read on Victoria Crabbe said the child continued her convulsions and visions, and it hadn't happened just the once. Come to think of it, he hadn't received any word of her condition worsening. Of course, that could be due to the fact he was assigned the Greengrass family, and, in turn, the Malfoys. He'd already begun to forget if he organized his quills in the Auror bullpen from right to left or left to right.

He thought about offering words of comfort like 'perhaps it was a fluke,' but he knew better. The foxes accompanying Scorpius's convulsions meant it was deliberate. Though why twenty-eight foxes for twenty-eight families, Jameson wasn't sure. He knew the Greengrasses were a part of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. And so were the Malfoys… but the Crabbes? They were most certainly not. Had they been, Theodore might see a connection, but as it were… he felt he was missing a vital clue to the puzzle, and it was just on the tip of his brain.

"Are you alright, Jameson?" Astoria asked, taking a seat beside him on the settee he currently perched on. She scooped up his left hand and gave it a light squeeze. Theodore wasn't accustomed to pretty woman touching him, and his heartrate elevated quickly. He tried thinking of the other names in the Sacred Twenty-Eight to simmer his emotions -Jameson refused to be emotional. That's not what an Auror was.

Abbott… Avery… Black… Bullstrode… Burke…

"I'm fine, Miss Greengrass," he said in his most pleasant tone, attempting a smile. He guessed he needed more practice; she didn't seem to buy it. She only rubbed her thumb over the back of his hand in a pleasant way. Small pink blush crawled up Jameson's cheeks.

Burke… no, he already thought that one… Carrow… Crouch… Fawley… Flint…

"I've told you -you're more than welcome to call me Astoria," she said, accomplishing a sincere smile that made Jameson lose all of his concentration. He glanced down to her perfectly manicured fingernails, and then glanced at his own calloused hands, fingernails chewed to the quicks. Nervous habit he picked up from his father.

Gaunt… Greengrass… Lestrange… Longbottom… Macmillan… Malfoy…
"Yes. Of course." He tried another smile, this time with more teeth. Theodore hated smiling.
"Astoria."

Was it hot in here? Nott... Ollivander... Parkinson... Prewitt... Rosier-Rowle-Selwyn...

The pureblood's face drew so much closer to his until Jameson finally asked, "What are you doing, Astoria?" How old was she? Theodore struggled to remember. Younger than Aurors Granger and Malfoy... older than himself...

"Doing?" she said in her most innocent tone, still grazing his hand with her thumb. "I'm attempting to comfort you, Theodore. You look... troubled."

He wanted to point out that having a beautiful woman beside him could do that to a man, but he remained silent, focusing on the Sacred Twenty-Eight.

Shacklebolt, Safiq, Slughorn, Travers, Weasley, Yaxley... Twenty-Eight pureblood families, linked back for generations.

"Astoria?" Jameson looked into her green eyes, really looking at them for the first time. By Circe, she was a beautiful witch. He could literally feel the magic flowing just under her skin. He, absentmindedly, overlapped his free hand over hers. It was only when he ached his eyes away from hers to glance down that he noticed. He trailed his gaze back to her face once more. By the gods, wasn't she hot? The room was scorching! He felt as if he were on fire.

"Yes, Theo?"

An unfamiliar tingle shot up Theodore's spine, and his mouth dried up instantly. He darted his eyes down to their hands again -when did their fingers lace? He didn't remember doing that. He felt his eyebrows crinkle together in frustration. This was far too informal of an Auror. He should pull his hands away, now, before he gave her the wrong impression. He wasn't here for... romance... wait - was that what this was? Theodore wasn't one for catching the signs. Maybe this was just her way of comforting. Yes. That was it. He stared long and hard at her fingers intertwined in his, up her porcelain skin that led to her wrist, covered in lengthy sleeves of a modest, black dress. It made her skin glow, and Theodore caught himself brushing his thumb up the palm of her hand, to the edge of her wrist. Lightly. He didn't want to frighten her.

"Aren't you hot?" he asked quietly, immediately realizing how forward the question sounded. "I-I mean -the room. Isn't it hot in here? -And... you're wearing such long sleeves... Not that I'm trying to get you to take off the dress... I..." He choked on his own spit and coughed, pulling his hands out of hers to clear his throat as he beat against his chest with his fist. Embarrassment. That's what Theodore felt. He made to stand, but Astoria grabbed his wrist and tugged him back down. "M-Miss Greengrass..."

"Astoria," she corrected, scooting closer. "You have such pretty eyes, you know."


"I could lose myself in them," she said quietly.

"I could shut them, if you'd like."

She raised both of her eyebrows and laughed. Laughed. Oh, Merlin. Had he said something wrong? Was he making a fool of himself like he felt? "Auror Jameson-Theodore," she said between giggles, "I'm trying to tell you that I think you're handsome."
Oh. Oh… Theodore didn't know what to say. If he opened his mouth again, he feared he wouldn't have anything intelligible, and it went against his moral code. So, instead, he simply plucked up one of her hands and kissed the back of it lightly. Simple gesture. Could be taken any which way. But which way would she take it?

Astoria smiled. Theodore guessed that was as good as any reaction he could infer. He looked over to Scorpius, who flew round and round the coffee table, smirking a smirk worthy of his father. Where had Draco Malfoy gone? Why would he leave Auror Granger so abruptly? And after Auror Bolt's death? It still hurt Theodore, if he were being honest. Bolt, though he didn't know her well, was something of a prodigy in her year. Intelligent. Quick thinking. The next Hermione Granger. To know that the wizarding world lost such a valuable witch in the prime of her life…

He should visit her parents, when this was all over. Have a sit down with them and tell them what an honor it was working with their daughter. Still, it troubled him to think that Auror Bolt would die so suddenly, and after passing her exams with flying colors. She was smarter than average. Quick little sprite, too. Great with illusion spells. But terrible when it came to potions. Absolutely awful. -He scolded himself. He shouldn't think of the dead that way. He should honor her memory and remember her for her strengths.

"Astoria, I'd like to make a Ministry visit," he said, still lost in thought. "I'd… like to pay my respects to Auror Bolt." He imagined her still in the morgue, probably sitting in a freezer somewhere, about to be examined by forensic coroners. It made his skin crawl. Someone should be with her. Had someone informed her family, yet?

Astoria placed her hand on Jameson's cheek and nodded. "Of course. I'll just make sure that Miss Granger knows our plans, yes?" She patted said cheek, allowing her thumb to graze over his bottom lip. How peculiar. Why would she do that? Why was she biting her own bottom lip? What was that look? "You really care, don't you?"

Jameson squinted. "Of course."

"Just a big teddy bear under all of that… rippling muscle…” Her fingers danced down his chin and rested on his pectoral muscles beneath his tweed blazer. "How often do you work out, Auror Jameson?"

He blinked. "Work out?" Who had time for exercise routines when Auror detail was so taxing on time?

Astoria shuddered, closing her eyes. Was it cold in here? Should he shut a window? It felt warm to him. "Oh, Circe." She fanned herself and stood. "I… I'll go let Miss Granger know our plans. Watch Scorpius would you?" She continued to fan herself with her hands as she walked towards the door. "Scorpius, Mummy will be right back. Keep an eye on our dear Jameson, would you?"

"Okay, Mummy," Scorpius giggled, not caring at all.

As the door shut behind her, Jameson reached up and fumbled with the top buttons of his shirt, unhooking the top two and stretching out the collar. Perhaps he should take the blazer off… it was way too hot in here.

"You gonna marry Mummy?" Scorpius giggled, landing his play broom next to Jameson's shoes.

Theodore Jameson was a man of few words. So, that's why, under the extreme pressure of the toddler's question, he remained silent.
Harry arrived in the Auror Division to find Auror Kingston pacing back and forth, scowling and agitated. "Kingston?" Harry asked. "What's going on?"

"I... I don't know how to explain it." Auror Kingston looked flushed. "I... there was an incident."

"Incident?" Whatever it was, he better spit it out fast. Harry was on a time crunch.

"When I arrived at my desk... it sounds silly, Sir."

"A lot of things sound silly until you look at them the right way," said Harry, encouraging, but also thinking that he sounded a bit too much like Luna.

"I think that our records were infiltrated... by... by a cat, Sir." Kingston turned red in the face.

Harry blinked once. Twice. Three times. "Cat?"

"I... Here, look." Kingston stalked his way to his desk and retrieved a piece of parchment -on it listed all of the known Death Eater families currently out of Azkaban, as well as the Aurors in charge of details. "I was just walking to my desk and I saw this strange, grey kitten on my desk. I swear, Auror Potter, it was reading the list." He motioned to a small ink blot at the top -in the shape of a paw. "When it saw me approach, it ran off."

Harry's skin crawled. Could it be... another animagus? "Alert the Auror details. I want a full lockdown of the department until further notice -and for Merlin's sake, find that cat!"

"Sir?"

"There's something else, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir." Kingston looked at him, apologetic. "Auror Malfoy... he's... he's been arrested, Sir."

"Auror Malfoy?" Harry frowned. "Arrested?" Hermione was going to be pissed, of that he was quite sure. "What'd he do? Start a bar brawl?"

"No, Sir." Kingston retrieved a new paper -this one held Draco Malfoy's status: currently sitting in a cell in Azkaban. "He... erm... attacked an inmate, sir. Gregory Diggle."

"Attacked him?"

"Yes, Sir."

Harry snatched the paper, already on his way to the portkey. "You should have led with this, Kingston!"

"I only knew moments before you arrived!" Kingston tried, but Harry didn't care. He stormed his way down the bullpen and around the corner to the portkey room. With an agitated huff, he loosened his tie and slammed his hand down on the portkey.

Chapter End Notes

ahahhaa, I hope ya'll loved Theodore Jameson as much as I did. We'll get back to Hermione and Draco next chapter. XD SO EXCITED! NEXT CHAPTER HAS SO
MUCH! I can't wait to write it.
~A.

replies to review
Hello, everyone! So, I had so much fun with the 'Meet The Penname' event hosted by Grangers Enchanted Survivors 18+ on Facebook! I got to meet a lot of my 'fans' (which, really, are just friends I hadn't met yet) and answered a lot of questions. It was a humbling experience. I had no idea I had such a following of fellow Dramione lovers. XD I even had a review from a writer I absolutely adore, so... fangirl moment. OMG.

Special, special thanks to Waymay. She's writing an AWESOME 3 part Draco/Hermione, Blaise/Hermione fanfic titled: 'Background' that I am eagerly waiting for completion for her to post! Please go check out her work, Empire, if you have free time. YOU WILL NOT BE LET DOWN!

Also, LightofEvolution's High on Magic is near completion! Totally worth the read if you love suspense, like HTTYA!

Thank you, Waymay, for reading this and proofing! Damn it, you found a 'that'. And I tried so hard not to have one. lol

~A.

Oh, P.S. -I'm starting some medication for my thyroid. It should improve my health, but if it takes me a while to post once I get the medication, it'll only be because my hormones will be settling. Medication and I... we don't mix very well. Let's see how this goes. Still waiting on bloodwork to confirm. (Have had this issue in the past, was told today I'll probably be on medication the rest of my life if it is my thyroid, so poo.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Well my goodness gracious let me tell you the news
My head's been wet with the midnight dew
I've been down on bended knee talkin' to the man from Galilee
He spoke to me in the voice so sweet
I thought I heard the shuffle of the angel's feet
He called my name and my heart stood still
When he said, "John go do My will!"

Go tell that long tongue liar
Go and tell that midnight rider
Tell the rambler, the gambler, the back biter
Tell 'em that God's gonna cut 'em down
Tell 'em that God's gonna cut 'em down

"God's Gonna Cut You Down" by Johnny Cash

"Start from the beginning," Harry offered, seated across the table from Greg Diggle. "What happened?"
"What happened?" Diggle snorted. "Seriously? You have to ask? The man's insane! He came in, wand blazing, and attacked me in my cell!"

"I heard he didn't take too kindly to a letter you wrote."

Diggle wore an expression that he would very much like to murder Harry James Potter in his seat. "That letter was for Hermione. Not for either of you. What it contains-"

"I know what it contains, Diggle. Did you think Hermione would shut us out?"

"It doesn't matter anyway," said Diggle, folding his arms. "He used an Unforgivable on me. That's a one way ticket into a cell next to mine. I know the laws. I know my rights as an inmate."

"Kingsley Shacklebolt wrote those rights only a few short years ago," said Harry, narrowing his eyes. He didn't like Diggle being correct. "You're lucky you're not surrounded by Dementors. What did you do? Did you attack first?"

"Attack first?" Diggle rolled his eyes. "Oh, I see. An Auror goes ballistic on an inmate, and still the Aurors stand by one another. He performed a Cruciatius Curse on me, Auror Potter. You know the laws." He scratched at his beard and shook his head. "He's mental, anyway. Would you believe he smirked at me as he was being taken away? He smirked. As if it meant nothing for him to be here."

A chill frosted down Harry's spine as he stood. "I see..." His jaw tightened. "Take Diggle back to his cell. I'll have a word with Malfoy next."

"That's it?" Diggle frowned. "I know my rights, Potter! I'll have the Auror Division on its head, mark my words!"

Draco Malfoy was alone. Not just physically, as he waited in his cell as the hours ticked by till morning's light, but alone in the sense that he had no one to turn to. Breaking Hermione's heart, his father's constant betrayal, turning his back on his mother, the mother of his child, and his son... It all left a detrimental hole in Draco's heart the size of a canyon, and he didn't know if he could climb back out to the top anytime soon. If ever. Purposefully landing himself a spot in Azkaban didn't help matters, but it was necessary. He couldn't do what he needed to do if Hermione, Dean, or Potter were constantly looking for him (which he knew they would do once he made the split with Hermione). He only hoped giving them this 'comfort' of knowing where he was would get them off of his back for what came next. If they thought him in a cell for the next two days, they would have no reason to get wound up in any more trouble. And if there was one thing Draco couldn't stomach, at this point, it was the thought of the people he loved being swept up in his inner-turmoil bullshit.

Especially when his grandfather now possessed both Pandora Stones.

"You will infiltrate the Ministry. As an Auror, it won't take much work. I want you to bring an accomplice of mine -you know it as a small, grey kitten..."

Draco blinked. "Kitten?" He thought about it. "Oh, sod off! That cat can't be an animagus! It's a kitten. Don't animagus forms take on the age of the wizard or witch? There's no way you've got a toddler running errands for you." He thought about it, and added, "And besides. That's just plain creepy. Hermione gave that cat as a present to Scorpius. Plain perverse, if you ask me..."

"I don't believe anyone did," smirked Abraxas, leaning against his cane. "And you're correct- most animagus forms do take the age of the host -however, if one is particularly good at certain attributes, one might be able to change physical attributes, as well."
Given some knowledge on the subject, it didn't take the younger Malfoy long to draw his own conclusion. "An animagus who is also a metamorphagus. That's what you're saying, isn't it?"

Abraxas's smirk widened. "Such an intelligent grandson I have. -As I was saying, I will need you, after you rid yourself of the muggleborn filth you insist on floundering around with," Draco narrowed his eyes at the comment, "Then I will present you your wand again, and you will escort my friend into the Ministry. You will need to make a distraction -one that will render you out of the case indefinitely. One that will land you in Azkaban."

"Azkaban?" Draco scoffed. "You want me to be put in Azkaban? Pah. Not on your life. Or mine. There's no way I'd agree to it."

"How about your friend's life? What is his name… Auror Thomas? Or perhaps Miss Granger? Mr. Potter? I have an entire list ready off the top of my head. Which life shall we put on the chopping block? Personally, I'm all for Miss Granger."

Draco's voice quieted as he begged, "No, please… I…" Anger boiled within his chest like a pot left on the burner much too long. That's what this night was -much too long, and much too hot under the collar. "You've no idea how long it's taken me to build the Malfoy name upright again. For Scorpius. If I get put in Azkaban, that'll ruin it. All of it."

"When I'm through, you'll be a hero," Abraxas said coldly, despite his words. "Tell me, Draco. These vermin… these Death Eaters… how does being one sit with you?"

Draco glanced down to his arm, contemplative. "It used to eat at me… for years, it corroded my heart. But…" He stared long and hard at his arm, thinking to Hermione's 'mudblood' carved arm. "I'm not my mark. I'm sure there are those, like me, who thought it necessary to join Voldemort in order to survive. I thought it was what I wanted, but…"

Abraxas pulled the bulb off of the top of his cane and revealed his Pandora Stone once again. "Bastian Cane told me you were once close to removing that cursed mark. What stopped you from finishing the job?"

"The price."

"Pardon?"

"The price," Draco said again. "It was too great. We were torturing criminals. -I was lying to my wife. All of it. It was too much."

"You would have never needed to suffer if Voldemort and his followers had been put in their place."

For the first time, Draco stared at his grandfather. Really stared at him. "I don't understand. I thought you hated muggles. Hated muggleborns. Why, then, would you side against Voldemort? Are you saying you wouldn't have taken the mark? That you're above all that?"

"I let no man tell me how to live in my own home," Abraxas said definitively. "Following an angry wizard's ambitions -that is beneath a Malfoy. We are not the servants of any man, no matter should they share the same cause or not. That Mark signifies the servant. Servant of greed. Servant of vanity. Servant of a losing side. I told your father just the same, when he decided to follow Riddle's cult. Do you not think if it could be done -ruling over the muggles -that we, Malfoys, wouldn't have done it already? There is a time for everything, my grandson. To associate with the muggles at all is the treason. They are not worth the time to rule. It would be as man ruling over apes. Let them have their wild jungle. Let them weed themselves out. -But we most certainly do not mate with them." He
made a sort of hiss under his breath that made Draco's skin crawl.

"Hermione's no ape."

"And you are no true Malfoy, with that attitude."

"I love her."

"Love." Abraxas scoffed. "What would you know of love, Draco? You're far too young to understand the parameters."

"I'm nearly thirty."

"And even now, you walk around like a boy chasing coattails. You are no more a man than your son." He shrugged, holding the stone out between them. "Trust in me, Draco. I do not wish to destroy this family -rather, I wish to see it rise again from the ashes. Like a phoenix. Strong. In flight. I wish for us to rise up the chain of power once again. How would you like to be Lead Auror? How would you like to bring our family the largest amount of honor?"

"Draco Malfoy," a guard's deep, monotone drawl commanded from the opposite side of the bars, snapping Draco out of his flashback. The magic-dampening clamps around his wrists were tight, making his hands mildly numb and forcing him to flex his fingers to continue circulation. He made to stand as the guard waved his wand and unlocked the cell door. "This way."

"Don't I get a letter?" Draco asked in a snarky tone as he approached and passed the guard. "I know my rights. I get a letter."

"Interrogation first. Letter after."

The guard pointed his wand tip in the curve of Draco's spine and pushed him forward, down the hallway. A few turns and twists later, Draco found himself in front of the same interrogation room he'd been in with Diggle so little time ago, though now he was the one who entered with cuffs. It was Potter to sit on the other side, arms folded, a look of disgruntled disgust written in his thick, black eyebrows. Draco shot him a hearty smirk as he slumped into his chair and rested his arms atop the table, palms out. He opened his mouth to make a smart comment, but Potter cut him off.

"What the Hell were you thinking, Malfoy?"

Smirk still set in his features, Draco leaned back in his chair, shrugged, and said, "Would now be a good time to ask you to be my best man?" There was a beat. "You know. Because I think Dean would muck up the bachelor party, and I really want it to be spectacular. Do you think you could get one of those witches to jump out of a cake? Or better yet, Hermione?"

"Are you done?"

"Not quite." He scratched the tip of his nose. "I don't want you to think I'm asking because I like you. Far from it. But I know it'd mean a great deal to our favorite witch, and-"

"Malfoy? Shut it." Harry sighed, rubbing his temples. "The truth. What were you thinking? Attacking Greg Diggle in his cell? How'd you think that was going to pan out? With a thank you party?"

"I'd hoped."
"Be serious for five bloody seconds!"

Draco yawned. "No."

"Malfoy!" The Auror threw his hands down onto the table. "I'm in a position to hear your side of this. Give me something. Anything that could absolve you."

"You want my side? I used the Azkaban portkey to get here, found Diggle's cell, entered, and proceeded to attack him using an Unforgivable." Merlin, it sounded so bad when he put it like that.

"Stick with the plan, he told himself.

"Why?"

Draco's voice grew grave. "Why do you think?" He began to pick at the skin of his perfectly manicured cuticles, eyes leaving Potter's. "I'm sure by now you've heard of Diggle's wonderful letter." He lowered the volume of his voice to a near whisper. "It's all he ever does, isn't it? Muck up my life. Not a week into our engagement, and there's already a way to bring Weasley back from the dead. And she's considering it, you know?"

Potter stared, nodding, his hands resting on the edge of the table. "She and I talked about it early this morning."

"Did you?"

"She says you tried to call it quits. Told her to 'keep the ring.' Sound familiar?"

Draco's cuticle of his left thumb was ruined, and he went on to the index finger next. "Vaguely."

"So that's the reason?" asked Harry. "The only reason you had to attack Diggle? To risk your badge, your career, your family's reputation?"

Draco's eyes darted up, and he knew he needed to play it big. Potter was being too nice. At this rate, he'd absolve him of all crime. "And what would you know of family, Potter? It can't be because you had any. Everyone knows you aren't exactly the poster child for normal childhood."

Potter's emerald eyes shimmered cold, and his caring face withdrew immediately, replaced entirely by his Auror one. "Alright, Malfoy. Have it your way. A few days in Azkaban should clear your head. But just know I'm the only way you're getting out of this one with your head off the chopping block. The Wizengamot are going to have a field day with this one. -As of right now, you are currently suspended from active Auror duty pending this investigation. And in turn, you are to be taken off any cases you are currently working on. Including this white wolf. He made to stand. "I'll try to keep this out of the papers -not for your sake. But for your family's. Especially Scorpius. Merlin, if he could see his father now."

Draco jumped out of his chair, making one of the guards twitchy and draw his wand. Potter put his hand up in the air, and the guard conceded, wand still drawn but not in duel stance. Harry walked around the table, boots clacking on the floor as he strode right up to Draco's face and leaned in.

"Don't think for a moment I believe you," he whispered.

Draco smirked. "Wouldn't dream of it, Potter. Why don't you just be honest? You never really trusted me to begin with."

Potter's already hurt expression tensed into a look of pure disgust. "Quit being petty."
"Petty?" he snorted. "Get out of my sight. I'd rather rot in Azkaban than listen to Golden Boy talk of morality, trying to sort me out like one of Hermione's books. You can't read me, Potter. I'm a bit out of your reading level."

Harry laughed dryly. "You know, Malfoy, all you've ever been is talk. I used to think you were someone formidable. Now…” he shook his head. "Now, I just feel sorry for you."

"Sorry for me?"

"You want to be a good man? For Hermione? For Scorpius? How about quit letting your anger flow free and get a grip on reality. -Attacking Diggle? That's petty Malfoy bullshit. Not the Draco I know now. That's the old you."

"You're wrong. It's just me. There is no 'old' or 'new.'"

Potter laughed under his breath. "I'll see you soon, yeah? In the meantime, pull the broom out of your arse and come up with a better excuse to the Wizengamot. I'll do my best, but only if you help yourself." He stepped away and strode to the door, glancing about. "Unless you'd like to stay here for the rest of your life?" He shook his head. "You're better than this, Draco. I know you are. I haven't given up, yet. And neither has Hermione."

The two men exchanged long, heated stares.

"Is she alright?"

"As best as one can be. I don't think she knows about this, yet. I'll inform her once I'm done here. -Is there a message you'd like me to pass on?"

Draco glanced down to the ground. "I… no. Only that I love her."

"Is this what you constitute as love?"

"Fuck off."

"Suit yourself."

The door closed promptly behind, leaving Draco alone with his guard detail. Without much to say, he let himself be escorted back to his cell and waited until the guard walked briefly down to his post before Draco glanced about, slunk over to the pillow on his cot, and turned it over.

Underneath sat a key, his wand, and a small, folded stock card that read, 'You have twenty-four hours. After that, you're on your own. Good luck.'

Draco smirked, plucking the key up first. He quickly made use of it and released the manacles around his wrist and carefully let them fall onto his pillow to muffle the sound. Next, he picked up his wand and incinerated the note. No use in leaving evidence behind. And finally, he set up a glamour to appear as if someone slept in his bed. The covers drew up, and he transfigured his pillow into a 'head'. Quietly, he made his way out of the cell and set up a confundus charm at the cell door so that anyone who touched the bars would believe the glamour and walk away. It would last about a day -as long as the time allotted for him to get to work. Another silencing spell to his shoes later, he made his way down the hall and came face to face with a guard.

"Imperio!"

The guard stared complacently at him.
"You just checked on me. I was sleeping in my cell."

"Sleeping in your cell, right."

"You didn't see me here."

"Never saw you."

"I won't want anything for dinner. Neither will Gregory Diggle."

"Nothing for dinner. Yes."

Draco carefully walked his way around the guard, took his wand, and snapped it in half. He could almost hear the wand scream in response, and his own magic countered in electric jolts up his arms. Draco felt terrible, but he didn't have a choice. He needed to get to where he was going, and he needed to do it quickly. He came across two more guards, each with their back turned, and did the same thing, as well as sleeping jinxes on the inmates until he finally was down the correct corridor.

Once again, he found Gregory Diggle curled up in his cell, atop his cot, eyes staring up at the ceiling. When he caught sight of Draco, he shot up straight, raised a curious eyebrow, and said, "Déjà vu." He looked to both sides of his small cell, looked at Draco, and stood. "I suppose this calls for a round two?"

"Shut it. We haven't much time." Draco waved his wand and unlocked the door. "Come on, Diggle. You're coming with me."

"Coming? Coming where? I'm not going anywhere with you. You Crucio'd me, you sod. Think I'd forget something like that? How are you even out right now? Unless…" Diggle read Draco's weary expression. "Ahh…. So, Dark-Draco comes out to play once in awhile, does he?"

"Dark-Draco? What the shit is that? That's a terrible nickname." Draco pointed his wand and pointed for Diggle to move. Greg stepped forward and out of the cell, arms up, though they were still manacled.

"I heard you used to call me 'Devious-Diggle.' Thought 'Dark-Draco' might be fitting for you."

"I thought I told you to shut it." Draco narrowed his eyes. "Hands behind your head, where I can see them."

Diggle did as he was told, leading the way as Draco aimed a wand in his back and told him which corridors to turn. As they passed the other cell mates, still nodding away in sleep, Diggle turned his head backwards, wearing an impressed expression. "The Bastian Cane in me wants to be so proud of you right now."

"Seriously, Diggle, if you don't shut it, I will perform another Crucius Curse, free of charge."

Diggle shrugged. "Been through worst, honestly. -Like hearing Hermione and you are to be wed? What sort of Twilight Zone am I living in?"

"Yeah… you know no one gets your references."

"Twilight Zone? Really? I figured Hermione would have cultured you."

They turned the corner, and Diggle found himself thrown up against the wall, Draco's wand jabbing into his Adam's apple. "Say her name again," Draco goaded. "Go on. I dare you. Say it." He twisted
the wand into Diggle's skin as it lit to life in searing heat, burning into his throat like a cigarette burn. "I'm sick of putting up with your shite, Diggle. I really am. So let me put this in words you'll understand. I'm in charge this time. If I say jump, you beg me to let you. If I say get the taste of Hermione's name off your tongue, you go wash your mouth out with bleach. Are we clear?"

Diggle stared long and hard into Draco's eyes, raising one eyebrow and then the other. "Crystal."

"Crystal, what?"

"Oh, you honestly don't expect me to say it." The wand twisted harder. "Ah! Alright! Sir! It's crystal, Sir! Goddamn it, Malfoy, lay off the theatrics!"

Draco smirked, removing his wand. "Good boy. On we get. It's not far off, now."

"Where are we going?"

"Seeing as how we can't Apparate out of here, we're going to use a portkey."

"A portkey." Diggle stared blankly. "You're kidding. That's your big idea? A portkey? And what are you going to do when we get there? The only way to Azkaban through a portkey is through the Ministry. So, are you going to kill me in front of the Ministry or something?"

Draco blinked. "Kill you?" He chuckled. "Oh, Diggle, Diggle, Diggle. I'm not going to kill you." He rolled his eyes. "If I were going to kill you, I would have. Years ago." He reached down and grabbed around one of Diggle's magic-dampening cuffs, pulling it up between them. "No, you're too valuable for that."

"Valuable?" Diggle raised an eyebrow. "I don't think you've ever said that about me before." He grinned. "I like Dark-Draco."

"I told you, quit calling me that." Draco reached in and fished out his key, holding it between the two of them. Diggle eyed the key as if he were debating on wrestling the blond for it, but then stopped himself last moment, keen on listening instead. "The truth of it is, Diggle -my grandfather fancies a little chat with you." Draco watched as all the blood drained from Greg's face, and it put a smirk across his own. "Yeah, got your attention now, haven't I? But see -before I hand you off, there's something else I'm going to need from you. And, if you're good, I might consider giving you some of your magic back." He waved the key.

Greg licked his overly-dry lips, hand moving for the key until Draco tugged it back. Then he narrowed his eyes and laughed. "You drive a hard bargain, Draco Malfoy. I have to say -breaking out of Azkaban. Using my magic as incentive to do whatever it is you bade me to do. It's all very… Bastian Cane. I'm so proud."

Draco's stomach turned in knots, but he ignored it. "So? Do we have a deal? Yes or no?"

Diggle rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes. Anything to get me out of this dump." He held out his shackled hands. "I am but your humble servant."

Raising an eyebrow, Draco pushed the key into Diggle's cuffs and turned the lock. "Now I know you're full of shite. But, seeing as how I'm not going to be able to do this alone…" The cuffs fell from Diggle's wrists and to the floor. Greg smiled, flexing his fingers and rubbing his worn, bloody wrists.

"Ah…" He inhaled. "I can taste the magic."
"Great." Draco grabbed him up by the collar and pushed him forward. "No funny business, Diggle. Or they come right back on."

Diggle shook his head. "In my weakened state, I wouldn't dare." He chuckled. "Don't you worry yourself, Draco. You and I will have our time. Just you wait till I'm back to normal."

Draco smirked. "Looking forward to it."

"So… I assume your attack to me earlier last evening was all a ruse to get yourself locked in here…"

"Yes."

"Did you have to Crucio me?"

"Hmm? Oh. No. That was a personal choice."

They walked on, careful to keep an eye out for any more guards on their path. As they approached the portkey room, Diggle turned on his heels, allowing Draco to poke him in the chest with the tip of his wand. "What is it then?"

"What is what?"

"The plan." Diggle looked pleased. "If I'm going to allow you to coerce me out of my life sentence, it has to be a good plan. Or I might as well turn you in as soon as we step foot in the Ministry."

"I don't think you'll want to do that."

"Why not?"

"Because if you do, you'll never get your hands on the Gray Magic again."

Draco watched as Diggle's green eyes lit to life, and his fingers danced along the edge of his ragged and torn robes. "Gray Magic, you say? Oh, yes. Dark-Draco just gets more and more interesting."

"I told you- quit calling me that."

"So where is it? The Gray?" He sounded like a dope-fiend stringing for another fix.

Draco grinned ear to ear. "The one place no one could access without you. And, considering you were subject to a life sentence, it seemed appropriate."

Diggle was a smart man. He put the pieces together like a child's jigsaw in moments. "My vault?"

"What is it you like to say, Diggs? And Bingo was his name-o?"

Chapter End Notes

Alright, guys! I hope you liked this chapter! Feel free to tell me what you thought.
~A.
Harry Potter and the Big Blonde Bimbo

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! First off, let me say a BIG THANK YOU to everyone who has jumped onto the How To Train Your Auror train recently! It's amazing to have so many new faces join the mix, and I'm thankful for every single one of you. The ones that have been here since the beginning and the new joiners. I'm bringing back the humor in this chapter! So, please, enjoy. NEXT CHAPTER IS A REVEAL CHAPTER, so don't mind this chapter much. You get so many answers next chapter. XD

Thank you, waymay, for editing this chapter for me! She has a new, FANTASTIC Dramione/Blamione fanfiction out called "Background" that she has been working on for so long, and it hits home with me in a big way. Like, this story is really close to my heart. SO PLEASE. Once you're done here, go check out Background by waymay. It's in my favorites on my author page.Background by waymay. It's in my favorites on my author page.

Took the Patronus test on Pottermore: Black Mare. XD Totally fits.

On to the show! Replies to reviews after the chapter.
Much love,
~A.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I, I'll never be, be what you see inside
You say I'm not alone, but I am petrified
You say that you are close, is close the closest star?
You just feel twice as far, you just feel twice as far

And I'll fall
And I'll break
And I'll fake
All I wanna

And I'll fall down
And I'll break down
And I'll fake you out
All I wanna

"Fake You Out" by Twenty One Pilots

Hermione hated being left alone. She felt as if she should be doing more. Harry was at the Ministry, Draco was Merlin knows where, Abraxas Malfoy was on the move, and here she was -stranded in her own home like she was placed on house arrest. No, this wouldn't do at all. She needed to think. She needed to devise some sort of plan. But communicating with Draco's parents was like trying to communicate with two snarling Hungarian Horntails. Hermione was strong, but she wasn't a dragon
Then again, she managed to charm Draco, hadn't she? But Draco wasn't like his parents. Not really. Sure, he had all the arrogance, the poise, the upbringing—but he also contained a heart. Love. She knew Lucius didn't hold that type of kindness, but… perhaps she could appeal to Narcissa? After all, she was, if nothing else, a mother. And a mother's love was one of the most powerful magics, wasn't it? Harry was proof of that.

She nodded to herself, set in her purpose. She would talk to Narcissa and appeal to her softer side—maybe she could shed some insight into Draco's actions. Perhaps he'd talked to her before he disappeared.

Just as she stepped to set off towards the spiral staircase leading up to the East Wing, where the Malfoys currently resided, she heard the rustling of fabric as someone stepped inside the doorway.

"Astoria," Hermione jumped, startled by the sudden appearance. "Oh, Rowena's hat! You gave me a fright."

"I don't believe I'm that near death's door," Astoria smirked, folding her delicate arms across her chest. "How are you, Miss Granger? You look a bit puckish. Have you eaten?"

"Eaten?" She thought about it. "No, I don't believe so."

"An Auror is nothing if she doesn't keep up her energy. I'll have one of the house elves sort you out some breakfast."

"No," Hermione said at once, and at Astoria's recoil, she added hastily, "Erm… No, thank you. I can fetch it myself. I don't much care to let house elves do work I'm perfectly capable of doing."

Astoria nodded slowly. "Yes… Draco told me you used to work in the Ministry's Magical Creature's department? House elf rights and whatnot?"

"Yes."

"A very fitting choice for someone like yourself." When she saw the other witch scowl curiously, Astoria added, "Intelligent. Kind hearted."

"Oh," Hermione smiled shyly. "I think that's one of the first compliments you've given me that wasn't sandwiched between two insults."

"Oh, that can't be right, can it?" The green-eyed witch smirked. "Anyway, Miss Granger, while I have you here – Theodore and I plan to visit the Ministry this morning. We wanted to inform you, so you wouldn't worry about our sudden disappearance." They both stared at each other awkwardly. "That was… a poor choice of words, considering Draco—"

"No. I knew what you meant." Hermione was determined not to break eye contact with Astoria, even though she desperately wanted to cast her eyes to the floor. "Actually… I think that's a wonderful idea. I'll join you."

"Aren't you assigned to watch Narcissa and Lucius?"

"Yes. Which is why they'll be coming along." It would be a perfect buffer in order to strike up a conversation. "I'll just go inform them." Hermione, with a kick in her step, started back in the direction of the staircase.
"You've jumped off the deep end, Malfoy. This will never work." Greg Diggle crossed his arms, scowling over at his criminal counterpart as Draco peeked out through the door of the portkey room and into the Auror Division's bullpen. He waved his hand agitatedly, ushering Diggle to shut up. But he was ignored. "You honestly think they won't see past a few glamour spells? What if they have new wards set up? You don't know what's going on out there -you're going to get us both arrested again, and the entire thing will be your fault."

Draco shut the door softly and locked it with a wave of his wand. "Diggle. When you posed as Cane, did I ever tell you about the time I snuck down and ate all of the cookies left for Santa?"

"You actually believed in Santa?" Diggle raised an eyebrow.

"Of course I didn't. A big, fat wizard who goes around giving presents? You think I'm that daft? But my mother tried to make me believe. Every year she'd bake these chocolate chip cookies and set them out for Santa. I was never to touch them. So, when I was about seven, I decided I'd had enough of it. I was going to eat those cookies." Draco smirked. "So, I created a distraction. I ordered one of the house elves to break my mother's prized Greek vase. And just like clockwork, my parents were thrown out of their beds in the middle of the night, distracted by the vase whilst I-" He waved his wand around, transfiguring Diggle's dirty robes into a green-sequin dress, "-ate every single cookie that night. And in the morning, I blamed the house elves again." He smirked.

"What in the devil do you think you have me in?" Diggle gasped, glaring down at his attire. "What the -Oh." He raised an eyebrow. "Oh, that's good." He smirked back. "I'm the house elf with the vase."

"Think you feel up for a little transfiguration?"

Diggle flexed his long, slender fingers and closed his eyes. "Let's find out." The metamorphagus shook out his shoulders and took in a deep breath. On his exhale, his body began to shift. Like a clay figure being pushed and molded, his arms became thinner, his jaw and nose subtler. The beard on his face was gone, and a head of full, blonde hair fell like ringlets down his back-or, really, her back. Greg Diggle disappeared, and in his place stood a beautiful, busty blonde with boobs the size of a small cantaloupe. "What do you think, big boy?" The voice that came from Diggle was that of a feminine vixen.

Draco tilted his head, smirking. "You look a bit bloated. Particularly around the middle."

Diggle stepped forward and slapped Draco across the cheek. "Never tell a lady she looks fat, Draco. Have you no class?"

The blond narrowed his eyes, snarling. "You slapped me!"

"You insulted me. We both know I look rather marvelous in this dress." Diggle spun around. "Is this what it feels like to be a woman? My, it's a bit freeing." Female Diggle pulled the dip of her neckline back and ogled her own breasts. "I'm surprised I never gave this a go when I found out I was a metamorphagus. All those years wasted. Tsk." Diggle smirked, glancing up at Draco. "I'm tempted to sing 'I Feel Pretty'. Do you know it?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Can you concentrate for five bloody seconds instead of feeling yourself up?"

"It was your idea to make me a woman."
"Yes, well, it's more distracting."

"Indeed. Bit roomier in the undercarriage." Diggle waved his hips back and forth while resting his hands on his hips. "This feels... good."

"Too much information." He was just about to make to unlock the door when Diggle spoke again.

"Not having any balls is rather nice."

"Remind me to cut them off for you once we're out!"

Diggle squinted and ruffled her eyebrows together. "You're a sour sport."

"Are you ready?"

"What exactly is it that I'm to do?"

"You're going to claim you got lost -one of these dolts will gladly escort you out of the office. I'll follow behind with a disillusionment charm."

"You, honestly, believe they won't spot you?"

"With the way you're distracting in that dress, they won't have a clue I'm there."

Diggle's pretty lips perked up in a smile. "Aww, Draco." He batted the Auror's arm playfully and giggled. "You really know how to charm a lady."

"Stop that."

"Just getting my practice in." And with that, Diggle's face fell into a serious tone. "Right. Are we ready, then?"

With another wave of his wand and an incantation later, Draco's body was nearly indistinguishable from the door behind him. If one looked at him from the wrong angle, they might notice a small shimmer, but that's what Diggle was for. Distraction.

It was an interesting experience, to say the least, as Aurors Jameson and Granger stepped through the Ministry Floo with Astoria, Scorpius, Lucius, and Narcissa. The two Aurors were efficient in every way, quick on their feet to get where they were going -and it was obvious, as they walked slowly next to Lucius (for his health) and Scorpius (for his little feet) that both were like two horses chomping at the bit.

Hermione, to keep herself busy as they walked slowly towards the elevators, leaned in and whispered to Jameson, "How are things fairing on your end, Theodore? Astoria seems quite taken with you."

Jameson raised a rust-colored eyebrow, keeping his eyes forward as he replied out of the corner of his mouth, "I seem to get that impression as well..."

"And?"

"And this is highly inappropriate conversation between two Aurors."

Hermione's shoulders slumped, and she ribbed him in the side. "She likes you, you know."
For the first time since she worked with him, she saw the corners of his lips turn up in an unassuming
smile. "I know."

By the time they made it to the elevators, Scorpius complained of his legs tiring, and Jameson picked
him up without a second thought. Astoria smiled coyly to him as she stepped into the elevator,
mumbling a, "Thank you so much, Theo." To which Jameson's smile widened. Narcissa grinned
curtly between the two and stepped inside the elevator as well, followed by Lucius, and, finally,
Hermione took up the last occupational space in the lift.

"I push button!" Scorpius squealed in Jameson's ear, and he leaned forward so that the toddler could
reach the buttons.

"Level Two," Hermione chimed in, but Scorpius began pushing all of the buttons wildly, so it was
anyone's guess, really, where they would end up. Lucius gave an amused smirk while Narcissa
checked her hair in the reflection of the floor. Astoria giggled into Theodore's arm. Hermione was
left to sigh, half irritated, half entertained, and they all waited to see where they would land first.

Draco let the 'female' Diggle step through the doorway first, noticing how 'her' breasts bobbed up
and down as she strutted out the door. My, Diggle was one for theatrics, wasn't he? Draco followed
closely behind, nudging Diggle in the back to shut the door behind him -or her -it was so hard to sort
that out in his mind.

With the door shut, Diggle glanced around to the many, unassuming male Aurors scattered in the
department. It didn't take them long to notice the voluptuous snake in their midst. Auror Kingston
was the first to take charge -he literally charged across the bullpen, a stack of paperwork in his hands
and a scowl written across his brow. "Ma'am! Excuse me? Ma'am!" He stalked up to the blonde
'witch', and Draco noticed the way his eyes raked over the fake breasts and curvy hips. "Erm…
excuse me, ma'am, but you're not allowed to be here. Are you looking for someone?"

Diggle batted her eyelashes and pouted her lips. "I'm so sorry. I seem to be mixed up. I was looking
for Auror Malfoy?"

Kingston raised a curious eyebrow, and Draco felt his palms begin to sweat. His wand nearly slipped
from his hand, but he kept perfectly still behind Diggle's back, though he did manage to press the tip
of his wand into the dip of Greg's spine, who jumped lightly in response. 'Stick to the plan,' Draco
thought, though he didn't dare whisper it.

"Auror Malfoy, you say? Oh, um, I'm terribly sorry to inform you, but…" Kingston stumbled over
his words as his eyes drifted downwards, "Auror Malfoy will be out for the rest of the week." He
snapped his eyes back up. "Personal reasons. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Perhaps…” Diggle reached out and stroked a slender finger down Kingston's arm. "Would you
give him a message for me when he returns?"

The Auror blushed and swallowed hard. "Oh, um. Of course."

Diggle leaned in and said, just above a whisper, "Tell him he's a cheeky arsehole, and I hope he rots
in Hell." 'She' winked at Kingston, patted him on the cheek, and pointed towards the double doors at
the far end of the bullpen. "I'll just show myself out. This way, yes?"

"Actually, ma'am," said Kingston, running a circle around Diggle to cut 'her' off, "I'm sorry to inform
you, but the entire department is under temporary lockdown. I have no idea who let you in, but…"
He sat his paperwork down on another Auror's vacant desk. "You'll have to remain here for the time
being, I'm afraid." Kingston wore thick, horn-rimmed glasses, which he pushed up his slender nose. "I'm terribly sorry for the inconvenience."

'Shit.' Draco scowled. 'Do they suspect?'

"Oh, dear." Diggle released a gasp and placed a hand over her mouth. "That truly is an inconvenience. I promised my dear, elderly mother I'd meet her for tea at noon. Is there no way I can pass?"

Kingston swept his eyes over Diggle's form, yet again, though this time he wore a face of skepticism. "What is your name, ma'am?"

"My name? 'She' placed a dainty hand on her waist. "I would think one would know simply by looking at me. -I'm Jill Valentine."

"Who?"

'Yeah.' Draco thought. 'Who?'

"Oh, surely you've heard of me? I'm very popular in the muggle world. Famous even." Diggle waved 'her' hand around, putting on the air of a starlet. "No matter. Is Auror Potter around? I wish to speak with him, then."

'What is he doing!?' Draco internally winced.

"Oh, um. Auror Potter is… oh, there he is now."

Draco whipped his head around and spotted Potter a ways off, talking to Dean Thomas. Shit. Double shit. Okay. Maybe this could still work.

"Thank you, Auror…?"

"Kingston." He straightened his posture. "Pleasure to meet you ma'am."

"Likewise." Diggle gave a flirtatious wink and started to saunter across the room, towards Potter. Draco scowled, carefully moving behind the criminal floundering around as a female until she stopped, suddenly, as her eyes connected with Potter's. "Auror Potter, I presume."

Harry didn't look twice at the jiggling breasts peeking through the dress. His brows were drawn together in a look of concern. "Excuse me, Miss, but how did you get in here?" He signed off on some documents another wizard was holding and stepped towards Diggle. "I don't mean to be rude, but you're not allowed to be in here."

"I'm so sorry. I must have taken a wrong turn."

Potter's left eyebrow shot up, and he looked over the blonde with interest -not in the sexual sense, but as if he were analyzing every single detail.

"Jill Valentine," Diggle said, shooting her hand out. "It is an honor to meet you, Auror Potter." She tittered with a 'nervous' giggle. Maybe it was nervousness.

"How did you get in here, Miss Valentine?"

'Shit.' Draco closed his eyes, ready for the blow. But Diggle was quick on her answer.

"Oh, you've caught me. I'm so sorry, Mr. Potter. I'm a reporter for the Daily Prophet, and… well…
this is embarrassing… I might have bribed one of your Aurors to let me through for an interview with you." Diggle played the part well, nervously tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "I'm just ever so smitten with you." 'She' reached out and trailed her fingers up Potter's tie, chin, and to the tip of his nose. "Perhaps there's somewhere more private we could take this?"

Potter narrowed his eyes. "I'm happily married, Miss Valentine."

"Oh, yes," Diggle winked, "Of course."

"No. Seriously. I love my wife."

"Right." Another wink. Draco had to hold back his sniggers that threatened to erupt from his throat. Damn it -if Diggle weren't the bane of Draco's existence, he would make a great chum. Anyone who could get under Potter's skin was kin. Shit. No. He hated Diggle. He needed to focus. -Though it was hard to when Diggle stepped up into Potter's personal space and brushed a shoulder against his chest. "Oh, I feel a bit faint. Catch me, Auror Potter!"

"Erm…" Potter sidestepped and avoided the blonde as she nearly fell over -and had to hobble awkwardly to stop herself from actually falling splat on the floor. It was all so entertaining to watch that Draco placed his hand on his mouth to keep from laughing. "Miss Valentine-"

"Call me 'Jill.'"

"Jill, listen," Potter reached out and placed his hands on her shoulders. "I need you to have a seat-" he gestured to a waiting bench nearby, "And wait until we sort a few things out. Could you do that, please?"

Shit. Shitty shit shit.

"Of course, Mr. Potter." Diggle sauntered over to the bench, leaving a flustered looking Potter behind. Draco took the seat next to Diggle, careful to not draw attention to himself. "Now what?" He heard Greg whisper under bated breath.

"You're a terrible distraction. You're too distracting," Draco muttered back.

"Isn't that the definition of a wonderful distraction?"

"Be serious."

"Fine." Diggle sighed. "Now what?"

"I had no idea they were going to be under lockdown… Perhaps you should have picked someone a bit less provocative. Too late now." Draco hung his head. "Shite. What are we going to do?"

And like a sign from the heavens, the double doors to the Auror Division swooped open, causing Draco's heart to skip a beat. A familiar set of bushy, brown curls pushed past the doorway. Her eyes were determined. Her jaw was set. The last time he had seen her look so formidable, she was unravelling the Gray Magic from Greg Diggle's soul.

Draco almost stood up, tempted to say something -until he remembered he was disillusioned and a criminal. His hand reached out absentmindedly, and her name fell from his lips. "Hermione…"

Diggle's ears perked at the murmur, and his head rose up, eyes lighting like a Christmas tree at the sight before him. "Well, if that isn't a sight for sore eyes…" A dastardly smirk crossed his, now, feminine lips. "Takes your breath away, doesn't she?"
Draco attempted to hold back his sudden pang of possessiveness, instead trying to soak in her every detail. Yes, there were those small freckles bridging the top of her nose. There were those beautiful doe eyes. -His ring still rested on her finger, he noted, as she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. Relief filled him to the brim. Did she know he didn't mean a word of it? She was intelligent beyond her years. He hoped she figured it out, that it was all a ruse. But, by Potter's face earlier in Azkaban, she might have her doubts. Without thinking, he stood from his spot, the glamour shimmering ever so slightly at his sudden movement. Diggle hissed under his breath in warning, and so Draco stood, rooted to the spot, tightness clutching his chest. He watched on as Hermione searched around the room, looking for someone –Oh, it was Potter. As soon as her eyes connected with his, she turned back around, behind her to the hall, and waved an ushering hand for someone to follow her.

Astoria. It was Astoria. And Jameson. Scorpius. -Oh, fuck. Scorpius. Draco swallowed a hard lump in his throat, his hands quivering. "Scorp…" The toddler searched busily with his gaze around the Auror Division, stopping to rest his eyes over near the benches, where Diggle sat. It almost looked as if he was staring directly at Draco as he gave a lopsided smirk, but then he turned around to Jameson and began to pull his ears. Nah. He couldn't have sensed him, could he?

Two more people followed behind, stepping into the doorway: Draco's parents.

There was a squirming sound from behind Draco, and he turned to see Diggle shifting uncomfortably on the bench, eyes resting on Lucius Malfoy. If eyes could shoot Avadas, Lucius would be in the family plot right about now. The tension between Diggle's brows was sharp enough to cut through steel. Every fiber of his soul rang true; he wanted to kill Lucius on the spot. But Diggle was a smart man. He knew better. So, instead, he clutched the edge of the bench until the knuckles of his feminine form grew white and he leaned back: a rigid statue of loathing.

"Harry," Hermione approached Potter with a staggering speed, "What's going on?"

Draco tried to lean in to listen, but, to his horror, Dean Thomas began to approach the benches, and he had to dart out of the way, nearly giving himself away to avoid being run-smack-dab into. Dean stopped for half a moment, eyeing the spot where Draco stood with an inquisitive stare, but, eventually, he shrugged and made his way to sit down next to Diggle.

"Harry tells me you're from the Daily," he said, folding his hands behind his head as he smiled cheerfully at the blonde. Diggle searched over Dean, gave a heinous smirk, and giggled.

"I am, yes."

"My girlfriend, Luna, she works for the Quibbler," Dean said. "Ever read the Quibbler?"

"Can't say I have, no," Diggle said, obviously enjoying the conversation. There was a hint of sincerity in his eyes and tone: he missed conversations with people. And, perhaps, Dean in particular. The two had been friends before they were enemies. "Though I hear a few people chit-chat now and again."

"Well, Luna's always looking for good reporters," Dean said, bringing his hands down as he reached inside his pocket and fished out a crumbled card. "Here's her information, in case you decide to play for a better team."

"Do you always promote your girlfriend's work?" Diggle asked.

"All the time. She's my best friend." Dean grinned from ear to ear. "Anyway, I'm sure this will all get sorted out soon and you can go on about your business." Draco recognized that look in Dean's eye - he wasn't just playing friendly: he was working. Searching for tells. No doubt, this was Potter's
suggestion. "I am curious, though. Who let you in? It couldn't have been much work, I'm sure, not with that body." Dean nudged to Diggle's set of knockers.

Diggle was quick on an answer. "A good reporter never gives her source."

Fully satisfied that Diggle could handle himself for but a moment, Draco tiptoed away, keeping the con in his line of vision the entire time as he made his way across the floor towards Potter, Hermione, and Jameson. He crossed paths with his parents and Astoria briefly, who stood around an empty desk and were playing a round of I-Spy with Scorpius. When this was all over, Draco hoped he could come back to this moment, here, and be a part of it next time. He loved his son more than anything, and it pained him not to scoop him up in his arms and spin him around. But if he ever wanted to be able to do that again, he needed to stick to the plan. So, he moved past his family and settled near the three Aurors huddled over a desk, stepping directly behind Hermione.

As Draco inhaled, he could smell her perfume -roses, hints of lavender, and -Merlin, did she always smell like parchment? Was that part of the perfume? –Draco, despite everything terrible going on in his world, closed his eyes for half a moment and inhaled her scent again. It was like breathing in starlight. He loved it. As his eyes opened again, she took a step back, and the curly nest of hair brushed against him, knocking him in the face. His nose scrunched up as he took a step back to escape the wild mane of hair, realizing, in retrospect, that if he weren't her fiancée, this would be rather stalker-like.

"The entire department?" He heard Hermione mutter to Potter. "Are you sure it was an animagus?"

"What else could it have been?" Potter asked, running his fingers through his midnight-locks. "By the way Kingston described it, it sounds a lot like your kitten, Hermione."

"No, but…but that's impossible." She tapped her foot. "I mean, isn't it?" She looked over to Jameson, who stood stoic and pensive. Finally, he spoke.

"It isn't out of the realm of possibilities, and it would explain Auror Malfoy's strange behavior, if what you believe is true. If he felt like he was being watched…"

A smirk crept up Draco's lips. Merlin, he had some intelligent friends.

"Have you heard anything, Harry? About Draco?"

Potter's eyes looked troubled, and he sighed. Oh shit, here it was. Draco didn't want to be here for this -he backed away slowly, turning on his heels and, as quickly as he could, made it back over to Diggle and Dean. "Imperio." Dean stood at once, under Draco's will, and offered an arm out to Diggle.

"May I escort you outside for a cup of coffee, Miss Valentine?"

Diggle perched an eyebrow but said nothing as 'she' stood from her seat and slinked her arm around Dean's. When they made it through the double doors, Draco looked once more back at his family -to the only reason he had for continuing on with this dangerous plan.

'I love you all.'

And then they were gone, being led away by Dean as Potter was distracted with Hermione and Jameson. All in all, though it wasn't the plan Draco hoped for, it worked out in his favor. He got to see them all one last time. And that… that sat right in his heart. He could do this. He would have to, to keep them all alive.
For those that don't know, Jill Valentine is a Resident Evil character. And that's why that was SO FUNNY. Because we all know Diggle makes pop-culture jokes that wizards don't get. XD

~A.
Revelations

Chapter Notes

OMG WE ARE HERE! The bigger reveals! So excited. Can't wait. Many feelz. LOL

Are you ready to delve into Lucius's head? Are you ready to see what Dark-Draco and Devious-Diggle are up to? XD

Special thank you to waymay for editing this chapter and listening to me ramble on and on. XD YOU DA BEST.

On to the show!
~A.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is how I show my love
I made it in my mind because
Blame it on my ADD baby

This is how an angel dies
Blame it on my own sick pride
Blame it on my ADD baby

Sail, sail
Sail, sail, sail
"Sail" by Awolnation

Hermione stared down at the floor, trying to comprehend Harry's words. She was a smart witch. It never took her this long to process such simple statements, and yet… this was different. This was about… "Are you sure?"

"I just came back from a visit with the sod, so… yeah. I'm sure." Harry rubbed his tired eyes, pushing his fingers under his glasses to pinch his nose as he shut his eyes tight. "Attacked Diggle in his cell..."

Her eyes flickered up. "He what?" She stomped her foot and balled her fists. "That self-centered… obnoxious… twat!" Hermione's patience wiped clean like a dry erase board. "Harry, you might need to hold me back, because I'm half tempted to attack him in his cell." She made a noise somewhere between a sigh and a screech as she ran her fingers through her hair. "I want to see him."

She took a step towards the back offices, where the Portkey Room resided, but Harry sideswept her and blocked her path. "Sorry," he said. He, indeed, looked apologetic. "The entire department's under lock and key until we can ascertain the location of the kitten."

"You're going to stop me from seeing him?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips and shooting him a disbelieving scowl.
"Hermione, believe me. You'll do more harm than good."

"I'm his fiancéé."

"Are you, though?" Jameson piped in, and, upon Hermione's curse-filled eyes, he soberingly added, "I do not believe Auror Malfoy is in his right mind at the moment. Perhaps give him some time to dwell on his actions, yes?"

"Theodore's right," Harry said. "And, besides. You know where he is. It's not like he's going anywhere."

"Where exactly are we going?" asked Diggle, calling back to Draco as they stepped out of the disgusting display of toilets in Whitehall. They'd left Dean some ways back in the Ministry, Imperiusing him to retrieve two banana nut muffins, two blueberry muffins, and an apple cinnamon raisin bagel. Needless to say, he'd be busy a while.

As soon as Diggle was out of the toilets, he shifted his appearance back to normal, along with his dark brown hair and forest green eyes. Though, now, he appeared clean shaven and more the Diggle everyone knew, down to the dastardly glint in his eye. Although…

Draco snorted a laugh. "Nice dress."

Diggle's eyes trailed down to his frame where the dress held loosely around his body -he was much thinner than he'd been two years ago. Of course, sitting in a prison could do that to someone. Or, maybe, it was all a ruse. Draco didn't put anything past Diggle. Sympathy card, perhaps?

Greg perched an eyebrow and gestured towards the dress. "Well? Any bloody moment would be wonderful for you to transfigure me out of this and into something more… appropriate."

"I thought you felt pretty?" The blond chuckled, and with a wave of his wand transfigured the dress into a shirt and pants combo. "There, that should do it. As much as I detest the idea," he said, watching Diggle check himself out in the mirror, "We'll have to take the muggle transit to get to Diagon. If we Apparate from here on out, we can be tracked by the Ministry."

"Given this a lot of thought, have you?" Diggle raised a precocious eyebrow and waggled a finger at Draco's attire. "You won't do in those."

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"A bit formal… here." He offered his hand out. "Lend me your wand."

"I will not," Draco said, a warning in his tone, "Do you think I'm daft? You'll not be getting my wand or any wand for that matter." He waved his wand and transfigured himself a grey long sleeve and black slacks. "See?"

"Still… too dressed up." Diggle shook his head. "You'll stick out like a snobby sore thumb in London."

"Like I care…" Draco rolled his eyes. "Come on. We best be getting on. We have an appointment this afternoon."

"Ooh? With your sinister grandfather?" Diggle drawled. "Oh, goody."

Draco smirked, stowing his away. Oh, if Diggle only knew what lay ahead.
"If I'm not to see Draco," Hermione huffed, "And I'm not allowed to leave for the time being, what am I to do?"

Harry's eyes were narrowed as he scanned the room. "Where's Dean?" His eyes rested on the far corner. "And where's that reporter? Shit -Jameson-"

"I'm on it, Sir," Jameson said with a curt nod, stepping off to leave but catching himself and, with a swing of his body, turned back around to face his superior. "While I have you here, Sir, I wonder if I might make a request…"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "From you? I think this would be the first. What is it?" He crossed his arms and waited.

Jameson brushed a nervous hand down the side of his robes and cleared his throat. "I was wondering, Sir, if I might leave Astoria and Scorpius in your possession so that I might… what I mean to say is... " he sighed. "I'd like to visit Auror Bolt, if it's alright with you, Sir. Pay my respects."

Green eyes softened, and Harry reached out, placing a hand on Theodore's shoulder. "I forget you and Bolt attended school together. How are you handling this, Theodore?"

Jameson shrugged, eyes pensive. "I didn't know her very well, so it isn't my place to grieve. However, I know she was a valuable asset to the Division, and."

"-Theodore," said Harry kindly, "You don't need to give me an excuse. If you'd like to visit her, I'll be glad to take over your duties for an hour. It's the least I can do."

Jameson's eyes drifted up to his superior's, and he nodded once. "Thank you, Auror Potter. Truly. Has anyone informed Bolt's family?"

"They're out in Scotland for the time being. I've sent an owl to ask them to come here in person. Never like giving this kind of news in a letter."

"Indeed." Jameson blinked -it was his way of showing support, even when he couldn't express it on his face. "If I'm here when they arrive, I'd like to be the one to inform them, Sir, if it's all the same."

"You would?"

"Yes. Is that not all right?" Theodore's eyebrows scrunched together in concern.

"No, it's perfectly alright. I just... " Harry sighed with a mixture of relief and sadness. "Normally, no one volunteers for these types of things." He smiled genuinely. "Thank you, Theodore. I'm very glad to have you as part of this team."

With another nod, Jameson confirmed his thanks and bowed before walking back, no doubt to talk things over with Astoria and the rest of the family, leaving Hermione and Harry to themselves.

"Where do you think Dean's run off to?" Hermione asked. "There was a reporter here?"

"Said she was from the Daily," answered Harry, placing his hands on his waist while thinking. "I think she was lying." Rubbing his hands over his face, he cleared his throat and looked to Hermione. "I think it's time we have a look at Malfoy's memories, don't you?"
"Mummy, I don't want to go to Finnick's today," says a small boy seated at a large dining table, far too big for the three patrons gathered. The boy fidgets nervously with the wool collar of his shirt, grey eyes darting between his mother, who is busy spreading jam on toast, and his father, who is reading a copy of the Daily Prophet with great interest. Neither of them bother to help the boy as he extends his hand for a glass of orange juice at the center of the table just out of reach for his short arms. "Mummy, are you listening? Finnick is mean. He says mean things about me."

His mother's face, painted much like a china doll, turns in his direction, finally, and she sets the bit of toast onto his plate. "Lucius, darling. Finnick Nott is a nice young man. And you're to play with him, even if he isn't."

"But why?" The boy whines, bouncing up and down in his chair. "He never lets me play with his toys, and he pulls my hair and pushes me-"

His father's silver eyes flicker upwards in his direction as he sets the paper down with crisp movements. "-Malfoys do not let others push them around, Lucius." He raises a condescending eyebrow, and the boy's face flushes with embarrassment. "I did not raise you to be second in command to a Nott."

The boy's eyes fall to the table, all appetite lost. "Yes, Father."

"Yes, Sir," his father snaps.

The boy's face withers into further humiliation. "Yes.. Sir."

"Good lad." His father nods in approval. Like a candle flickering to life, a smirk finds its way up the boy's lips. He's pleased he has done something right. "And your mother is correct. You must be seen with this Nott boy. But that does not mean to be compliant to his demands. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Wonderful."

"Abraxas, dear," says the boy's mother. "Did you order me that chiffon scarf for Druella Black's tea party this weekend?"

Abraxas grins. "Of course, Winifred. It should be arriving today."

"Thank you. Oh, you spoil me so." She smiles back, patting him on the arm. There, in this moment, Lucius's parents look happy. Proud. Accomplished. It's written all over the twinkle in the boy's eyes; he wants this one day, too. To be happy the way they appear to be.

"Come along, Lucius, dear," says Winifred, her slick, black hair shimmering like a waterfall down her back as she escorts her son down the streets of Diagon Alley. On her right is Abraxas, walking with a slender cane with a brass bulb on the top. His slender fingers grasp the handle as he glances down towards his son on the other side of his wife. Lucius is staring inquisitively back at a seated gentleman with scruff on his chin and battered robes.

"Why does that man look so dirty?" he asks. His voice is slightly more filled than before -he appears about two years older. His hair no longer holds that boyish frame around his face. It is slicked back, like his father's, attempting to uphold traditions.
"He is homeless," Abraxas explains, leaning against his walking cane for half a moment. He moves a hand up, and his wife and son cease their walking to allow him time to rub his knee.

"People can be homeless?" Lucius asks.

"Of course they can," says Winifred, checking her reflection in a shop window.

The blond boy turns his head back around in the direction of the scruffy looking man and frowns. "Should we give him some money?"

His mother's eyes widen, and she scowls in disapproval. "Certainly not."

"We don't give money to his kind," his father explains, not caring to keep his voice quiet. He straightens his posture and then relaxes, smirking down at Lucius.

"His kind, Sir?"

"Muggleborn."

Lucius's eyebrows knit together, and he shifts his pity for the man nearly instantly. His lips curl up in a sneer as he says, "Oh. How can you tell?"

"We went to school with him," Winifred explains. "Now, gentlemen, can we please keep moving? I'll be late to my hair appointment if we don't get a move on right this instant."

"Of course, Winny," Abraxas says with a calm smile and ushers a hand out, ready to follow at her request.

Lucius still doesn't appear convinced, and he fishes around in his pockets, pulling out his coin purse. It's small, and he doesn't carry much, but he releases his mother's hand long enough to scrounge out a few galleons and toss them near the man's feet. The wizard glances up, a mixture of confusion, thankfulness, and horror written across his eyes as he realizes who has gifted him with such a marvelous donation. "Th-Thank you kindly, Mr. Malfoy..." he mutters, reaching for the coins.

The boy closes his eyes, already feeling his father's wandering glare set in the back of his head. He knows he'll pay for this. So, to save his family's honor, he sneers out, "Don't thank me. I simply do not wish to see your presence here, dirtying up the streets ever again. Do you understand?"

Happiness flickers out of the man's eyes, replaced with a sad sense of understanding. "Yes... of course..."

Turning on his heels, Lucius gathers up his strength and looks up to his father, who stares at him with a hardened expression. The family says not a word as they make their way down the cobblestone path -not until they make it to Winifred's hairdresser. As she enters, Abraxas holds Lucius back by a firm hand on the shoulder and whispers in his ear, "That was a bold choice, my son. You reek of compassion."

Lucius swallows hard and nods once. "I'm sorry, Sir."

"Walk with me."

The two Malfoys excuse themselves from the salon and start a path down the streets, facing the opposite direction of the beggar. Lucius is relieved. He doesn't want to go that way again, to face the shame he's placed on his family's honor. Quietly, he walks beside his father, arms folded behind his back, chin up and out. He's been bred to appear confident, even when he isn't. Engrained since birth
to encompass everything a wizard should stand for: poise, structure, well-groomed and well-versed in magic. And, above all else: Pureblooded. His father has made it very clear; it is a disgrace to be anything less than a Malfoy.

"What you did back there," says Abraxas, his feet clicking in opposing time to his cane, "Do you feel any pride in it? Giving that mudblood money?"

Lucius is torn in his feelings as he replies, "No, Sir. Not at all."

Abraxas nods. "Then why did you do it?"

"I don't know, Sir."

"I do." The elder Malfoy stops, mid-stride, and places his hand on his son's shoulder again. "It is because you are gentle. Like your mother. A trait that is both admirable and foolish."

The blond boy looks inquisitive as he turns his head towards his father. "How can something be both?"

"The same way a pine tree can thrive in both frigid and sweltering temperatures, I imagine. -But it is not the how that concerns me. A gentle heart means vulnerability. Do you understand that word, Lucius?"

"Yes."

"What does it mean?"

"It means one is weak."

"Are Malfoys weak?"

"No, Sir."

"Right. So you musn't be, either. -Weakness will get you hurt. Killed. Thrown under the dragon and without a broomstick. It is something no Malfoy must live with. You must not risk it all for some mudblood filth. They are beneath you. Beneath us. Do you understand?"

Lucius nods. He doesn't want to displease his father in any way. He won't flub it up again.

The years are kind to Lucius. He stands in an onyx robe ensemble, staring out at the vast amount of Pureblood socialites for the annual St. Mungo's charity function his parents hold every year. The Minister of Magic stands by Abraxas, laughing as if they're old chums. Winifred Malfoy twirls in her glitzy cocktail dress robes in front of a tittering group of women slightly younger than her. It's obvious to everyone in the room she enjoys the attention.

Finnick Nott approaches, a tumbler glass of aged scotch tucked in his left hand. He grins as he catches eyes with Lucius and says, "Hello, Malfoy. Pleasant evening we're having."

The blond snorts a laugh and trains his eyes across the room on a beautiful raven-haired witch who is chatting up Victor Crabbe. Though she's a year behind the fifth year Slytherins, Irma Abbott holds her own as Crabbe attempts to peek down her dress. She swats him on the arm and giggles. Lucius is unimpressed.

"Are you always this shy when it comes to women?" Nott joshes, nudging Lucius in the side. The Malfoy sends Finnick a withering stare worthy of his father, and his friend falls silent. Over the
years, a pecking order has been established, and Nott has been put in his rightful place - a few rungs
down below Lucius, who sits at the tippy top.

A Malfoy is never second best.

He stalks across the ballroom with poise that could only be inherited from his mother as he gathers
up two glasses of champagne (uncaring if they're underage) and walks directly up to the giggling pair.

"Irma," he says, giving a graceful bow, "You look ravishing this evening."

The black-haired beauty smiles genuinely and flashes a set of pearly white teeth. "Lucius." She
curtsies. "Your parents certainly know how to throw an affair worthy of the Queen."

"Mmm, yes. The Queen wishes she could receive an invitation," Lucius smirks, offering out one of
the glasses. Irma takes it with a blush on her cheeks, and Crabbe doesn't look impressed. "So glad
you could make it this evening."

"Are you?" she bats her eyelashes.

"Yes." He leans in further. "I am." He sips idly on his champagne for a moment, and so does she,
and when the tension has built, Lucius carefully takes both glasses and shoves them into Victor
Crabbe's pudgy hands. "Crabbe, why don't you run along and make yourself useful?"

Crabbe's face turns red, but he's no Sacred Twenty-Eight descendent, and he knows his place.
Lucius has seen to that. So, with a red, blotchy face he mutters under his breath and stalks away
towards the kitchens.

"Care to dance?" Lucius asks, offering out his hand.

And they do. He guides Irma around the dance floor like she is a sugar plum fairy. The room dulls in
comparison to their shy smiles and idle chatter. Lucius has never looked so at ease. One dance turns
into two, which turns into three, and soon the evening is dwindling down to the twilight hours. He
escorts her out to the gardens, and, tentatively, kisses her.

Irma smiles.

There is a tint to Lucius's cheeks.

A cough comes from the side.

"Miss Abbott," says Abraxas Malfoy, eyeing the two with a superior expression. "Your family is
looking for you. They wish to go home."

"Oh." Irma stands immediately. "Thank you, Mister Malfoy." She does a quick curtsy, glancing over
to Lucius. "Thank you… for the dance." She dares another soft smile. "See you in school?"

Lucius nods, and Irma disappears through the foliage, back to the Malfoy Manor.

Abraxas's smile drops instantly, and he gives his son a stern glare, though he says not a word.
Eventually, Lucius stands, tucking his hands behind his back. He begins to fidget with the cuticles of
his nail beds- a nervous habit he's picked up. He swallows hard, but keeps his cool.

"Something the matter, Sir?"

Abraxas blinks, turning his eyes back the way Irma retreated. "She's beneath you."
Lucius's eyebrows work together, and his lips purse. "Beneath me? She's a Pureblood. How can she be beneath me? She's-"

"-A muggle sympathizer." His father tsks. "At least, her father is. And we all know an apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

There's a spark in Lucius's eye; the fifteen year old untucks his arms, and his hands ball into fists. "She's wonderful." He steps forward. "Irma is beautiful, and intelligent-"

"And entirely beneath you," Abraxas insists again. All softness from his face retires, and in its place sits a cold, scrutinizing glower. "Why can't you see that, my son?"

"I do not see what's wrong with her."

"Then you look at the world through rose-colored lenses." The elder Malfoy's voice rises in volume as his eyes narrow. "You've done so well for yourself, Lucius! Do not muck it up by fraternising with lower classes!"

"Crabbe is lower class than us! You seem to have no problem with our friendship!"

"Crabbe is not a potential life partner for my son, either! Do not think for one second I do not see the way you follow her around like a stray puppy!"

The Malfoy men glare at each other, mirror images of one another but for the generation they stem from.

"You cannot force her out of my life. I love-" Smack!

Lucius stares down at his father's hand, reddened by its assault to the teen's face. There is a tension so thick between the two that if a pin were to drop, it would echo in the garden. Abraxas's eyes glimmer with reproach, and, as a Malfoy, he doesn't apologize. "You are never to speak to that girl again, Lucius. Do you understand? You are better than this. Better than her!" He places a rough hand on his son's shoulder and shakes him lightly. "I will not tolerate you to besmirch our family name with tainted blood. Even if she is a Sacred Twenty-Eight, she is just as bad as a Weasley." His voice lowers, and with a firm growl, he adds, "Never again. Do I make myself clear, Lucius?"

The blond boy's face grows solemn, and it's obvious he is torn. He doesn't want to disappoint his father again -but he simply cannot turn his back on the girl he loves -can he? He reaches up, rubbing his stinging cheek, and mulls it over. A Malfoy is not weak. A Malfoy doesn't allow anyone else to control him. Did he really follow Irma around like a puppy? His eyes search the ground, down to his dress shoes, and he wonders when he's become so weak. Weak enough for his father to strike him. -Was it her? Muggle sympathizer? Was she really? Disgusting. He nearly disgraced the family name, hadn't he?

"Yes, Sir," he whispers, drawing his gaze back up to his father's. "I understand."

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"I never thought I could feel bad for Lucius," said Harry, drawing his face out of the pensieve. Hermione followed suit, concern tracing the lines in her face.

"Irma Abbott..." She touched her finger to her chin. "Irma... why does that name sound so familiar?"
The streets were littered with muggles, and, to Draco's detestment, he had knocked elbows with at least twenty on his way through the city. Diggle convinced him, half way through, to confound a trolleybus driver into taking them to their destination free of charge. It was all very unnerving how comfortable Diggle seemed to be with being on the run. Of course, Diggle was in his home territory, wasn't he? Muggles, muggles, everywhere! When Draco was young, he'd been raised to seem them as hairless monkeys - but, as he stepped off the trolleybus and onto Charing Cross Road, he couldn't help but admire the craftsmanship of the muggle machinery. Impressive how they made things move without a drop of magic in their bones.

"We might need to change your appearance from here on," said Draco as his eyes caught the fountain a ways off - that fountain was where it all began, really. With Hermione. With the rest of his life. Cane. The Leaky sat across the street, rebuilt. It all seemed like such a distant memory. "Can hardly tell you left your mark here," he mused.

Diggle raised an eyebrow, looking out down the street. "I didn't do it to make a mark. I did it to make a point. To you." His eyes danced dangerously over to Draco's, and he grinned. Truly, this man could double for the Devil. "I think I made it very clear, don't you? Even if you did go and muck it up by disabling the Pandora Box."

"A lot of people died because of you," Draco replied coldly. "If I had any other choice at the moment, you'd still be rotting where you belong." They walked as they conversed, strolling in the direction of the Leaky.

"Yes," Diggle sing-songed, "but you do need me, so here we are. Isn't it grand? Cane and Malfoy, together again. Should we brand a name? I'm thinking 'Cane Industries, Malfoy Incorporated'."

"I will gladly hex your testicles if you don't shut the Hell up."

Diggle shrugged. "So, who should I be today? Aren't you worried that someone will spot you, oh so famous Auror-turned-criminal?"

A smirk crossed Draco's lips, and he relished in the uneasiness that settled over Diggle's face. "You leave that little bit to me. - Just figure out how you're going to look before we get to Diagon."

A wry smile crossed Diggle's lips, despite his previous unrest, and, as they separated to walk between a lamppost, he shifted. One moment, he was Gregory Diggle, brown hair, green eyes, strong jaw and plump lips - the next, he wore silver-white hair that rivaled Draco's in brightness, midnight black eyes with just a hint of brown around the pupils, and faint amount of scruff along his chin. "Miss me?"

Draco stared into the cold, calculating eyes of Bastian Cane. A horror rested in his stomach, and he instinctively reached for his wand, but caught himself last moment. No. He needed to remember that this was Diggle. Had been the entire time. He wasn't sure why this version sent a chill down his spine and the want to pisset himself. But he simply shrugged in response, as if seeing his once evil counterpart didn't make him want to vomit. "Does wanting to stab you in the eye count as missing you?"

Bastian Cane laughed. His voice was higher than Diggle's - colder, too. How was that possible? "Oh, how I've missed that glare. It just eats you up inside, doesn't it? This form?"

"Any form you take, Diggle, is disgusting. You're like a mosquito - you're no good to this world alive."
They stepped into a side alley near the Leaky Cauldron, and Draco pulled open a trash can to reveal two sets of normal, onyx robes. Cane - er, Diggle - looked impressed as he shrugged on the robes and wiggled his fingers through the sleeves. "Ahhh… you have connections."

"I do."

"Care to share your source?"

Draco smirked. "In good time."

"So," Cane rubbed his hands together, "On to Gringotts, then?"

"Patience, young padawan," said Daco.

Black eyes blinked back at him. "Did… did you just make a Star Wars reference?" Cane threw his arms around Draco and squeezed him. "I'm so proud of you."

"GET. OFF. ME. RIGHT. NOW!"

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"What is this?" Abraxas stares down at Lucius's left forearm, mouth agape. There is silence in the Parlor Room of the Malfoy Manor, but grown Lucius shows no hint of worry on his face. He steps forward, unabashed, excited in his exposure.

"I've taken The Dark Mark," Lucius explains, thrusting his arm out further for his father to see. His father steps back. "The Dark Lord -he sees muggles the same as we do. As worthless vermin beneath our feet." Lucius's eyebrows draw together. "You don't look pleased."

"Pleased." Abraxas repeats his words back to him. "The Dark Lord. Dark Mark." He scoffs, turning his back to his son. "And I suppose he offers this muggle-free world with but a small price -submission. Am I correct?"

Lucius stares down at his arm, confused. "I've been promised supremacy."

"You've been promised to be a lap-dog," Abraxas sneers. "Malfoys do not submit to anyone, Lucius. Have I taught you nothing?"

"But this is what we've been striving for -for centuries. Lord Voldemort offers peaceful pureblood supremacy! Imagine it, Father! A world where the muggles worship the ground we walk on! Imagine the possibilities!"

"You have always been a vain one," says his father quietly, leaning against his cane. His back stays turned, refusing to show an ounce of give. "You worry more about feeding your own ego and positions of power than your own family name."

"That isn't true!" Lucius shouts, sighing as he runs disgruntled fingers through his hair. "I've done this for us! For our family! The Malfoys will stand at the top of the ladder for centuries."

"Wrong." Abraxas finally snaps back around to face him, fire burning in his eyes. "You have been deceived. Do you not think this a fruitless affair? This, too, shall fail. And all while you bow your head to someone less worthy than us. Are you aware this wizard -this 'Lord Voldemort' is a half-blood? A half-blood, Lucius! You would follow blindly behind a mixed disgrace in the name of
"I've already taken the mark," Lucius replies coldly. "It is done."

"So be it." Abraxas shakes his head. "But you are no son of mine while you take up this worthless cause. You are no better than the rest of your Death Eater brethren."

"Father." There's desperation in Lucius's voice as he strains to reason. "I will make this family proud. You will see."

Abraxas stands in silence for quite a long time, inhaling deeply. He is struggling between his love for his son and the absolute discord he feels at Lucius's betrayal. "If there is nothing else…"

"There is." Lucius takes a step forward. "I… I would ask your permission to court Narcissa Black."

"Druella's girl?" Though there is still resentment on his face, Abraxas is intrigued. "Yes. Narcissa is a fine example of pureblood ideology." He gestures down to the Mark. "Is Miss Black aware?"

"Yes."

"And she is comfortable with the idea?"

"Hardly. But…" Lucius swallows a hard lump in his throat and folds his hands behind his back, picking at his cuticles again. "I care about her. She is… strong. Resilient. And, as you say, a perfect Pureblood woman, in every way."

Abraxas nods. "This relationship, indeed, has my approval. -The Black family will be a wonderful lineage to intertwine with ours. Perhaps… you haven't entirely ruined the Malfoy name."

The younger Malfoy gives a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Father."

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Hermione pulled herself first out of the pensieve, eyes widening. Harry came up shortly after, fixing his glasses as they dangled off the tip of his nose.

"Harry," Hermione looked serious. "Harry, I think I understand what Abraxas is doing."

"Well?" Harry gestured to Hermione when she didn't continue. "On with it! What'd you get out of that?"

"The Sacred Twenty-Eight." She waited, and when he didn't catch on, she sighed. "The foxes. I thought it meant the attackers were targeting the Sacred Twenty-Eight. But… what if it's the other way around? What if Abraxas is using the Sacred Twenty-Eight? To take out the Death Eaters. Think about it. Lucius nearly 'ruined' the family honor by associating with anyone of half-blood or who were muggleborn. -What if Abraxas is recruiting pureblood, Sacred Twenty-Eight descendents?"

Harry rubbed his chin, taking in every word. "But why? What's he accomplishing by taking out the Death Eaters now? So he wants to make a point with the descendents. Fine. But what's the point?"

"Honor." Hermione slammed her hand down on the table. "He's trying to restore his family's honor. We might be able to pinpoint who he's using through researching family trees. It would have to be pureblood descendents only. They might have different last names…"
Harry grinned. "Hermione. That's brilliant." He reached over and hugged her. "Brightest witch of our generation? More like the whole, damn planet!" He glanced over at the clock on the wall. "Shit. We're late."

"Late?" Hermione frowned. "Late for what?"

"I…" His green eyes searched over her face. "I have a lead I need to follow. -Come with me."

She frowned. "But what about our lead? Here? Shouldn't we start researching-?"

"Hermione. I'm the Lead Auror of the Auror Division. I have an entire department at my disposal. -It'll be quicker to give this off to the appropriate channels."

"But -I have the Malfoys…"

"Kingston will watch them." Harry reached over and took her hand. "I think it's time you found out."

"Found out? Found out what, Harry?"

He said not a word to her as he gathered up Lucius's memories and sifted them back in the vial before stowing them away in his robes. Quickly, he made his way out of the room, out into the Auror bullpen, and flagged down Kingston, Hermione on his heels. "Any luck finding Dean?"

"He was down in the cafeteria," said Kingston. "Jameson found him confounded -searching for pastries, if you can believe it."

Harry's eyes flickered over to the corner bench, and he sighed. "I knew it."

"Knew what?" asked Hermione.

"Where's Jameson now?" Harry asked, ignoring Hermione's question.

"The… um… the morgue, Sir."

"I see…" Harry clapped a hand on Kingston's shoulder. "Babysitting time." And then he pointed to the Malfoys, along with Astoria and Scorpius. "They stay here until I return, got it? They don't leave this room. Send food up. I don't care what it takes, but they stay here, understood?"

"Sir." Kingston nodded, bewildered. "But… but where are you going, Sir?"

"I'm also going to need you to send me a list of every pureblood descendent associated with the Sacred Twenty-Eight. By yesterday."

"Erm, yes, of course, but that will take time."

"Make it work." Harry waved a hand and ushered Hermione to follow him, calling back to Kingston, "While I'm gone, Kingston, you're in charge! Think you can handle that?"

It began to snow when Draco and Diggle, now Cane, entered The White Wyvern pub, located in the corner of Knockturn Alley. Draco shook out his robes to rid himself of snowflakes while Cane crooked his head, taking in the dimly lit bar.

"What are we doing here?"

"What's the matter, Digs? This place mirror too close to your icy, disgusting soul?"
"Do you see the tables? They've got three layers of dust. When was the last time someone cleaned in here? Azkaban is cleaner than this…"

Rolling his eyes, Draco guided Diggle to a back corner table and ordered them four pints of butterbeer, two shots of firewhiskey, and a round of chips.

"Planning on getting sloshed before you commit high treason?" sneered Cane, nursing his butterbeer as it arrived at the table by a frightening, elderly witch with a literal wart on her nose. As she walked away, he muttered, "I'm going to call her.. Wartz. That sound good to you?"

Draco ignored him, staring at the door.

Cane snapped his fingers. "Woohoo. Earth to Malfoy. You alright there? Dementors gone and sucked out your soul or something?" He glanced about the pub. "This place should be called the Black Dementor. There's no soul in this place…"

The bell above the door jingled as new guests entered, sweeping a gust of icy wind through the bar. Two figures in hoods stood in the doorway. One was taller with square shoulders. The other was wispy, feminine.

Draco's heart began to stammer wildly in his chest as the two approached the table, directly towards them. The smaller figure stopped half way across the establishment. She couldn't seem to move from her spot. With shaky limbs, Draco climbed out of his chair, nodded to the first cloaked figure, and swallowed a lump in his throat. Carefully, like a man approaching a timid dear, he stepped forward, palms out, forgetting how to breathe.

The feminine figure removed her hood, brown curls flying every which way as she stared in disbelief. Her chocolate eyes held tears, and with quivering arms, she reached out and grabbed him by the scruff of his robes, yanking him forward. "Draco?"

A thin smirk curled at the corners of Draco Malfoy's lips as he reached out and caressed Hermione's cheek. "Hey there, beautiful. Miss me?"

Chapter End Notes

EEEEEEEEE! (claps) Well? XD I can't wait to see your reactions.
~A.
Harry Potter approached the table; there came a tightening in his throat and jaw as he peered down at the infamous form of Bastian Cane. The last time he'd seen Diggle this way, he'd been forced to (painfully) walk on a broken leg and out himself, and the rest of the wizarding world, to the muggle population. There was no doubt in his mind whom sat in front of him -he could never forget this form in a million lifetimes.

"Diggle," he said quietly, taking a seat directly across from him. "Enjoying your freedom?"

Bastian Cane tensed in his chair, one hand poised on the back as if he were ready to run and bolt -but Harry removed his wand from its holster and rested it on the table, pointing it directly at Cane, and he settled back into his chair. Good. The bastard still recognized threats when he saw them. Still self-preserving. That was exactly what they needed out of him.

"You're Draco's source..." Cane's eye twitched, and he snatched up a shot of firewhiskey between them and downed it at once. His breath hitched as he hissed, the liquor burning down his throat, but it didn't stop him from grabbing up the second shot and taking it as well. When he finished, he wiped the sides of his mouth with his fingers and shook out his surprise. "I suppose it all makes sense, now. Why you weren't concerned that he attacked me." Those black eyes drifted behind Harry, out towards the center of the floor, and his eyes flickereded green for half a moment. "Hermione?"

SMACK.

Harry whipped his head around to see Hermione's aggravated glare and Malfoy fumble backwards a step, clutching his cheek.
“Ooh, this just got good,” said Cane, leaning back in his chair while tucking his hands behind his head. "Do you think they serve popcorn here?"

“I am really getting tired of people slapping me this week…” Draco grumbled, rubbing his sore cheek.

Hermione stared in wonder at the man before her, taking in his worn expression and sallow complexion. Had he slept at all since his departure from her? Not that it mattered much. She was so irate, she couldn't fathom taking pity on him at a time like this.

"Explain," she demanded. "Now."

"Love to -if you'd be so kind as to quit striking me first," Draco snapped. He wrapped his arms around her, despite her protests, and squeezed her tight to him. "Merlin, you smell nice."

"Smell…? Quit smelling me!" She smacked him on the arm and shoved away from him. "Do you have any idea what kind of torture you've put not only me through, but your entire family!?! You - you're supposed to be in Azkaban right now!" She swatted him again in the shoulder.

"OW!"

"You attacked Diggle!"

"You're welcome." He held up his hands, palms out, surrendering to her anger. "It was all part of the plan, Hermione. Please. If you'll just calm yourself, we could all sit down and-"

"Don't you dare tell me to calm myself, Draco Lucius Malfoy!"

"Now he's gone and done it," Cane tsked, "Doesn't he know you never tell a woman to calm down?"

"You're awfully calm, considering…” Harry noted.

"Considering? What? That this was all a ruse?"

"No." Harry smirked, crossing his arms. "Considering what Hermione's going to do to you once she realizes you're here."

"Shit." Cane swallowed. "I didn't think of that."

"Alright!" Draco threw his forearms up to keep from being swatted. "Alright! Quit hitting me. Merlin! I should call protective services on you!" And though she was half-way serious with her smacks, there was nothing better than knowing he was tangible. The smirk across his face only made her angrier, and she gave a frustrated huff, crossing her arms. He rolled his eyes and said, "You know, if you want someone to blame, why not blame Potter? I never lied to you. He's been giving you the run and go."

Hermione's gaze shifted over to Harry, who sat at the table, a mug of butterbeer nearly to his lips. He stopped, though, when he noticed her. With a heavy sigh, he sat his glass down, motioned to the chairs around him, and said, "Come on, Hermione. It's time we clue you in." As her head whipped around the bar, he added, "It's secure. Everyone in here is someone from the Ministry that I trust with my life. -I promise. Come on." He patted the chair next to him. "Sit down."
Her eyes came back to Draco, who smiled faintly at her with encouragement. "I know it's a lot to stomach," he said, "but it's alright. I promise."

With nowhere else to turn, and so many questions boiling her mind, Hermione stomped across the establishment and took a seat next to Harry at the table. That's when she noticed a third body seated across from them, and she raised an eyebrow. "Dean?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on. She's going to find out eventually. Show yourself. Your real self."

Dean cast Harry an anxious, fear-riddled expression. "She'll kill me."

"I'll do it myself if you don't," said Draco, taking a seat next to Dean. "Go on."

Inhaling through his nose, Dean closed his eyes -and then wasn't Dean at all. Seated across from her was a handsome looking gentleman with glossy brown hair, a strong jaw, and traditionally handsome features. His eyes opened, confirming her suspicions as emerald green gleamed back at her.

"Diggle." She moved on instinct, going for her wand, but Harry was quicker, diving his hands into her robes pockets and removing her dragon-heartstring bit of wood before tossing it over the table to Draco, who pocketed it with a smirk. Hermione was in far too strong a shock to say much anything else, so she stood up from the table and smacked Greg across the face with her palm -hard enough to leave a red mark. "Is that allowed?" she managed to sneer through her teeth, turning her attention to Harry.


"Owwwww...." Diggle muttered, rubbing his cheek.

Draco chortled, "Hurts, doesn't it?"


"Draco's been playing double-agent since that night in the Forbidden Forest," said Harry at once, pausing to let her soak in his words. Hermione wasn't sure how to process them, so she waited for him to continue, but Draco spoke up first.

"I wanted to tell you, Hermione," he said, "but my grandfather has eyes everywhere. I had to make it look as if we were having problems -for your sake."

"My sake?"

"Your life," he corrected, reaching out and snatching up her hand to rub his thumb over the back of her knuckles. His eyes drifted down to her engagement ring, pensive. "Abraxas wanted you dead. I made him a deal. If I offs our engagement, he'd leave you alone. I had to make it convincing. Otherwise, we would have let you in from the beginning."

"All this time..." Her world felt shifted on its axis as she trained her eyes on Harry. "You could have let me know!"

"You're not as good an actress as you think you are," Harry rebutted, and a cocky laugh came from Diggle on the other side of the table.

All eyes turned to him, and his laughter only amplified. "Well, Miss Granger, he has a point. You hardly fooled me, did you?"
"Why is he here?" All of her anger, her frustration, it all was taken out in the form of dagger eyes at Gregory Diggle. She pointed an accusing finger at him. "He's supposed to be rotting in Azkaban. _He killed Ron!_ How is he out? _Why?_" Each question made her voice amplify and shoot up an octave, until she sounded like a squeaking mouse instead of a furious witch.


Her pointing finger fell, and she stared around the table in disbelief. She shook her head. "No. No, we buried it. We said we'd never use it again."

"Hermione," Draco called her attention at the same time that Harry reached up and yanked her back down into her chair, "We don't have a choice. Abraxas has both Pandora Stones."

"Both?" She gasped, her interest peaked. "There's two?" She, suddenly, wasn't going to hex Harry into oblivion for pulling at her robes.

"They're a set. Passed down from father to son for generations in my family, as a mark of complete power over the enemies of the Malfoy name. One of them was with me - the other resides in Abraxas's cane." It was written all over Draco's face; he wanted so desperately to be forgiven for lying to her. "We're powerless against him without the Gray. It's why I went to Potter as soon as I could."

"When-?"

"Before the official interrogation, Malfoy pulled me aside and confessed to his agreement with Abraxas Malfoy."

"Agreement?" Hermione swallowed a hard lump of dread. "What… what did you agree to, Draco?"

Draco smirked sadly and glanced down to his hands. "I'm to bring Diggle in for his official execution, along with the Gray Magic and the resurrection stone." A bitter laugh escaped his throat.

"That's why you were going through my things…" She blinked at him, hurt. "You could have told me. All of you."

"No," Harry shook his head. "We couldn't. Not until you were off Abraxas's radar. If it makes you feel any better, Malfoy wanted to confess the whole thing to you the moment we formed a plan. But I made the call not to. If you want someone to blame… blame me."

Draco's face was hopeful of forgiveness, but she ignored it - for now.

"Harry…" Hermione was hurt. "You shouldn't have hidden something like this from me."

"Well, I'm telling you now. We need you in on this plan."

"What is the plan?"

"Malfoy does exactly what he's agreed to. He delivers Abraxas the stone, the asshat," he gestured to Diggle, "and the Gray Magic."

"I really hope you have a better plan than that," Diggle frowned.

"In order to protect my son, we don't have much of a choice," Draco said definitively, rapping his knuckles across the table. "I have to uphold my end of the bargain."

"Why?"
Hermione pieced it together quickly with horror. "Because he made an unbreakable vow. -Didn't you?"

Draco glanced away quickly and stood from the table. "Can I have a moment alone with my fiancée?"

"Yeah. There should be a secure room upstairs." Harry rifled through his pockets and fished out a key, which he tossed in the middle of the table. He then added, "No… lovey business, alright? Just talk?"

Hermione reached over, snatched up the key, and stood to follow Draco. "He'd be lucky if he gets a kiss from me ever again." She noted her fiancé's disheartened smirk, but he said nothing as he led them towards the back and up the old, rickety staircase which squeaked under their weight. There were three doors up at the top, but Draco seemed to know which one to stop at: the very last one. He thrust his hand out, and she handed him the key; both of them stepped through the door to greet the quaint sight of a four poster bed with cream colored sheets and hardly anything else. Draco took a seat at the edge of the bed, folding his hands between his knees, staring down at the floor.

"I'm sorry." His voice quivered. "I'm... I can't even begin to tell you how sorry I am. For lying to you. For keeping secrets." He ran a shaky hand through his hair and tossed himself back onto the bed to stare at the ceiling. "He didn't give me a choice, Hermione. It was either take the Unbreakable Vow or allow him to use Scorpius as a pawn in his game of Wizard's Chess. -He's got them all under Unbreakable Vows. Every single one of them."

"But... that means he has an end of the bargain to keep too, doesn't it?" She felt like one of the furniture pieces rather than a useful witch in the moment. "What exactly was your vow, Draco?" She shrugged off her over-robes and set them on a hook on the door. Then she, carefully, made her way to the bed and took a seat next to him. She suddenly felt very guilty for striking him. It was Harry to insist on keeping secrets, and it was all for Draco's safety. She would have fouled it all up, had she known. She could have cost him his life. His hand reached over and traced down her arm gently, and she turned her head to meet his gaze.

"My vow was simple: I'm to take Scorpius's place in his army of animagi and obey all orders given to me under my grandfather's command."

"You're not an animagus."

"But I could be, with the Gray Magic."

She shook her head helplessly, gaping at him. "You told me you'd never use it."

"I don't have a choice, Hermione." He shrugged, as if the idea was nothing more than common. "If I break this Vow, I die. If I die, I can't protect Scorpius, or you, and he gets him anyway. And it's not just Scorpius..." He looked thoroughly pained as he clasped his hand around her arm and tugged her down into his embrace. Hermione molded instinctively into the crook of his shoulder, inhaling the smell of fresh soap and pine. "My father had an affair. I... have a sister."

There was a moment of silence as Hermione stewed in the confession, thinking over Lucius's memories, and then turned her face towards him at once. "You have a sister?"

"I do." He smiled, though it was hollow.

"How old is she?"

"Eleven."
"What's her name?"

"Victoria…” He paused. "Victoria Crabbe."

It then clicked in Hermione's head where she'd heard the name Irma before. It was on the list of potential Death Eater families in danger: Irma Crabbe. Maiden name… Abbott.

"Your life could be a soap opera,” she noted. "We could call it 'All My Purebloods.'"

He chuckled, pulling her even tighter to him. "You know I have no clue what a soap opera is. Do people perform in showers or something?"

It was her turn to laugh, despite the obvious tension between them. Being here, in his arms again… there was nothing like it. "Something like that," she muttered, turning to nuzzle into his chest. Before she knew it, she was crying into his shirt. She fist the material with strength, sobbing. "I thought I'd lost you."

He traced his fingers up and down her arm with adoration. "Silly witch. Don't you understand my feelings for you by now?"

And just like that, all of her anger melted away, replaced by a sense of longing. It filled her heart with endless joy to know he still loved her, still cared about her, and still wanted to marry her. All of her doubts were stemmed off the assumption that Draco went corrupt -knowing he, in fact, hadn't, made her so giddy she could hardly contain herself. New tears came this time, but they were ones of relief. Underneath it all, he was still her Draco. The Auror who loved his son more than anything in the world. The man who learned to love despite his horrible upbringing. Abraxas hadn't cracked into his moral code. He was still him, deep down inside.

In a flurry of movement, Hermione climbed on top, straddled him, and sent her lips crashing down on his while Draco went wide eyed. He hadn't expected the adoring assault, and his arms flailed out across the bed as if he'd been attacked by a wild bear. Soon though, when he realized she was kissing him, his body relaxed, and he moved his hands up to the sides of her cheeks, deepening the kiss with a tender lick to the seam between her lips. Hermione's lips parted, allowing him access, and his tongue slid inside, caressing hers with precise talent. It felt like eternity since they'd kissed each other in such a way, as if their entire world was centered in this one moment. They'd become too comfortable, she soon realized, before the dangers. They always assumed they had more time, but now she felt as if there just wasn't enough time. If at any time Draco faulted or accidentally broke his vow, he'd die. Oh, God. She couldn't stomach the thought. He promised her he was too stubborn to die.

She peeled away from his lips long enough to mutter, "Lock the door."

Draco smirked up at her and snapped his fingers; he always did have a talent for wandless magic. The door lock turned and clicked, solidifying their privacy. And then Hermione found herself flipped over onto her back, Draco on top of her now, propping himself up by his hands as he bit on his lower lip. "Potter said no love making," he teased.

"When has that ever stopped us before?"

His eyes lit up in amusement. "Merlin, I love you." He dipped his face forward and began to trail brazen kisses down her neck, occasionally biting and nipping and suckling to lay claim to her.

Jameson cleared his throat as the Ministry coroner unlocked freezer 32 and pulled out the gurney inside. The body was covered by a thick, white sheet, leaving so much to the imagination. Theodore
wasn't accustomed to seeing the dead; the cases he'd worked on never called for body counts. Aside from his great-aunt Nelly's passing when he was nine, this would be the first corpse he would see up close and personal. He needed to do it, though. For Lindy. For her family.

He nodded once to the respected coroner, signifying he was ready. Gloved fingers reached over and pulled the sheet back, revealing Bolt's pale, inanimate face.

A lump of ice froze inside Jameson's intestines as he took in the sight of his once childhood schoolmate dead on the table. She'd been stripped to bare skin, and an embarrassed flush tinted his cheeks as he sterilized his hands with a spell and pulled the sheet all the way back. Her body was smaller than most Aurors - even Auror Granger's. Her blue lips looked pursed and cracked around the edges. She still wore yellow eyeshadow from the night before. Theodore felt a strong urge to owl his mother and tell her he loved her.

He observed her body with clinical interest, trying very hard not to take notice of her areolas or the space between her legs, instead focusing on her arrow wound. It was a small entrance wound. "May I see the arrow?" he asked.

"Do you have clearance?" asked the coroner, and Theo produced the appropriate paperwork. "I'll be right back. Evidence is in the next room." He stalked away, his mustache working back and forth as he muttered under his breath about Aurors and their meddling with his line of work.

Theodore waited patiently, allowing his eyes to travel down her form. The dip in her stark-still stomach made goosebumps flourish over his flesh. She'd never take another breath. It was so peculiar to think how a body was so delicate. One little hole in just the right spot, and life was snuffed out.

"I'm so sorry, Bolt," he said, grabbing up the coroner's initial file on her and sifting through the pages. So far, cause of death was confirmed, indeed, as an arrow wound. No known foreign substances found in her blood, so no poison. The arrow was spelled, however.

'Magic detected: spell unknown ATM'

At the bottom of the file rested Bolt's application into the Auror Division, her test results, and her profile. Theodore flipped through them, taking note of the small details; Bolt was excellent at charms, hexes, and most everything to do with a wand. She didn't excel as expected with wandless magic, however. Patronus was a butterfly - he almost laughed at the thought of a Dementor being frightened off by a flittering butterfly, but then checked himself when he remembered where he was. He looked back to the clipboard. Something felt… off. He didn't know exactly what, but he usually followed his gut instincts. -1.6 meters tall… red hair… wait. Red hair? He eyed over the blonde with interest. Did she dye it? Carefully, he reached over and checked the follicles of her hair, down to the roots. No dye job… perhaps a potion? How interesting. Blue eyes… yes, that seemed to be in order. Scar on left palm: fishing accident. He turned her hand over with interest.

Ding, ding, ding. He had a winner. No scar.

Well, wasn't that peculiar?

"Here's the arrow," said the coroner, offering out a stasis sealed arrow. Theodore took it and held the tip up to his eyeline.

"Blood?"

"Cleaned, I'm afraid. For the secondary testings."

"I see… Did you test the blood to see if it matched the victim's?"
The man puffed out his chest, and his mustache waved wildly. "Excuse me, Auror Jameson. The arrow was found in the victim's heart! I do not come into your Department and tell you how to do your job! Do not assume to know how to do mine!"

"My apologies," Jameson bowed his head respectively, then added, "But -did you, though?"

"No." He huffed, crossing his arms. "I did not see the point, seeing as how I already knew it belonged to the victim."

"Did it though?" Theodore's mind raced wildly as he held up the arrow and then, without warning, plunged it into the chest again. The coroner cried out, horrified, ranting and raving -that was, until Jameson removed the arrow to find -nothing. Nothing around the stasis charm. No blood. No tissue. Nothing. "Give me your scalpel."

"I will not!"

"I could arrest you for impeding an ongoing investigation, and lock you away for tampering with evidence." He motioned down to the arrow. "Your choice, coroner."

Defeated, the coroner turned as purple as a grape and Accio'd his scalpel, handing it to the Auror. Theodore was careful as he cut open the area surrounding the hole to Bolt's chest and narrowed his eyes at what he saw.

"Hmm…" Once again, to the coroner's horror, he watched Theodore tamper with the body as he cut even further down and thrust his hand inside. There was a sickening, squishy sound, followed by the crunching of bone. When he removed his hand, he brought with him a tiny black box. "How peculiar." His hand appeared clean as he removed it, and he gazed in wonder. "Very peculiar." A determined gleam in his eye, he pried open the box and gave a whistle. "Just what I thought."

"W-What is that?" The coroner asked, dumbfounded.

"This?" Theodore offered out the box, where a single finger rested inside on a bed of dirt. "This is all that's needed to create a golem, Coroner Verua. Contact Auror Potter immediately. Let him know: Auror Bolt is still, very much, alive."

Chapter End Notes

Drop those truth bombs, Theodore! Dramione Lemon and more answers next chapter! XD Please feel free to leave a review with your thoughts!

~A.
Interlude

Chapter Notes

Lemon alert! There is an explicit lemon in this next chapter. XD You've been warned...
~A.

Will you stay with me tonight?
You could be my cure
You're afraid
I'm a bad guy
All I do is hurt

So take away all my sin
Give me a sweet prayer on my lips
And take it off
Take me in
I wanna make love to you

Put your hands on my chest
I'll make you feel like you've been blessed
Put my words to the test
I wanna make love to you

"Cure" by Barcelona

Draco Malfoy nearly convinced himself he would never see Hermione again. All of the lies, the secrecy, the discord he set in their lives just days ago forced him to come to a startling realization: his life could end at any moment. If he betrayed his grandfather, Abraxas, in any way, he could activate the Unbreakable Vow and leave Scorpius without a father, Hermione without a fiancé, and his mother without a son. There were very few people in the world he cared about, but there were still those he didn't want to shatter. The silver lining to all of this was Abraxas never ordered him to keep away from Hermione. Only to simply break off his engagement.

And he did. Technically. His grandfather never said he had to mean it. That was the thing about being a Slytherin: finding the loopholes to nearly every situation. And Draco was good at that -just like his father.

So when he tumbled his future-wife over and pinned her down beneath him, he did it with a smile on his face. It was difficult to remember the world was falling apart outside when he was graced with such a beautiful, captivating creature in front of his face. He recalled seeing into her mind when they first started seeing each other in a different light -she thought him ethereal. He wished she could see herself now, curls around her head like a crown. If she could view herself through his eyes, she would see not just her physical form (which was a breathtaking sight indeed) but all the way down to her soul, which glistened like the stars above their bed back at the Manor. She was beautiful, inside
and out. Strong. Intelligent. All of the makings of a perfect woman, with the added bonus of magic. He only wished he could have seen her this way back in their youth, so he could have held back all the nasty, vile things he ever said to her. Her blood wasn't dirty. He saw that now. And he so very much wanted to take down his grandfather so he could marry this witch, solidifying his love for her.

Morbidly, between feather light kisses, he remembered the only reason he kissed her this very moment was because the man she was destined to be with had been brutally murdered. It left a bitter flavor in his mouth to which even Hermione's tongue couldn't will out. He wished he could absolve himself of the guilt he felt when thinking about his involvement, but it never went away. Diggle might have been the one to commit the crime, but Draco was an accessory. He created the damned Pandora Box that took Weasley's life. If he hadn't been so consumed in his vanity, Hermione would most likely be at home, curled up under a blanket next to Weasley with a thick book and a smile on her face.

And now Bolt was gone… and his father was dying… and his marriage fell apart… and his grandfather was Hell bent on destroying any happiness Draco had made for himself…

He withdrew his lips from hers and said, "Everywhere I go, I destroy."

She stared back at him with appreciation and shook her head. "Not from where I'm standing."

"You're not standing at all," he noted.

She rolled her eyes. "You know precisely what I mean. You're wonderful, Draco. Hush." Hermione's eyes trailed down to his lips, and she chewed her lower one. "Right now, I just want some alone time with my future husband. Is that alright with you?"

A faint smile cracked his brooding demeanour. "Whatever you want, love." He dipped his head and began to kiss along the pulse point in her neck while taking a free hand to start unbuttoning her robes. He caught her earlobe between his teeth and nibbled gingerly. "What do you want, Hermione? You want me to ride you? You want to be bent over and spanked? You want me to come in that mouth?" He grasped a covered breast and kneaded thoughtfully. "What do you want, your future husband to make you come?"

"Listen to that mouth," she chided breathlessly.

"You love this mouth. When kiss you, when I lick your scrumptious little quim. When I feed you dirty thoughts of how I want to take you. You love it all."

"Mmm… maybe a little." Her hand snaked between his legs, over his erection.

"A little?" He chuckled. "Oh, Hermione. There's nothing," he pressed his cock into her hand, "little about me."

She grinned excitedly, glancing around the room as her mind worked. Uh oh. That couldn't be good. Just what was she-? "Come with me." Unexpectedly, her hands shot up and shoved him off of her, rolling him onto the bed. He laughed, taken aback by the strength of her small form, and watched as she jumped off the bed, offering her hand out.

"Pray tell, where are we going, Miss Granger?" He let his hand slip into hers and allowed her to pull him up to stand. He towered over her but tried his very best not to dominate her -yet.

She coyly smiled, interlocking their fingers together as she pulled him towards the only other door connected to the room besides the exit. The bathroom. "You've been such a naughty boy." Her voice
was lighthearted. "Dirty, in fact. Maybe we should clean you up?"

His smirk paired with a raised eyebrow. "Azkaban is filthy. But I think this place alone," he glanced around the room, "Could rival that."

"So… a shower then?"

"What is it with us and water?"

Greg Diggle was a patient man. Yes, he was cunning, deceiving, a ruthless killer, and a criminal mastermind. But, above all else, he was a patient man. He'd pined for Hermione Granger for over ten years until he'd finally kissed her (though it had been coaxed with Gray Magic.) He'd convinced the world's most arrogant twat to work for him. He'd nearly gotten away with his plans for overthrowing the Ministry. So, the fact that Hermione was now up in a bedroom with Draco Malfoy should have been nothing but another game to play the patience game with.

Yet, Diggle, this time, was severely agitated.

They were to be married. *Married.*

But he didn't want to appear stricken by the event. Seated across from Harry James Potter, he allowed a relaxed smile to breach his Cane lips and licked the width of his lower lip contemplative, wondering just how he was going to get out of this one.

"So, Auror Potter," he said with a casual tone, "What's next on the agenda?"

"That's on a need-to-know basis," said Harry, sipping on his butterbeer much like the days in which the two would go out for a pint after work. "And you don't need to know."

Irritation shrouded Diggle's features, but he remained calm. This piss-poor example of an Auror thought he was better than everyone, didn't he? Just because he saved the bloody world on most occasions… "I figured I was part of this ragtag team of rebellious misfits?"

"You're the bait and the pawn," Harry smirked. "How does it feel to have the tables turned, for once?"

Greg snorted a laugh, glancing about the bar. "So… everyone here works for the Ministry? Let me take a guess. Polyjuice potion."

"Yup."

"And you're sure you can trust them?"

"Absolutely."

"Are you sure?"

Harry leaned forward in his chair. "Not everyone is a snake in the grass like yourself."

"No," Diggle replied, also leaning forward, "But if I were Abraxas Malfoy, I'd have moles all through the Ministry."

"You didn't."

"That's because I *was* the mole."
The raven-haired wizard sighed, pushing his glasses up his nose. "It's a shame you're a dark wizard, Greg. You could have done so much good for the world."

Greg wasn't entirely sure whether to be insulted or flattered. "All I'm saying is you best watch yourself. Trust no one. You think I'm nefarious? I'm a cake walk compared to Abraxas."

Harry kicked back in his chair then, his eyes contemplative. "How did you know? About Lucius Malfoy and his coveting another woman?"

Oh, had they figured it out? Truly? How exciting. "I spent a lot of time in Abraxas Malfoy's mind. Sifting through his memories. Making use of all the information he possessed. I needed to know everything I could about the Malfoy family if I were to bring their legacy crumbling down like an overbaked cookie."

"Because Lucius killed your father?"

"Why else does a man turn his back on his morality in order to receive justice?" There was a stirring in Greg's chest as if the entire world were just as bitter as the heartache in his heart. Maybe they all were. "Don't paint yourself to be a saint. We all know you're responsible for as many deaths as I am, even if they didn't come from your word."

Harry's eye twitched, but otherwise, he remained perfectly calm. "I never meant for any of them to die."

"My father died for you." There was a long pause. "He died protecting your legacy. He believed in the prophecy. He believed in you. And now you protect his murderer. Befriend that murderer's son!"

His hands slammed down on the table, and he realized he'd lost his settled persona. Greg inhaled deep, released his breath, and shape-shifted back into his own, original form. Morphing into someone was always so draining—not only physically, but emotionally as well. He hadn't met another metamorphagus personally to discuss if they felt the same exhausted pull he did every time he changed the mask. But those on the outside should never know. It would show weakness. And Diggle wasn't weak.

"About that." Harry cleared his throat. "Some recent developments have come about…"

"Oh? Have you finally locked that sod up in Azkaban to rot for the rest of his life with me? I assume that's where I'm going, should this little plan of yours not manage to get me killed."

Harry ignored him. "Lucius Malfoy isn't your father's murderer, Diggle."

"...Come again…?" Diggle tapped his ear, thoroughly convinced he'd heard wrong. But as far as he was aware, his hearing was still intact… "You lie."

"Lucius Malfoy offered up his memories for the night your father was attacked." Harry removed a small vial from his robes and held it between his fingers. "You cooperate with us; I'll let you see for yourself. But you try anything—and I mean anything that hinders this investigation, and I'll make sure to destroy this memory, and with it, all clues leading to your father's actual killer."

"So this is how you plan to control me?" Diggle sneered, still unbelieving. "Some fancy words and a vial full of memories I've seen no evidence of. Psh. As if."

"Hermione's seen them, too. Don't take my word for it, then. Ask her when she comes back down." Harry's green eyes twinkled with confidence. "You seem to prefer her word to everything else."

"Maybe I will."
Diggle reached over, picked up a mug of butterbeer and chugged, contemplating on whether he could honestly trust Potter's word, or if this was some elaborate hoax meant to goad him into helping. Well, one thing was for sure. The only person Greg Diggle cared more about than himself was Hermione Granger. He'd hear it from her mouth before he took the word of the Ministry's poster child.

As it were, Hermione Granger was extremely busy at the moment lathering Draco with a conjured exfoliating bath sponge. The scent of mint and green tea filled the shower, rising with the steam into both their nostrils. She worked gentle circles with the sponge while they fed each other erotic kisses. Draco's hand rested gently on her inner thigh, caressing, teasing, but never quite making it to the destination they both actually wanted; inside of Hermione's dripping folds. It was difficult to concentrate on scrubbing Draco clean, especially when his erection pressed against her stomach, but she continued, bringing the sponge around and running it over his chest.

"Such a dirty boy," she whispered, standing on her tiptoes to reach his ear. She felt him smirk against her cheek.

"Oh, Hermione. I'm not sure you have any idea," his index finger slipped, finally, between her pussy lips, splitting her folds, "just how dirty I am." Hermione squeezed the sponge absentmindedly, and soap suds drizzled down Draco's chest, abdomen, pelvis… her eyes followed them down to his cock, which stood ready at attention. He moved his finger expertly up her slit to her clit before he caressed it between two of his fingers. Oh, that felt so good. "I hear wet cleans dirty up rather nicely." He paused, flicking her clit lightly, before adding, "Turn around and bend over."

She always did enjoy this dominating side of him and took no more prompting as she spun around and braced her forearms against the shower wall, away from the shower head, spreading her legs to get an even stance as she bent forward. She expected him to drive into her without a second thought, but he simply palmed her pussy with his hand, rubbing thoughtfully over her sensitive button. She bit down on her lower lip and closed her eyes, unaware she still held the sponge until he commanded she give it to him. She extended her right arm back and felt him take it before she steadied herself again and waited. Warm, lathered suds caressed down her back as he began to run the sponge up and down her spine, all while maintaining his possessive hold between her legs. Hermione set her forehead on the wall, inhaling small, controlled breaths to keep herself quiet. There was such a major part of her that wanted to moan -but they forgot, in their discarding of clothes, to cast a silencing spell. So, begrudgingly, she gritted her teeth to muffle a purr while Draco inserted two fingers into her heated center. But when those luxurious, talented fingers curled, her hips bucked backward as a featherlight moan escaped her lips.

"Dra...co..." she gasped. He was gentle with her, scissoring his fingers to stretch her before turning them again in just the right spot. "Ooh... fuck..."

The hand with the sponge worked its way to her ass, squeezing soapy froth onto it. "Fuck, indeed," he muttered at the sight while still pumping his fingers inside her leisurely. "You've no idea how much I need this right now."

"I... ah...think I have -ohh... some idea."

He removed his fingers, then, and aligned himself, the head of his cock brushing over her opening. There was a thoughtful pause, drawing the moment out as he tossed the bath sponge to the floor and gripped her hip in ownership. "I'm going to fuck you so hard you see stars. That sound good to you, love?" And then he rammed into her with a sharp thrust of his hips, stretching her in the most beguiling way. Hermione had to bite back a scream, pinching her eyes closed as she arched on her tiptoes to keep balance. Her body hummed in glee, thankful to have him inside of her once again. No
matter how many times they did this, it was never enough. The connection they shared was something far more than love. There was friendship. There was a past. A present. And, hopefully, a future.

Draco retracted himself to the tip, groaning in abandon. She thought he might make quick work of his second thrust, but he surprised her when he took her inch by inch, slowly, drawing the moment out. This time, when his cock was fully buried inside of her, he pressed just a bit more, making her walls spread. Hermione whimpered, biting her lower lip, gasping for breath. He stayed inside of her, muttering, "That's it, Hermione. God, your pussy's so tight around me. I bet if I even moved in the slightest..." He did, barely moving his hips forward, and she nearly screamed in response, overwhelmed by the pain and pleasure. Draco's free hand darted up and muffled her mouth as he did it again. "Fuck, I love it when you scream." He moved slowly, powerfully, tugging her ass upwards with the hand on her hip while he began to rock his own forcefully, but tentatively. Hermione tried to hold her own against the sway of his body, but she became so caught up in the sensation that she stumbled forward, pressing her chest into the wall.

She laughed against Draco's hand -until he drove into her with snapping thrust, and the laugh turned into a moan. Her arms caged her face, and her nipples brushed against the tiled walls as she took each and every bit of his cock over and over again. Fuck, he was always so good at this. Giving over a piece of his soul through passionate, rough lovemaking. They were each other's Horcruxes, containing a part of the other. They were their own prophecy. Without him, she wouldn't be living - not really. And she didn't think he would be much better off if she were to disappear, either. Their love was resonating. And even though their friends barely began to understand it, to them, it was evident.

"Mmmh..." She gasped against his hand, feeling him usher her up to stand with a tug. He released her, momentarily, slipping out of her to spin her around into a gentle caress of his tongue against hers. His hands rubbed undemanding down her shoulders, her breasts, her stomach, until he, like many times in the past, hooked his fingers under her thigh and drew her leg up around his hip. Hermione reached down, still devouring his kiss like a drug, and lined up his cock to her entrance. "In me," she demanded, and he did. She wrapped her arms around his neck, hoisting herself up to pin her other leg around his hips. He did the rest, tucking his hand underneath her to keep her propped up, and together, they worked her up and down his shaft as hot water drenched their skin.

It was freeing, Hermione noted, never having to hide from him. She could demand more or less, could speak her mind, could take control and he only obliged happily. Together, they worked her hips into a steady rhythm, alternating between gyrations of her hips mixed with the lovely feeling of her pussy dropping onto his cock over and over.

After one particularly intense descent in which Hermione slammed herself down on him, Draco groaned, kissing into the crook of her neck, fingers digging harshly into her skin. "You keep that up," he teased, "and there's going to be consequences."

"Ha." She repeated the motion, this time earning a gargled moan. "You're not going to stop me. You like it too much." Hermione used her arms to brace on his shoulders and slide herself up to the tip, keeping him barely inside of her. "I don't think you could ever deny me."

He chuckled, staring up at her. The grey-blue of his eyes glistened with boyish excitement. "You're right. I could never." He licked a line from one end of her collarbone to the other, and she slowly relaxed her arms, thus impaling herself slowly with his cock. When she was settled back in place, they stared into each other eyes, happy to be together again. It was written all over the lines of their faces, in their tender movements as they worked their hips, in the brushing of lips and chests and stomachs against one another. From this angle, Draco's prick hit inside her in all the right spots, and
she knew if they kept it up, she would come just like this.

"Right there," she encouraged, running a hand up his neck into his white-blond tresses. "God, Draco. Don't stop. Yesss… Harder."

"You want it harder, love?"

"Please." She tugged at his hair, meeting his thrusts with impatient tenacity.

Draco was ever so willing to comply. Soon, their hips met in desperate slaps of skin. Hermione felt the lecherous tension between them unburdening itself into each thrust. She was so close to unraveling at the seams, at being his livewire.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

"Someone's here," Draco grumbled, prepared to slow down, but she yanked at his hair.

"Don't stop. Don't you dare stop."

"Heh. Yes, ma'am."

He pistoned in and out of her while her clit rubbed against his pelvis, adding that sweet feeling, building her up in her lower stomach. She was like lava about to erupt-

*Knock, knock.*

"Just… a little... more…"

"That's it, beautiful. Come for me. Ride my dick and come." Draco spouted off filthy things into her ear, sending a shimmer of heat over her skin. "After you come, I'm gonna fill you up so much you're going to be dripping my cum down your leg all evening. Is that what you want? You want my cum inside your little cunt?"

"Mmfuck… I do… I want it so bad…"

"All you have to do is come all over my cock, sweetheart. I 'd like you dripping for me. I want-"

"-Yes!" Hermione's walls clenched, and she cried out, tucking her face into his shoulder to douse the sound of her mewling. A tingle of magic jolted up her spine, blending in with her euphoric, Draco-induced high. Her whimpers and sighs of elation set off a chain reaction within the blond, and Draco's cock twitched inside of her as promised, unloading his warm cum into her.

*Knock knock knock knock.*

"Piss off, Potter!"

Hermione stifled a laugh in Draco's shoulder.

A disgruntled Harry answered from the other side of the door. "Just... get out here… and for Merlin's sake, please -the next time you two decide to disobey my command, put a silencing spell on the room!" And then, "I think I'm going to be sick…"

Chapter End Notes
Yay, smut! Moving on with the plot next chapter. More reveals. More Side character arch, along with our new Team Trio. Very excited about the next couple of chapters. But we all know it—we were overdue for some Dramione lemon. XD

~A.
Hermione Granger was prepared for most things in life. Preparation was always her key to winning any battle. But she wasn't prepared for a set of green eyes -not belonging to Harry - as she stepped out of the bathroom behind Draco. It wasn't Harry who flushed her with an embarrassed heat, nor was it he who made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

"So that's what you sound like when you're…" Diggle let his voice trail off, arms crossed over chest and a jealous smile written across his face.

"Thoroughly satisfied?" She quipped back, doing her best to counter the horrifying tumble her stomach took as it dropped to the floor. She could see Draco's hackled smirk play on his lips as he tucked an arm around her waist and kissed her on the cheek.

"Should I brew you a pepper-up potion, Diggle? You look a bit green," Draco taunted.

"I really don't think this is the time," Harry mumbled, out of his element. Hermione agreed with him. There were few things she wanted to discuss, and her sex life with the overly obsessive man who killed her husband in cold blood wasn't one of them. "We have bigger fish to fry."

"Right. The Gray Magic." Diggle looked to Draco as if he were debating which way he wanted to flay him alive. Perhaps he was. "Potter wants to give us the plan. Think you two could stop fornicating as a way of stitching together your failed communications long enough to hear him out?"
When Theodore Jameson arrived back at the Auror Division, he was too distracted by his newest
discovery with the investigation to notice that someone small, fast, and entirely too blond had latched
onto his legs as he leaned against the wall next to the lift and sighed. That was, until Scorpius Malfoy
stepped onto Theo's boots in order to be another inch higher next to Theodore.

"Scorpius!" he exclaimed, startled. "Where is your mother?"

"She maaaaad…" Scorpius grinned up at the Auror. "Gampa in trouble."

"Oh, Circe…"

Theodore pried the toddler off of his leg, tucked him under his arm, and carried him like lost luggage
through the double doors leading into the Auror bullpen to find the entire office standing idly by,
watching as Astoria Greengrass shot sparks of silver out of her fingertips while shouting, aggrivated,
at Lucius Malfoy.

"-on all that his whole and holy, I will curse you right here and now, Lucius! Take it back!"

Lucius smirked down at the haughty witch, leaning on his walking cane. "Miss Greengrass, do you
dare threaten me in front of all these upstanding officers of the law?"

"I don't care how many Aurors are present!"

Narcissa Malfoy stood between the two, an arm extended out towards each of the near-duelers, a
pursed expression on her lips. "Miss Greengrass. Calm yourself."

"Oh -go suck a toad, Narcissa!"

Theodore nearly wondered how one would go about sucking on a toad when he realized it was
simply a form of expression. He approached Astoria, Scorpius in tow, and held up a hand of peace
as she glared in his direction. "Astoria," he said cautiously, "Is everything alright?"

"I won't be in his presence a moment longer!" She shouted, more sparks spouting out of her finger as
she pointed an accusing finger at the arrogant Malfoy. Scorpius ooh'd and aww'd at the 'pretties'. "I
won't, Theo! I can't!"

"Alright." Theodore looked at the overwhelmed Narcissa Malfoy, exchanging unspoken words of
understanding. He passed off Scorpius to Narcissa, who cradled the toddler in her arms, even as he
protested that he wanted to watch 'Mummy make more pretties,' and carried him off in the direction
of the water fountain. Theodore looked around to the many Aurors hiding behind their desks in the
pen, but not one of them dared to speak up against the daunting witch (perhaps, some of them were
even rooting for her to win). He supposed he would need to be the voice of reason. "Astoria… come
with me." He offered out his hand, and, after swiping some tears from her cheeks, she set her hand in
his and allowed him to lead her away from the center of the fight and to his corner office desk in the
very back, near Auror Potter's. With the witch compromised, Auror Kingston was able to step in and
escort Lucius to the opposite side of the room, though he did so with a sneer on his face, uncomfortable with the idea of accommodating to the former Death Eater.

With Astoria seated in his swivel chair, Theodore propped his hips against his desk and crossed his
arms, adding an even expression to his nearly emotionless face. They remained there, quiet, for some
time, until, finally, Astoria sighed and gave in, which is exactly what Theodore wanted her to do. He
remembered his interrogation training; the best way to crack and egg was with patience.

"I don't know what came over me," she sighed, her hands shaking. She reached for a tissue from the
box on Theodore's desk, dabbed her eyes, blew her nose, and sniffled. "I simply cannot fathom that a
man like that raised a man like Draco."

Theodore, for the most part, was an extremely well-adjusted individual. He didn't get jealous easily, nor angry, and there were very few things that shook him. However, seeing Astoria Greengrass cry was one of them. "What did he say to you?"

"It wasn't what he said to me." She scowled. "It's what he said in front of Scorpius." Her hands shook as she reached for another tissue. "He said Draco's better off in Azkaban."

"How did you-?"

"After you left, Kingston informed the family." She narrowed her eyes. "Judging by your reaction, you disagree with his methods."

Theodore cleared his throat. "I meant to tell you myself, is all. Honestly, Astoria."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I had some matters to clear up."

"Matters that were more important than telling me the truth about my ex-husband's whereabouts?"

"Yes."

Astoria crossed her arms, "What were they?"

"Astoria, you know I cannot discuss these things with you," Theodore said as-a-matter-of-factly, but judging by her face, she didn't share the sentiment. "I am terribly sorry."

"Hmph." She looked elsewhere, to his organized quill collection, possibly admiring the attention to details he used when arranging them from shortest to longest. Or, maybe, she simply wished to keep her gaze off of him. As difficult as it was to admit, Theodore wasn't the best reader of faces. Give him a crime scene any day of the week, and he could read it like an open book. Faces. Expressions. These were foreign to him. "Your job truly does come before all else, doesn't it?"

"I swore an oath to the Ministry."

Astoria rolled her eyes. "Just another Auror for the chopping block."

"Astoria, I am truly sorry that Lucius Malfoy said such awful things about Auror Malfoy. And to say it in front of Scorpius is intolerable. If you'd like, I would have a word with-"

"Oh, don't bother, Theodore!" She shot up out of the chair and uncrossed her arms, looking him square in the eye. "I know we've only known each other for a short time, but... I thought..." She shook her head as if to rattle her brain for words. "I thought there was a deeper connection between us."

A flush formed over Theodore's cheeks, and that same heat from earlier this morning radiated off his skin like sunbeams. He shimmied his lean off the desk and stepped up to her, tilting his head. "I'm not sure what you'd like me to say. My job requirements are those of utmost secrecy on multiple occasions. That I do not share these details with you in no way implies I do not hold a candle for you, Miss Greengrass." It was more of a confession than Theodore had ever given, and he felt his eyebrows draw upwards in confusion at his candidness. Even curiouser, still, he reached down and grasped her hand in his, continuing, "I will have a word with Lucius on Auror Malfoy's behalf, and I will make it clear to him he is to keep silent unless required from the Ministry."
The corners of her lips turned upwards, and Astoria let out an airy laugh. "You are full of surprises, Auror Jameson."

Someone coughed next to the pair, startle them both. Theodore shot his eyes over in the direction of the sound, finding Auror Dean Thomas standing a few feet away, his bookbag curled under his arm and a smirk on his face. "Am I interrupting something?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I'm off duty for the day, so I wanted to let you know when they release all of us, I'll watch over the Malfoys this evening. Harry wrote it in a few minutes ago."

The news couldn't have been more relieving to the overwhelmed Auror, and he nodded his head appreciatively. Auror Thomas gave a lopsided smile and side swept away, giving the two privacy. Theodore attempted his best smile, despite his apparent greenness on the action, and said, "See, Astoria? Silver linings to everything." He glanced down at their hands, clasped in one another's, when he noticed something peculiar. The veins around Astoria's covered wrists were purple where they peeked through the sleeve. Astoria's eyes followed his, and she jerked her hand away immediately, pulling the sleeve down further.

"Astoria?"

"It's nothing, Theodore." She smiled sweetly. "You're right. You should... talk to Lucius. I'm unsure how much use I could be without my level head."

Theodore lowered his voice. "Astoria, are you sick?"

"Of course not. Don't be preposterous." She patted his chest. "Do you think you might be able to find me some food? I'm famished."

Like Luna approaching a cupboard when she thought there might be a cornish pixie inside (though there usually wasn't), Dean strolled up to Narcissa Malfoy, set his briefcase down on the floor, and crossed his arms. "I'm gone for one day, and look how the division falls apart."

Narcissa pursed her lips, bobbing her grandson up and down on her knee. "Auror Thomas," she said crisply, "Now is not the time for jokes."

"Is it ever?" he asked, motioning to the empty spot on the bench next to her. "May I?"

"If you must."

Dean took his place next to her, smiling down at the younger version of Draco. "Allo, Scorp. Good afternoon?"

"Mummy make pretties!" Scorp shouted happily, hopping off his grandmother's knee. "You see, Unca Dean?"

"Missed it, I'm afraid." He turned his attentions to Narcissa. "Harry's assigned me back to you for the evening."

"As much as I loathe to admit it, I think it's for the best," she replied, folding her hands together on her lap. "My husband always seems to know just what to say to turn everyone against us."

"Draco picked up that particular set of skills from Lucius, I presume?"

"Unfortunately." She eyed her husband, who sat several benches away, watching the room as if he owned the entire Ministry of Magic. "He wasn't always this way. Lucius, I mean. He used to be a
gentle soul."

Dean couldn't help it - he laughed. Narcissa sent him a withering glare, and he tried explaining between chuckles, "I'm sorry, Missus Malfoy. It's just a bit out of my grasp to imagine it."

"Draco has much of his father in him - more than I care to admit," she said quietly. "But it isn't the side you see, Auror Thomas. It's a side buried deep down, under layers of refined guilt gifted to him by his own father, Abraxas." Her fingers clenched, forming her hands into tiny, white knuckled balls. "To know my son rots in a prison cell right now because of his temper… it only makes me believe him more to be like Abraxas than Lucius."

"Maybe he isn't any of them," Dean offered, attempting to keep the peace. "Maybe Draco is just Draco. I know him and Hermione are going through some things… if he attacked Diggle, like the report states, there must have been a reason."

"To use the Cruciatius curse…"

"Your husband's done far worse and gotten out of it," he pointed out.

Narcissa narrowed her eyes. "War does terrible things to a man. This is a time of peace. That he would throw away all of his hard work over some petty reason..."

Dean opened his mouth to reply, but the sight of Auror Jameson coming up on Lucius Malfoy with a blazing speed in his stride made him forget himself. He stood from his spot, sensing an approaching storm, and walked over to the two just before Jameson began.

"Mister Malfoy, I would like a word with you."

Lucius didn't acknowledge his presence, so Jameson continued.

"I would advise you to hold your tongue around Scorpius in regards to his father." There was a pause. "Or at all, if we're being frank with each other."

That got the Malfoy's attention. Lucius's steely eyes drifted up at Jameson, and a foreboding smirk perched across his lips. "Do not speak to me as if we are equals."

A tinge of red flared across Jameson's cheeks. "You're correct on that subject. I dare say, for someone raised with such a cultural upbringing, you haven't shown a bit of class since stepping back into your family's life."

"Whoa, Theodore," Dean interjected, sensing the tensing magic in the air, "Let's all just settle down and-
"

"That witch over there is not my family," Lucius sneered in reference to Astoria.

"But she is the mother to your grandchild. And as such you will treat her with the proper respect in her presence, or-"

"Or what, Auror Jameson?" The elder Malfoy smirked. "Will you attack a defenseless, dying man? What happened to those upstanding vows you took as an Auror?"

Theodore narrowed his eyes and leaned forward. "I am never one to threaten, Mister Malfoy. I find it beneath me. However, I cannot promise the same for Astoria's temperament the next time you see fit to lash out at her. I might find myself quite busy and unable to be a viable witness to your destruction." He straightened his back, smoothed out his blazer, and smiled warmly to Dean, who
never realized, until that moment, just how daunting Theodore Jameson could actually be. "Auror Thomas, might I pick your brain for a moment? Some recent developments leave me baffled…"

"Er… yeah." Dean nodded, following Jameson away from the befuddled looking Malfoy.

"Right." Theodore crossed his arms when they were earshot from others. "May I see your wand, Auror Thomas?"

"Bit forward, don't you think? Haven't even asked me to dinner…" Dean quipped, taking out his wand from its holster to present. Auror Jameson didn't bat an eyelash at his joke, instead turning Dean's wand over in his hands, observing it for any imperfections. Seemingly satisfied, he handed the wand back.

"Good. You're you."

"Yeah? I'm me? What's all this about, Jameson?"

"Are you still dating Miss Lovegood at the Quibbler?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"Do you think she could do some digging for us?"

"Digging? Into what?"

"Into Lindy Bolt."

"Auror Bolt? The late Auror Bolt?"

Theodore nodded.

"Er… yeah. I suppose. But why?"

He watched Jameson dig around in his pockets and produce a small, black box. Dean plucked it from his hands, opened it, and nearly vomited on sight.

"Ah, Merlin's ballsack! Why are you carrying around-"

"Shhh-"

"-a finger," Dean said, a bit quieter, "in a box?"

Jameson took the box back, shut it, and stowed it away back inside his pocket once more. "Because I'm quite sure this finger belongs to Bolt in order to control the golem that resides in the morgue downstairs."

Dean nearly choked on his own spit as he gasped and whispered, "She's alive? Does Harry know?"

"I've had the coroner write to him. But until I received orders back, I do not know who can be trusted in the department, aside from you and Kingston. We need to keep this between us, Dean. Understood?"

Dean nodded, producing his cell phone.

"What are you doing?"
"Hmm? Oh. I'm texting Harry. Owls take way too long, you know." He held up the phone between them, showing the other Auror his message before clicking 'send'. "Right. What do you need on Bolt?"

Harry's cellphone vibrated in the center of the table, startling those in attendance gathered around it, Draco most of all. Hermione would have laughed, except that she noticed Greg Diggle staring coldly in her direction, which made the humor of it all fade out like a dimly lit candle. Things had been awkward since arriving out of the bathroom.

"So that's the plan," Harry said, ignoring his phone for the time being. "Everyone set? Any questions?"

"Yes. I have one," Draco spoke, a smirk set on his lips as he cast his eyes on Greg. "How badly do you want to slug me across the face right now?"

"Draco," Hermione scolded. Harry rolled his eyes.

"That'd be too good for you," Diggle replied, leaning forward.

"Remind me again why we're throwing in our chips with the asshat?"

"Because," Diggle grinned, "this asshat is the only way you're getting your hands on that oh-so-beautiful Gray. And we both know, without it, you'll come up short in some departments."

"You'd know all about that, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, for the love of house elves," Hermione sighed, pushing up out of her chair. "Let's get to work. We haven't much time, and if we wait for these two to stop comparing sizes, Draco will be dead by morning."

"Fine by me," Diggle smirked.

"Well, it's not fine by me!" Hermione shouted, startling the three men. "Now kindly shut your traps, tuck in your bits, and let's get to work!" She stormed off, towards the door. When she arrived there, she turned around on her heels, snapped her fingers, and shook the table. "Today!"

"She's frightening when she's angry," Draco muttered.

"But that's why we love her," said Harry, picking up the cell phone off the table. He read over his text, furrowed his brow, and muttered, "You've got to be kidding me."

"What is it, Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked around the table, over to Hermione, and then said, "Nothing. It can wait until after we're done." He looked shaken as he, too, stood from the table, tucking his phone back into his pocket. "Right. Who's ready to steal back some Gray Magic?"

Chapter End Notes

Hope I didn't miss anyone! Feel free to drop me a review! And if you haven't done it already, would you please favorite HTTYA? It would mean so much to me!
~See you soon, dearies, with action, adventure, and Dramione.
And devious-Diggle.
A.
So, this weekend was Hella busy. Planning Halloween party with my bestie, waymay and I have been working on my wedding stuff (yes, I'm married, but we're finally getting to have a real wedding), and then my son, husband and I went and did some pumpkin carving! Batman, Flash, and Green Arrow logos in one pumpkin, a dinosaur in the other. Very proud. lol

HTTYA has been nominated for a Dramione award! Please read the A/N at the end of the chapter to find out how you can help HTTYA win!

Special thank you to waymay for the proofing!

If you'd like to follow my original works, you're more than welcome to look me up on facebook. I have a writer's page under the name A.E. Taylor. Feel free to look me up and like my page! I'm currently working on a horror fic titled: A Dandy World.

Much love,
A.

You know that he trusts you and I know that he loves you
But somehow you convinced me again
My foundation rumbles and all my morals crumble
My father's warnings run through my head

Your heart's a vine that I've bled trying to climb
Yeah, you're making a ruin of me
Try to survive, keep my spirit alive
But like a knife in the woods
Yeah, you hunt down the good in me

"The Good In Me" by Jon Bellion
This really, to me, describes how Hermione is Diggle's Kryptonite.
HIGHLY recommend listening to this song.

The trick wasn't getting inside of Gringotts. If anything, that was the easy part. There were only five people authorized to know the whereabouts of the Gray Magic: Harry, Draco, Hermione, Dean and Minister of Magic himself, Kingsley Shacklebolt. It had been Hermione's idea, two years ago, to seal it away inside of Greg Diggle's vault. No, the real work would come from Greg Diggle himself, for only he could unseal his vault and grant them access.

"Remind me, again, why I have to wear this ridiculous disguise?" Draco grumbled as he ran his fingers down the adhesive goatee over his perfectly sculpted face. He glanced in a nearby window as they marched down the road in the direction of Gringotts, catching the reflection of his once blond
hair, now a faded brown thanks to some 'temporary hair dye spray' Hermione insisted on. "Why couldn't I just wave my wand and give myself a new look?"

"Because," said his fiancée, "Someone got himself thrown in Azkaban and will be found out if he goes around looking like himself."

"Also," added Potter, "Gringotts has wards up for any disguising charms."

"Come on, Draco," sniggered Diggle, a skip in his step as he marched down the road disguised as Dean Thomas, "where's your adventurous spirit? Being someone else is fun."

"Not all of us get our jollies off on being someone else," Draco replied. "Especially when one could look as amazing as my usual self."

"Being overly pale isn't a quality I'd deem as attractive..." muttered Potter.

"Says the oaf who married a pale redhead -do you listen to yourself sometimes, Potter? Really."

"We should go over the plan once more," said Hermione, pausing as they stood across the street from their destination.

"Hermione. If we go over the plan anymore, I'm going to start making it my mantra." Potter pushed his glasses up his nose.

"I just don't want to run the risk of anyone figuring out what we're doing." She straightened her shoulders, brushed down her robes, and fluffed out her curls. "Frankly, this idiotic idea to break you-know-who out behind the Minister's back is preposterous..."

"I don't think I'm near all that bad to be referred to as you-know-who," said Diggle cheerfully.

Potter scratched at the side of his cheek, irritated. "Malfoy was being watched, Mione. He needed to appear to have a plan of his own to break you-know-who out. One that didn't involve me going to the Minister of Magic and asking for temporary guardianship of the world's most dangerous criminal."

"Once again, it's not nearly as flattering as you think to be referred to as you-know-who..."

Dean-Diggle stepped up between Harry and Hermione. Draco didn't approve of it one bit, and he wedged himself between his fiancée and her stalker. "How about we give you a code name? Does 'The Twat' work for you?"

"I second that," replied Hermione.

"Here, here," said Harry.

"I'm surrounded by comedians," Diggle sneered sarcastically.

"Ready?"

The four of them crossed the streets and prepared themselves for what was to come.

Gringotts was bustling this time of day Hermione noted as they approached one of the goblin tellers, who was busy scribbling away on a bit of parchment at his desk. He looked as if he really couldn't be bothered as he grabbed up a gold stamp and slammed it down on the parchment before waving his hand and spelling it to a pile behind him. Hermione's heart gave a bit of a start when the goblin...
turned its beady eyes on Harry and company, remembering her fateful adventure of pretending to be Bellatrix Lestrange all those years ago. She felt the same nervous edge as the goblin placed one hand, and then the other, over the edge of his desk and peered down at the group.

"Auror Potter," he said, a sharp edge to his voice. He stroked down his beard with his knobby fingers. "To what can I help you with today?"

"Must be nice being such a celebrity," muttered Diggle, and Hermione dug her heel into his toes, causing him to wince.

"Auror business," Harry replied casually, presenting a key from his pocket. "My associates and I are doing follow up on a case, and we have reason to believe some evidence might be resting in this vault here."

The goblin reached down from his overly-sized desk, plucked the key from Harry's hand, and observed it thoroughly. "I see." He looked over the group cautiously. "Very well. Come with me." He disappeared from view for a moment before walking around his desk and wobbling past them, towards the back doors. "Quickly, now!" he called. "I don't have all day."

"Oh, I fear we'll never catch up," Draco sneered under his breath, "He's so quick, you know."

"Draco," Hermione scolded barely above a whisper, and he met her gaze with a flirtatious wink. She rolled her eyes, thinking how a beard and brown hair would never suit him in real life, and followed behind Harry. She stopped, when she realized Diggle walked behind her, turned to him, and added, "You first." It was far too unnerving to have him behind her, possibly ogling her as she walked. Diggle (as Dean) gave a perfect imitation of Dean's aloof grins and stepped in front of her, taking point behind Harry. Draco reached over, squeezing her hand lightly, and gestured her forward, following promptly behind her.

They all climbed into a cart and watched on as the goblin, who now identified himself as Tonklin, steer the cart down the tracks and descended into the underground tunnels of Gringotts.

"After this, I say we grab a bite to eat. I'm thinking... Italian?"

"Dean?" Draco smirked. "Do shut up."

"Aww, that's no way to talk to your best friend."

"He's not my -you're not my best friend."

"Funny. That's not what I say."

"How would you know what you say?" There was a pause. "Wait, does... do you visit yourself?"

Hermione exchanged wary glances with Draco as it became apparent: Dean still visited Diggle in Azkaban. She, also, noticed Harry didn't bat an eyelash, which gave her the sneaking suspicion he knew. Anger bubbled up inside of her not only towards Dean but also her best friend. How dare they allow this psychopath any version of comfort? As if he could sense Hermione's heated glare, Harry rubbed the back of his head thoughtfully like it might burn. Good. They would speak about it later.

In the meantime, she kept her eyes peeled on the numbers they wheeled past, keeping careful eyes out for one section in particular. As they approached a nearby curvature in the tracks, she prepared herself. "I feel a bit faint..."

"Auror Granger?" Draco said, right on cue.
"Could we pull the cart over a moment?" she called up, and as she pretended to feign a cough, she slipped a puking pasty (courtesy of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes) from her robes and took a bite. Nausea overtook her immediately, and she, on cue, vomited all over the back of Tonklin's dapper three piece robes. The cart came to a screeching halt as the goblin cried out in shock and pulled the brake lever. With eyes the size of small saucers, Tonklin furrowed his brows together and stared back at Hermione formidably.

"I'm so sorry!" she gasped, "Oh, dear me! Allow me to clean you up!"

It was apparent by Tonklin's withering gaze; he wished very much she were not an Auror so he could tell her off. He threw up one entirely too long finger and shook his head. "No! Thank you." He sounded anything but thankful. "We should continue."

Hermione pretended as if she were about to blow chunks again, and Draco, squeamishly, put a hand on her shoulder. "Auror Granger, perhaps you need a moment to collect yourself?"

"I think that's best," she nodded appreciatively, looking to her disguised fiancè. They shared a real smile which had 'Dean' shifting uncomfortably.

"I'll stay behind with her," he offered.

"Thank you, Auror Thomas," she replied.

"Would that be alright, Tonklin?" Harry asked cordially, and the goblin narrowed his beady eyes around at the wizards. Hermione pretended to hold back another bout of vomit. He nodded once while he snapped his fingers, and the cart door flung open. It was written all over Draco's face; the idea of Hermione being alone with Greg Diggle made him want to chuck Diggle over the cart and into the abyss below. She gave his hand a gentle squeeze, pleading with her eyes to him not to do anything stupid, and climbed out first, followed closely behind by 'Dean.'

"You sure you'll be alright?" asked Draco.

Hermione nodded. "I'm perfectly capable of handling myself."

"Except when it comes to your stomach," muttered Tonklin. The wizards decided not to comment on it and push their luck.

"We'll be back in two shakes," Harry said as Tonklin shut the cart while eyeing Hermione and 'Dean' curiously. The cart wheeled on with a yank of a lever, leaving the two behind. When the cart was out of sight, Diggle released an entertained sigh of relief and gave way to his true form, all green eyes and boyishly brown tresses.

"Alone at last," he smirked.

Hermione withdrew her wand at once and pointed it directly under Diggle's chin. "Let me make one thing perfectly clear, Diggle. The only reason I haven't hexed your bits into oblivion is because we happen to need you alive to keep Draco's vow to his grandfather. When that vow has been honored, you and I will be exchanging words, and they will not be pleasant. Do you understand?"

The smirk didn't waver. "Of course, Miss Granger. I would expect nothing less of you."

She paused for half a moment, wondering what exactly was going through his mind. "Right. Good." Hermione lowered her wand ever so slightly and cast her eyes to the left, in the direction of the hallway where their goal resided. "On we go, then."
Diggle tucked his hands behind his back and gave a slight bow. "On we go." He, calmly, led the way, appearing unfazed by Hermione's obvious death threat, instead strolling with a skip in his step that had her stomach wanting to vomit all on its own this time.

"I don't like this," Draco muttered next to Potter as they stepped off the cart two sections below where they left Hermione with the world's most dangerous psychopath. Tonklin was too busy lighting a lantern to take much notice of the two wizards as they whispered casually to one another.

"Hermione's perfectly capable of handling herself," Harry told him. "Trust her enough to have faith in her."

"It isn't Hermione I don't trust."

"Look, do you want this to work, or don't you?" The Auror sighed. "You know the rules. Two may enter. One of them has to be him. And since neither you, nor I, are familiar with the Gray magic, it has to be Hermione."

Tonklin, finally able to light his lantern, wobbled over to them, reeking of vomit. "This way."

"This is absolute bollocks," Draco grumbled, following the goblin down the pathway, thinking how being a distraction could be one of the most miserable experiences of his lifetime.

In an alternate universe, Greg Diggle would be ecstatic to be alone with Hermione Granger as himself and with no other pretenses than working together. However, it was difficult to enjoy his freedom when she refused to look him in the eye or acknowledge his presence unless otherwise needed. He understood why she did it - he wasn't delusional. There were some things one could never come back from and killing a love interest's husband was one of them. But Greg didn't imagine he'd have another chance to discuss a few topics with her ever again, so he overlooked her brooding attitude and said, "You read my letter, I take it."

"Don't talk to me," she snapped, the tip of her wand pointing outwards to light their path. She kept her eyes forward, like the last ten minutes.

"Did you figure it out? My clue to the stone?"

Her back stiffened, and she stopped abruptly. "I have my theories."

"Might I inquire?"

"No, you may not."

"Come on, Hermione. Have a go. I'm anxious to hear-"

"Stop it." She spun around to face him, eyes blazing. "Stop talking as if we're coworkers or chums. We're not. As far as I'm concerned, the day you drop dead is the day I dance in the streets."

Admittedly, her words stung, but Greg simply shrugged and replied, "Bit morbid, don't you think?"

"You wish to discuss with me about morbidity? You killed my husband in cold blood, and then you pretended to be my friend only to betray everything a wizard should stand for."

A coldness spread through Greg's chest, as it sometimes did when he was forced to face the consequences of his actions. "I've offered you a way to fix all of what I've done, and yet you act as if
"Because I shouldn't." She glanced down half a moment at her shoes. It would be the perfect opportunity to have the upper hand -a quick body barrel forward to knock her off balance, and he could have her wand in a matter of moments. And, if this were anyone else, he might have done just that. But, as it were, this was Hermione Granger, the chink in his armor. It explained, above all else, why Potter sent her with him instead of himself or Malfoy. Betraying Hermione Granger -to bring her any more pain, was nearly impossible for him to perform. The moment passed, and she stared back up, finally looking him in the eyes. "Ron's dead. As hard as it is for me to admit, bringing him back would only unbalance the universe."

"Not to mention a complication in your future marriage to Draco Malfoy," he pointed out with nonchalance in his tone.

Her eyes narrowed. "I bet you're reveling in that, aren't you?"

"I'd be lying if I said it didn't feel just a tad wonderful to know I've put a strain on you two. -But that was never my intention. I care for you, Hermione-" he extended a hand to comfort her, but she pointed the tip of her wand to his nose, nearly blinding him with her *Lumos* spell.

"Touch me, and I'll castrate you."

"Duly noted." He dropped his hand to his side at once, never doubting for a moment of her intentions. "But I do care for you."

"You want to care for me?" she asked, leaning in. Her perfume, lilacs with a hint of vanilla, filled his nostrils, creating a nearly euphoric high. "Keep. Draco. Alive. I don't care what it takes. I don't care if it means you sacrifice yourself. -You want to make up for every terrible act you've ever performed? -You keep him alive."

Tension prickled the air between the two, and it was no question why. Asking him to keep his enemy alive was like asking Potter to keep Voldemort alive at all costs. Couldn't she see just how awful of a choice Draco Malfoy was for her? Arrogant. Selfish. Vain. None of these qualities did Hermione Granger possess, and yet she found all of them endearing in the platinum-blond prat. Why? What was it about him that made her forget herself? Greg watched her interactions with Weasley enough through the years to know these were not qualities she tolerated and would critique out of her husband at any given chance. So what was it about Draco Malfoy which would make her turn her back on her very nature?

"I can't guarantee the twit could keep himself alive…" he muttered. "But you have my word, Hermione. He will not die on my behalf. If that is what it takes to satisfy you, so be it."

Hermione's brown eyes shone curiously as she searched his own for something -she must have found it, because she nodded once, curtly, and turned back around. "Right. This way then, Diggle. Your vault is close by, yes?"

Greg couldn't stop the smirk that graced his lips. "Yes, Miss Granger. Just a few rows down."

They walked together, side by side, in peaceful silence, until they arrived at a familiar door Greg thought he'd never see again. He extended his hand towards the palm-shaped lock he'd set up years ago, but Hermione brought her hand up to his, catching it at the wrist. Physical contact. She touched him, willingly, and it made the magic on the back of his neck stand on end. "A few things have changed, Diggle, since you've been here. -As much as the idea of you blowing yourself into bits does sound appealing, I recommend lowering your hand and await further instruction."
Greg nodded once as she released his wrist. "Yes. Of course."

"Hand me your palm."

"My palm?"

She dragged her wand across the lifeline of his hand and sliced it open. Wincing in pain, Greg fought the urge to retaliate somehow, instead turning to his calmer Auror roots. Pain was all in the mind, after all… and in his hand. Oww.

"There are three trials to entering your vault," Hermione explained. "Call it paying homage to your training trials."

He nearly felt flattered. "Let me guess. One of them requires a blood sacrifice?"

She scoffed, still pressing his hand against the cold stone. Greg watched in awe as his blood was soaked into the door by osmosis. Finally, it seemed satisfied with the amount of blood it received because the clink of a lock somewhere inside could be heard, and then the door split in half, swinging open. They stumbled backward to avoid being smashed, and Hermione tripped over herself, flailing towards the ground below. Her wand rolled backward, towards Greg's feet, and both their eyes fell on the slip of wood, wondering what would happen next. "Don't you-"

But Diggle was quicker, and he grabbed it up in a flash, pointing it decidedly at Hermione, still on her backside. "Don't what, Miss Granger?" He smirked. "I hardly believe you could be this careless."

"Give me my wand, Diggle." She jumped to her feet at once, hand out. "Right now!"

"And if I don't?"

"I'm rather versed in wandless magic."

He smirked. "As am I. Or have you forgotten? -Tell me the truth. Is Lucius Malfoy innocent of crimes against my father?"

His question floored her, but her eyes glistened with tenacity. "Put the wand down."

"Not until you answer my question."

She scowled. "If you wanted the truth, you could have simply asked it!" Greg waited patiently, and she finally gave up the ghost. "Harry and I looked into Lucius's memories. It rings true. I didn't want to believe it, but Lucius Malfoy is innocent. I've seen it myself. Now, please… my wand."

With a quick turn, he offered out the base of her wand to her, rendering her speechless. "You can trust me, Hermione. I've told you before; I will do everything I can to ensure your wishes are met."
She waited, like a human forced to pass a coiled snake, and, eventually, decided it was safe enough to take her wand back. Greg happily let her, throwing his hands up in submission.

"Let me make one thing clear, Diggle. I will never trust you." She pointed towards the split doorway. "In."

"As you wish."

Greg relished in the way her cheeks turned the most fetching shade of pink as he passed her, though his mind lay on more pressing matters, such as the fact that Lucius Malfoy was not the murderer of his father. Even coming from Hermione, it still felt… false. It must be, because if it weren't, all these years of pent up hatred towards the Malfoys would only be half deserved. They were still xenophobic ingrates, mind you. Still… could it be so? Hermione Granger was quite a few things: beautiful, intelligent, willful and determined -but a good liar, she was not. As they stepped inside the door and listened to the slow groan as it shut behind them, he gathered up his courage to ask her, "Did… did you see who did it?"

"Who killed your father, you mean?"

Greg nodded, heart beating strongly in his chest. All these years… had they been wasted on the wrong family? Did bringing back Abraxas Malfoy to torture generations of Malfoys really mean nothing now? Was it all for naught?

Hermione pressed her wand into his spine, and the tip lit up in a flare of heat. He did his best to remain calm as she answered, "They wore a hood. I didn't get a good look at their face… but I'm sure it was a man."

Greg listened intently, searching for any hints of deceit. He found none. "Were they tall? Short? Large? How low was his voice?"

"I'll answer your questions when I have The Gray in my possession. Call it -incentive."

He couldn't have felt more proud of her than in that moment. "Quid pro quo, then?"

"Something my Auror Trainer taught me."

Smirking, Greg Diggle clapped his hands together, turned around, and stared into her amazing, chocolate eyes. "I'm ever so glad to have made an impression."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I promise to have the next chapter out by Friday, at the latest. I'm lame.

HTTYA has been nominated for a SomethingWicked16 Dramione Fanfiction Award! Category: Best Crime/Mystery Fic! Voting goes through the 28th of October, 2016. Please consider going to the link below -(will need to take out the *'s to make it a workable link) and vote for me? It would mean the world! This is the first time I've ever been nominated for an award of any sort when it comes to fanfiction, and I'm so happy it's for How To Train Your Auror!

http://goo.gl/for*ms/Rfr*1KF2lv*J2g9fY*63
Winner will be announced October 31st, so I will let you know if I've won!
He wakes up early today
Throws on a mask that will alter his face
Nobody knows his real name
But now he just uses one he saw on a grave

He pretends that he's OK,
But you should see
Him in bed late at night,
He's petrified
"Trap Door" by Twenty One Pilots

With a flick of her wand, Hermione lit to life the hundreds of candles running atop the high shelves circling the perimeter. The room illuminated at once, revealing a large, stone walled infrastructure scattered with bits and pieces of Diggle's life: piles of books (muggle and magic alike), awards for various good deeds for the Ministry, and every bit of the music he collected over the years. There were also a variety of magical objects, though none of them were deemed cursed or illegal, so the Ministry had no reason to confiscate them. Diggle's eyes lit up the second his eyes came upon a tiny, wooden box next to a crate of older records.

"I thought I'd never see this again," he muttered, more to himself than to Hermione, though when he picked it up he did offer it out between them for her to look. "My mother's," he pried open the top, and a tiny ballerina popped up as a tinkling rendition of Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy. "She had a love for The Nutcracker."

There was something so… human about him, in that moment, watching the tiny, plastic dancer spin on her ballet slipper. Greg Diggle didn't appear as if he were debating on how best to con someone out of a situation, nor did he wear that smug smirk he so often did. His green eyes glistened only with longing.

"She passed away, didn't she?" Hermione heard herself ask, and instantly reprimanded herself for it. This was not the time to suddenly have a heart for the man who killed her husband.

Diggle nodded. "Two years after… my father." He appeared captivated by spinning toy. "Have you
heard of stress-induced cardiomyopathy?"

"Broken heart syndrome? You're suggesting it was stress that killed her."

"Precisely." He snapped the music box shut and set it on top of the table where he found it. "It was... a rough go of it. If my father had died in a car wreck or a heart attack -some muggle way to go, I don't think she would have thought much of it. Yes, it would have hurt, but... I had an obligation to her, didn't I, Hermione? To tell her the truth?"

Blast it all for moral compasses, because despite all Hermione knew of him, she still couldn't bring herself to give him the cold shoulder on this matter, like she so desperately wanted to. She walked past him, towards the music box, and pried it back open to listen to the tinkling melody again. Somehow, it made the words come easier. "You couldn't hide the War from her. To do that would be to diminish your father's death."

Diggle looked over his shoulder, back at her, and smiled genuinely. Then he cleared his throat. "Shall we press on?"

Hermione nodded, shutting the music box. "Are you ready for the next task, Diggle?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"Great." She approached small door on the opposite side of the vault that looked little more than a cupboard. "Open the door."

"Why? What's going to come popping out?"

"Trial two."

Diggle raised an eyebrow but said nothing else as he walked up to the door, hand poised at the knob. He tilted his head, listening to his magical instincts. No sounds came from the other side. "I wonder..." With careful measure, he turned the handle.

The cart finally halted for Harry, Draco, and Tonklin deep in the bowels of Gringotts. So deep, in fact, Draco wondered what key Potter presented to the goblin. His upper lip begged to be scratched, but he remained stoic in the back seat of the cart, doing his best not to draw attention to himself. This fake goatee was really working his last nerve. He watched Tonklin snap his fingers, opening the door, and Potter climbed out first, followed by Draco.

"You're not coming?" Potter asked, his black eyebrows drawing together in concern to their tour guide.

"I'll be waiting here in the cart," the goblin assured him.

"Never thought I'd see the day when a goblin doesn't feel the need to stick his nose in wizard affairs..." sneered Draco under his breath, but Tonklin heard.

His eyes narrowed. "I thought wizards were more evolved in recent years, but that thought seems to have bypassed you, somehow." Tonklin slammed the cart door shut. "Of course, what do we expect when wizards throw war around like it's an afternoon tea party?"

A flare of anger shifted inside of Draco, but Potter grabbed him by the arm with commanding authority. "You were out of line. Apologize."
"Apologize?" Draco scoffed. "To this ingrate?"

Potter got right up in his face. "This is not the time to show your bigotry."

His words cut deep, opening up an old wound Draco didn't know he had until then. Somewhere, deep in the crevices of his soul, he still harbored his old, pureblood roots of prejudices. He thought he'd moved past this after twelve bloody years, but obviously, he hadn't. A chill scattered down his spine as he turned to the goblin, who stared at him expectedly, and muttered, "I... I'm sorry."

Tonklin bowed his head slowly in approval, shifting himself comfortably in his seat. "Do hurry along. I haven't all day."

"Neither do we," said Potter, dragging Draco away from the scene of his xenophobia and up to the large, stone door before them. In an effort to rid himself of his embarrassment, Draco thrust his hand out expectedly and glanced at the key. Potter rolled his eyes, but gave it over in any case, and Draco smirked as he slipped the key into the brass lock in front of them and turned it.

"Whose vault is this?" he asked in a hushed tone as the doors drew open, towards the inside.

Potter did not answer him, simply opting to step inside the swung open doors, expecting Draco to follow (which he did). When the door behind them shut tight, Draco allowed himself to speak in a comfortable volume. "Why are you being so ominous?"

Potter removed his glasses as if he teared up for a moment, but then gave a small cough, placed them back on the bridge of his nose, and replied, "We're following a lead Hermione gave me in whereabouts of the Resurrection Stone." His eyes clashed with Draco's. "This vault. It belonged to Ron."

Cold. Cold and frightened and diminished. If someone asked Greg Diggle how he felt the moment after the door opened, that was how he would have described it. Because no one was prepared for their greatest fear, especially when it sprang up on them so quiet and peaceful.

*Clack. Clack. Clack.*

Someone stepped out from inside the closet in lengthy, billowing robes the color of midnight. Someone with a form that changed height or build every few seconds with a flicker. The face was a blur, though momentarily it would shift between various Death Eaters, including Lucius Malfoy.

Panic flooded his system, and Greg stumbled back, instinctively reaching for a wand that wasn't there. He knew the incantation to use -just didn't have the means to do so. Even with wandless magic…

"Hermione!" he shouted, his heart pounding, "Hermione, do something!"

He cast his eyes in her direction, and she gave a measured pause, no doubt studying his incredulous glare. Why wasn't she helping him? Surely she didn't get some sick sense of enjoyment out of watching him stare down his greatest horror? But maybe she did.

"So this is your greatest fear," she said mildly as the robed figure took another step in his direction. "Your father's murderer."

"Analyze me later," he snapped, his eyebrows furrowing together as he attempted to think of something, *anything* that would rid the foul beast before him. No matter how hard he tried, the seizure in his chest wouldn't cease, and he couldn't concentrate long enough on a happy thought. "P-
Please." He choked back a small sob. "Hermione, have mercy."

Her lips pursed, her eyes narrowed, and she suddenly tossed the wand at his feet. "You have to be the one to do it," she told him, and he nodded in thanks as he scooped up the magical strip of wood and wielded it at the creature before him.

_Something silly_, he thought to himself and shouted, "Riddikulus!"

The boggart shifted immediately, bending and twining. Its frame grew slender, and its face was no longer a blur, but sharp features, platinum blond hair, and ridiculously purple eyeshadow. Soon, the image of Draco Malfoy, dressed in a school girl's uniform (the tight, midrift shirt, knee highs with mary-janes, and short, pleated skirt all included) with a copy of gay porn tucked under his arm and a lolly-pop dangling between his lips stood before them.

Greg smirked, thoroughly satisfied.

"Oh, really now." Hermione thrust her hand out for her wand, and Greg gleefully handed it back over to her. The pair traded considerate glances, and then, with a whirl of magic, Hermione _accio'd_ a trunk from across the room and slammed the boggart inside.

Draco’s hands turned cold and clammy as he struggled to focus his eyes. Nothing, it seemed, could force him to concentrate on the task at hand while he knew he stood inside of Ron Weasley’s personal vault.

"You really think the stone is here?" he asked, glancing about at the sparse room. Weasley, obviously, was not a materialistic man. The objects in here were sentimental: an older model broomstick from their days at Hogwarts, a chocolate frog collection tucked inside a binder, riddled with dust, and a replica of Godric Gryffindor’s sword were just some of the listed items.

"Hermione seems to think so," Harry replied, rummaging through his pockets. He revealed a folded bit of paper Draco recognized immediately as Diggle’s letter, still stained in Draco’s own blood. "Diggle said he left her clues to obtain the stone. Hermione believes something in Ron's vault will lead us to it. Look for anything out of character."

"I didn't know him well, you know," Draco pointed out, shuffling his feet as he walked over to a bookshelf filled with Quidditch statistics and framed, autographed pictures of world famous Quidditch players.

"You know him enough. After all, you're marrying Hermione."

"The two couldn't have made a more awkward pair."

"You're one to talk."

Draco cast his eyes in Potter's direction and glared furiously. "I make her happy. Perhaps, if you would pull your head out of your arse long enough, you could see it."

"I never said you weren't good for her," Potter noted, his back turned as he observed the broom. "Only that I think you're awkward."

"More like you feel awkward seeing us together."

"You think I'd eventually get used to it." He shook his head. "I haven't."
"Yes, well... I love her. And she loves me. And we're getting married."

"You say it as if you have something to prove."

Draco, looking for something to keep himself busy, walked over and observed the sword. The jewels glistened in the hilt, refracting colorful streaks against the wall. He didn't want to think about Potter's words and how they rang true, somehow. So many things hung in the balance. His life sat at the top of the priority list, making his crumbling relationship trivial in comparison. One day soon, should he survive this mission and his grandfather's assault, he and Hermione would need to sit down and discuss their issues, which all stemmed from one deceased Ron Weasley.

"This is a shoddy replica," he muttered.

"What?" Potter turned around.

"This sword," Draco replied, pointing to the hilt, "The real sword of Godric Gryffindor has red stones set in all three places. This one here," he nudged to one of the two smaller stones set at the crossing point, "It's black. And discolored."

"Malfroy, you're brilliant."

Draco smirked. "Yeah, I know. -Why?"

Potter stepped up beside him, grabbed the sword by the hilt, and drew the imperfect stone up to his eye level. "Because this isn't a replica. This is the actual sword."

"You mean to tell me the sword of Godric Gryffindor is just lying around in some dead man's vault like some two-bit piece of trash? Have you Gryffindors no respect for history?"

Potter smirked. "I'm beginning to see why Hermione enjoys your company now."

"Shut it." Draco leaned in closer, observing the black stone. "This is it, isn't it? The stone?"

"Yes."

"And you're sure?"

There was a thoughtful look in Potter's eye. One of forlorn and longing. "Yes. I'm quite sure."

Hermione pointed into the closet once she was sure the boggart was secure. "See that mirror there?" She extended her arm, where a framed, full body mirror covered in a black drape rested inside the closet. "That's your third task."

Diggle smirked. "A mirror?" He tucked his arms behind his back. For being scared silly only moments ago, he seemed rather calm about it all. "Forgive me for being so blunt, but I'm not Draco Malfoy; I don't enjoy looking at myself at all hours of the day. -Even if I am devilishly handsome."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Go to the mirror. Remove the cloth."

"Why? What's going to happen?" he asked, extremely interested. Where any normal person would have been apprehensive, Diggle only looked towards the mirror in excitement. He stepped to the mirror, and as he approached, he grinned wider. "I can feel it." He turned back around to her. "Can you?"

She stared curiously at him, stepping forward. For the longest time, she thought it was only her. "I
guess anyone who comes in contact with the Gray can sense it."

"Perhaps." Diggle nodded, turning back to look at the cloaked mirror. "What will I see when I remove this cloth?"

"Well… that depends on you." She tucked her hands behind her back and shifted on her toes. "You love myths, Diggle. Figure this one out for yourself."

"Hmm. Curiouser and curiouser…" He extended his hand, wrapped his fingers tightly through the cloth, and dragged it down. The sheet billowed to the floor, revealing their reflections. Well, almost. Diggle appeared much more robust – he was a few shades more muscular, like his golden days at the Auror Division, while he wore a fresh haircut and no stubble upon his chin. Hermione's hair was slightly shorter, and her face glowed with a fresher, gentler tone. "Some sort of filter spell," Diggle concluded, rubbing his chin, "But for what?"

"See for yourself. Touch it."

As instructed, Diggle raised his hand and extended his fingertips towards the glass. He paused, half a moment, weighing the magical energy coming from it. "Not cursed…" His fingers slid across the glass -and then pushed through. The mirror gave way like metallic goo, encompassing his fingers and showing them inside the glass. "So, an adventure through the looking glass." He grinned wildly. "Fascinating."

Stepping through the mirror was like stepping into an Alice in Wonderland caricature. Or, at least, Greg saw it that way as he and Hermione pushed through the metallic film of the mirror and into the reflection. Knowing she would fight against it, but also knowing it was for their safety, he reached over and clasped her hand in his, earning a gasp, a swat to the arm, and then a frightened grasp of her fingers around his as they both broke entirely through and fell into a blanket of darkness.

"So… what exactly is supposed to happen now?"

Their surroundings suddenly lit to life like the lights for a stage on opening night. They stood, interestingly enough, in the one place Greg Diggle thought he'd never see again; The Minister of Magic's office. It was entirely too quiet, aside from the sounds of their own breathing, until Hermione gave a hefty huff and jerked her hand out of his. Greg thought to comment on it until the sound of the door unlocking behind them caught his attention, distracting him as Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped inside.

Greg tensed, preparing for some sort of alarm to sound and alert the Aurors in the building, but instead, Minister Shacklebolt grinned warmly at the two in his office and said, "Ahh, Auror Diggle. You received my invitation, I take it?" His eyes turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger. Did I miss a memo?"

Hermione didn't miss a beat, tucking a lock of her -now shorter- hair behind her ear. Greg noticed her robes were gone, and she wore a black pencil skirt, white button-down blouse, and pumps instead. "Forgive me, Minister." There were papers tucked underneath an arm, and she scanned her eyes quickly over the headline before continuing, "I… believe I need your signatures on some of these articles."

"Ah. A law-woman's work is never done, is it?" Shacklebolt laughed, moving past the two over to his desk. He plucked a thick, plummed quill from an ink bottle and signed the top of Hermione's forms. "How goes the S.P.E.W.?"
Hermione glanced over to Greg with a sad gleam in her eye, cleared her throat, and said, "Wonderful, Minister. Thank you for asking." She nudged over in Shacklebolt's direction with her head discretely, cueing Greg to speak. He hadn't realized how dry his mouth became until he attempted to speak again.

"Thank you… for inviting me here, Minister. To what do I owe the privilege?"

Shacklebolt gave an incredulous look. "Why - your promotion, of course. To Head Auror."

Greg couldn't help it - he immediately turned to Hermione and offered out his arm. "Pinch me. Please."

She shook her head, shooting him a warning with her eyes. "No. Thank you, Auror Diggle. I believe I'll pass." Under her breath, she muttered, "Play your part."

"My part?" Greg turned his eyes back to Shacklebolt, who looked at him expectedly for a response. "I…" He thought about it. "Sir, it's a privilege - and an honor. Would you mind if I have a moment alone with my colleague? For only a moment?" He wrapped an arm around Hermione's shoulder and guided her out the door, throwing up a finger to the Minister in a 'just a moment' manner before shutting the door behind them. When they were out in the hall, Diggle put an arm on both of Hermione's shoulders and looked her square in the face. "What the Hell is going on? Where are we?"

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but a voice - so familiar, and yet so foreign, pierced Greg Diggle's eardrum, rendering him speechless.

"Seriously, Diggs? Would you mind keeping your mitts off my wife for five bloody minutes? I swear to Merlin, you're worse than a Veela during mating."

Greg didn't need to turn around to know who stood behind him. All he needed to do was stare into the bewildered, pain-filled expression in Hermione's eyes to know.

He swallowed a bitter lump in his throat, removed his hands from her shoulders, and turned to face a set of sky blue eyes and a head full of bright red hair. Ron Weasley gave a lopsided grin, crossing his arms. "That's better. -Hey, Mione. Ready for lunch?"

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone loved it! What's going on with the mirror? Find out soon.
~A.
P.S. - A review is always welcome, if you have the time. :)
So, this new chapter was a lot of fun to write. I should have the next one up pretty soon. Waymay came for a visit this weekend, and it was a special experience I will hold dearly in my heart. It's amazing, really, how Harry Potter can help you discover the friends worth having. We're going to Harry Potter World in a month. Should be lots of fun! Thanks, waymay, for proofing this for me after staying up half the night and traveling! Bad ass mutha luva right there.

Hope you love this chapter as much as I do.
~A.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clear blue water, high tide came and brought you in
And I could go on and on, on and on, and I will
Skies grew darker, currents swept you out again
And you were just gone and gone, gone and gone

In silent screams,
In wildest dreams
I never dreamed of this

This love is good, this love is bad
This love is alive back from the dead
These hands had to let it go free
And this love came back to me

"This Love" by Taylor Swift

"Ron…"

For all the moments in the world, Hermione could never have been prepared for the devastating, chaotic force that was fate. For it was fate which brought her fallen husband back to her, once more, to smile at her in just that way. Like he was truly alive, standing in front of her with his head tilted so.

"You alright, Mione?" He flashed her a set of teeth as his eyebrows drew up in concern: a perfectly conflictual conundrum wrapped in a pretty paradox. "You look like you've seen Nearly Headless Nick without his trousers on."

"You alright, Mione?" He flashed her a set of teeth as his eyebrows drew up in concern: a perfectly conflictual conundrum wrapped in a pretty paradox. "You look like you've seen Nearly Headless Nick without his trousers on."

Her mouth went dry. Words escaped her. All she could do was take off at a dead run in his direction, despite knowing the truth; none of this was real. She flung her arms out and wrapped them so tight around his torso he groaned upon impact, though he did give a small chuckle as he, too, met her with affection. His hands rubbed up and down her back soothingly -and it felt so real. As real as Draco’s hand in hers not an hour before. He smelled real, like his godawful cologne his mother purchased him nearly every Christmas, mixed with sweat and coffee grounds. He sounded real when he tucked
his head low and whispered against her ear, "Did… Did I do something wrong?"

Finally, her voice found its way back to her throat as hot tears spilled down her cheeks. "I've… I've just missed you, is all."

Ron pressed her closer to him, chuckling softly. "Last night's sex that good, I take it?"

She laughed, nuzzling closer into his shirt while trying to remember every precious detail in all its splendor. "You always know how to make me laugh."

"I'm honestly not sure if I take that as a compliment or an insult."

"It's a compliment," she pried her face away and stared into his brilliantly blue eyes, "obviously." This reflection even had every subtle freckle Ron ever wore. It captured the unevenness of his smile, how he would smile just a bit more on his right side than his left. Hermione swiped at her tears and sniffled into the back of her hand. "Sorry… for the tears. I-" she gathered her excuse quickly, "-think I'm feeling a bit under the weather today."

Ron reached up and cupped her cheek, rubbing his thumb over her cheekbone lightly. "For a moment there, I thought I royally screwed up."

Hermione shook her head, leaning into his touch. "No. I'm just happy to see you again."

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. The sound of boots across a marble floor brought the two out of their own little world. "Er… Weasley." Diggle approached the two, still keeping a healthy distance. There was a shaken edge to his voice, and who could blame him? It must have felt right awkward to stand before the man he murdered, alive in the flesh -so to speak.

"Join us for lunch, Diggs? You look a bit pale."

"There's a reason for that," Diggle muttered, rubbing his fingers down the clean shaven skin of his chin. He eyed Ron over with great interest -and if he weren't being blatantly obvious, Hermione would have found it rather comical. Finally, he settled on a forced smug expression and countered his awkwardness with, "Thai sound good to you, Weasley? My treat -apparently, I've been promoted."

"So, how does it work?" Draco asked, brandishing the sword outwards in the middle of the vault. "This Resurrection Stone."

"Erm…" Potter cleared his throat, still staring at the stone. "You focus on the one you lost and touch the stone. Very point and swish."

"By the look on your face, one can assume you've used this before?"

"Yeah…" His green eyes dropped to the floor, focused on anything else. "Admittedly, it's sort of hard to put down once you start."

Draco stared down at the hilt of the sword, contemplating giving it a go himself. Who would he see, if he simply touched the stone without focus? Crabbe? Bolt? One of the many friends he lost in the Second War? Would he see his grandmother? A thought crystallized before him -what if he saw Weasley? They were never close… "Can you see… anyone with the stone?"

"Loved ones."
"Loved ones…" Draco repeated. "So… how is it Diggle raised my grandfather, then?"

Potter's head shot up, and he narrowed his eyes. "That's a question now, isn't it? Diggle hates your family. He shouldn't have been able to summon Abraxas."

Could it be possible? Could this Abraxas Malfoy not be Draco's grandfather at all? There was only one way to tell. "I have to try out the stone."

"Malfoy," Potter began, "That's a dangerous game. Believe me, it'll hurt more than you think. It isn't like seeing them in the flesh. There's a… it's like peering through a veil. They're there, but they're not."

"Still…" Draco tilted his head down, staring at the stone. "We have to see if it is, in fact, my grandfather - or an imposter." He swallowed a large lump in his throat and cleared it. "Will you see what I see?"

Harry - Draco guessed he could call him Harry in his mind, now, seeing as how they were, regrettably, friends, and he didn't want to die without at least admitting that to himself - opened his mouth to speak, but then shut it fast before opening it right back up. "I'm not sure. I was alone when I used it. It's possible…" He trailed off, lost in his thoughts for a time. "Guess we'll find out."

"I suppose so." Draco nodded in confirmation before bracing the sword in his left hand and guiding his thumb, slowly, over the stone. He closed his eyes in the process, fearing what he would see (or, rather, who) before focusing all his efforts on his grandfather. When his eyes opened, his mouth fell.

"Finally. I was starving." Ron dug into the egg roll appetizers before the plate even touched the table, shoveling one into his mouth as a look of pure harmony glazed across his long face. "Oo guys 'ave to try some!"

Hermione exchanged glances with Diggle, who sat across the table from her and Ron, fiddling with the straw inside his cup. He wore a stoic expression while watching the two of them - surprisingly, none of it mirrored jealousy. He was smart enough, after all, to deduce this was fantasy.

"So… Ron. Mate." Diggle folded his hands on the table. "We, um, we get along, do we?"

Ron raised an eyebrow, simultaneously slurping down half a glass of water. When he finished, he answered, "Well, yeah. I hope so. We've been partners for the last two years."

"Have we?" His voice was sneering, almost bored. After a swift kick under the table from Hermione, however, his attitude changed. "That's… wonderful. How did that happen, I wonder? My memory seems fuzzy…"

"Ha. Ha." Ron swallowed the rest of his eggroll. "Look, just because we got sloshed last night doesn't mean you get to try to opt me out of being your best man."

"Best… man?" It was obvious from the expression on Diggle's face when he turned to Hermione, he, for a moment, thought it might be her he was marrying. Then he came to his senses, reached for an eggroll, ate half of it in one bite, then followed it up with some water. When he finished, he looked between Ron and Hermione, shrugging. "What? I'm a stress eater."

"You're getting married," Hermione said, hearing the disbelief in her tone she tried to shrug off. It didn't work. "Someone wants to marry you." She began to laugh.

"What's so funny?"
"Someone wants to marry you." She couldn't help it; she barrelled forward in laughter. "You. Greg Diggle. The man obsessed with-" she nearly said 'me' but caught herself, "-chasing unattainable women is getting married."

"Talk about your Deja Vu," Ron muttered, reaching for another egg roll. "I think those were her exact words the day you told us."

"And you two are married to each other, yes?" Diggle crossed his arms, thoroughly miffed. When he caught Ron's withering expression, he smirked. "So. Who's the lucky witch?"

"You gone and bonked your head? Seriously, Lindy's too good for you."

"Lindy?" Diggle's face scrunched up in pure confusion, and he leaned across the table to Hermione. "I don't know a Lindy."

"Lindy… Bolt. The Auror?" she offered.

"Obviously." Ron sat his eggroll down on the table. "Alright, what's gotten into you two? Hermione, please tell me you didn't tamper with his memories?" He grabbed his stomach. "Uh oh. Egg rolls and a belly full of alcohol from the night before… not a good combo." Rising from the table, Ron gave Hermione a quick peck on the cheek before retreating, with little dignity, in the direction of the bathroom.

Diggle, for all his good nature, dropped the pleasantries the moment Ron disappeared, settling on an annoyed expression as he muttered under his breath, "Remind me again why he's the cat that got the cream?"

"Because he's kind, and genuine, and funny, and has more integrity in his pinky finger than you do in your entire body. You took it all away from me. You took him away from me." Hermione had put up with enough. She folded her arms over her chest and smirked in a way which would have made Draco extremely proud, ignoring the knot in her chest. "Have you figured it out, yet? Why we're here?"

There was a small nod, followed by Diggle ducking his eyes to the table whilst rapping his knuckles along the wooden countertop. "This mirror is a what-could-have-been."

"Yes."

Silence dragged on before he spoke again, eyebrows working as he processed his thoughts. "Is this supposed to show me what it would have been like if I was simply another bleeding heart?" The tone in which he spoke held bitterness. "To teach me some moral conduct?"

"You're half right," Hermione admitted, "But you haven't seemed to grasp the larger picture."

"Do tell." He refused to look her in the eyes.

She chose her next words carefully, repeating them verbatim from her memory. "This is the Mirror of Amuart. Its purpose is simple, but it only works when two people enter. Had you come by yourself, you would have found yourself lost inside forever."

"Why two people?"

"For the person who has been wronged, and the person who has done wrong. -This reality is what would have happened had you never betrayed me or my friends. If you'd proven yourself worthy of this life. It's meant for the betrayer to see what he's taken away from his victim-"
"-and force him to come to terms with his actions," Diggle finished. Even then, he dared not raise his eyes to hers.

"Precisely."

Slowly, and then all at once, a smirk clawed its way up lips, predatory. "So, you mean to tear me down to build me back up into a better man?" It was nearly sinister, the way he changed moods on a whim. One moment, he appeared truly remorseful, and the next… this. Cold. Detached. Still, just under the surface of his eyes, there gleamed the small bit of humanity he pretended to cast aside. "Hermione, I'm flattered enough you'd care for my soul this way."

Her eyes turned to slits. "Don't you dare insinuate I would harbor any feelings for you other than the necessary hatred I hold. You want the Gray, yes?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, the only way you're getting it is by cracking the code to this mirror's magic."

"And how would one go about that?" He tilted his head, still smirking.

"Convincing me of your remorse. Which, if right now is anything to go off of, will never happen."

"Being trapped in a mirror with the woman I desire? Color me convinced. How long should our stay be? Long enough for Draco to fail his task?"

Hermione gasped. "You wouldn't."

Diggle laughed. "No, I dare say you wouldn't forgive me ever again. You're quite the little liar, aren't you, Hermione? Telling me you'd forgiven me, and then forcing me to act out this false charade. Tell me, at what point am I supposed to crumble to my knees and beg forgiveness? I've already done it, and let me tell you, it wasn't as satisfying as one would think."

It was a good thing Ron appeared back at the table, because, if she were forced to endure another moment of that foreboding grin, Hermione would be tempted to knock the taste out of Greg Diggle's mouth. He played his part well, settling into a pleasant smile the moment Ron slipped into the spot next to his wife, draping an arm around her shoulder while yawning. "Did I miss anything?"

"A few good years, I'd say."

Diggle pushed up out of his chair. "Don't turn your back on this one, Weasley. Not even a year with you gone, and she'd turn to embrace the one you despise most."

Quickly, he turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" Hermione burst out, shaking the table at her uprise. Ron looked between them, utterly confused.

"Killing two birds with one stone? Sounds… inviting. Consider it my penance. You won't use the stone to bring your husband back, then allow me to give you the deepest pleasure in assuring you'll
never need to live without him."

"Draco will die!"

The air hung thick with tension. Diggle allowed a moment of pause, considering her words, before shrugging. "Your point, Hermione?"

"God, Greg! Do you think of no one but yourself? Draco isn't the only one with a head on the chopping block if we don't succeed! Scorpius, Astoria, Dean! You say you don't care, but we both know that isn't true, is it?" Her voice grew softer, and she ignored the vacant, hanging jaw of her figment husband for the time being. "Dean visits you. But you have to accept those visits. You care. Despite everything, I know you care about him. Us. Me." It stung to say the words, but she needed to if she wanted any hope of leaving this mirror. "Don't turn your back on me. You promised you only wanted to make me happy."

Diggle looked between Hermione and Ron, and then said in a hushed tone, "Does seeing him again make you happy, Hermione?"

A tear slipped down her cheek. "You know it does."

"Then I don't want to be forgiven." He backed away before taking his departure, leaving Hermione standing awkwardly next to Ron, who stared at her with such inquisitiveness he looked like he was trying to solve the world's greatest math problem.

"Um… Hermione?"

She turned her eyes on him, cheeks as red as the devil himself.

"What… did you mean 'Draco will die'? Draco Malfoy? What's Malfoy got to do with anything? What's going on? Listen, if you're in trouble-"

"-I am, Ron."

He immediately jumped up from the table, placing his hands on her shoulders. "Tell me what to do." And there he was - that ever loyal, stern, loving force that could only be Ron Weasley. Even down to that silly little crinkle between his eyebrows.

"You always did love being bossed around by me," she said nostalgically, reaching up to his hands, bringing them between their bodies, and weaving their fingers together. "I need you to help me hold Diggle accountable for his actions. He refuses to face the truth, but I need him to understand."

Red flared on his cheeks, and Ron looked to the door, where Diggle left only moments ago. "He didn't try anything, did he? I know he jokes around a lot, but, Hermione, if he came on to you for real-"

"That's not it." She batted away a choke full of tears. "Ron. This… this isn't real. None of this is real. I thought this would work, but if it doesn't, everyone I love is going to be in grave danger." Hermione closed her eyes, inhaled the scent of Ron and the restaurant, and then opened them, confessing, "Diggle needs to feel remorse, because… you're dead, Ron. Greg Diggle is responsible for your murder."

He still looked the same as he ever did, pudgy and square faced. It had been years since Draco felt anything like a schoolboy, but the moment his eyes rested upon his childhood friend, the overwhelming urge to race to the Slytherin common room came to mind.
"Crabbe." The faintest of smiles, laced with crippling sadness, skirted across Draco's fine features as he took a step forward. "Is it really you?"

Vincent Crabbe nodded, nearly stoic in expression. "Hello, Draco."

"I…" Draco searched for words. What could he say? There were so many things, after Vincent's death, that he'd wanted to, wished he could say, but hadn't because he'd always felt superior. He never treated his friends with the respect they deserved, but it wouldn't be until it was too late to realize. It's why Gregory Goyle never wrote. It's why Pansy Parkinson went her own way. Why Blaise Zabini thought himself too good to keep in contact. Friends, after War, were few and far between. Especially when Draco questioned every moral in his arsenal, turning it over again and again looking for the wrong. Most of them, turned out, were tainted with xenophobic notions. Crabbe's death made him question what it meant to be pureblooded, and if it were worth the risk of dying over whose blood might be more 'worthy'.

He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Crabbe asked in his husky, low grump of a voice. He had a slight glow about him, and Draco looked to Harry to see if he saw it to. Potter stared right through Crabbe. So… it was only to the person who touched the stone. Interesting.

"For getting you mixed up in all of it. If I had been a better friend and… less…"

"Bossy?" Crabbe cracked a grin.

A relieved laugh escaped Draco's lips. "You have me there."

Harry stepped forward, eyes focused on Draco. "Do you see him? Abraxas?"

Draco looked down to the stone, concentrating, then glanced back to Crabbe. Nothing.

"He's not on this side," Vincent said. "Your grandfather. He's… gone."

"He's not there," Draco answered Harry. "Just Vincent."

"What about Lindy?" Harry asked carefully. Too carefully, in fact, to be comfortable. Draco concentrated his efforts, thought of Bolt's limp body in his arms at the edge of the forbidden forest. Of her gentle smile and confessions to admiring the older Auror. Still, she didn't show beside Crabbe.

"She isn't there, either." He thought about it. Did he care for the young Auror enough to see her? Yes. He admitted to himself; he did. The stupid little witch managed to get under his skin in just the right ways to create a notch in Draco's sparse friendship post. "Somehow, you don't look as surprised as I thought you would."

"There's been a development at the Ministry." Harry pulled up his robe sleeve and checked the time on his watch. "If they haven't found that cat by now, I'm going to call the search off."

"Yeah, about that…" Draco smirked, guilty. "I might have been the one to let that feline into the Ministry."

Harry's eyes fumed. "You what?"

"I didn't have a choice!"
"Did it never occur to you to let me know?"

"How the bloody Hell was I to contact you?"

"Get a damn cell phone!"

"On my dead body I will!"

"Oy. Draco," Crabbe muttered. "Bit insensitive, don't you think?"

"Insensitive?" Draco smirked. "I'm impressed, Crabbe. I didn't know you knew words like that."
Harry stepped up beside Draco, yanking the sword, and thus the stone, out of his hand. "Oy! Bit insensitive, don't you think, Potter?"

"We don't have time for you to quip with your old Death Eater chums." Harry's words were harsh, but his next words would be the ones to nearly send Draco toppling to his knees. "Lindy Bolt is alive."

"...What?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The Mirror of Erised is Desire spelled backward, as we all know. So, the Mirror of Amuart is Trauma spelled backward.

Thank you to everyone who reviewed! I will answer all reviews next chapter, so feel free to leave reviews! They mean so much to me, and these next few chapters mean a lot to me.

Lots of love,
~A.
So, as some of you might have heard, How To Train Your Auror was nominated for a Dramione award! It came in 2nd place in the best crime/mystery fic category! Woohoo! Thank you to everyone that voted!

This chapter is twice as long as the normal ones, but that's because it has SO MUCH HEART. I spilled a lot of my soul into writing this chapter, so I hope it shines through.

Thank you, waymay, for awwing and complimenting this chapter (even when you grimaced with Ron haha)

Special vibes out to LightofEvolution today!

~A.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Are you with me after all
Why can't I hear you
Are you with me through it all
Then why can't I feel you
Stay with me, don't let me go
Because there's nothing left at all
Stay with me, don't let me go
Until the Ashes of Eden fall

"Ashes of Eden" by Breaking Benjamin
This was on repeat through most of writing this chapter. Please, give it a listen.

Weasley is our King,
Weasley is our King,
He didn't let the Quaffle in
Weasley is our King.
Weasley can save anything,
He never leaves a single ring,
Surrounded by plates of pad thai, Ron Weasley never looked less inclined towards food in his entire life. A scowl set upon his face like a permanent marker, exaggerating the lines of his face. Every few moments or so, between the silence after Hermione finished her explanation, he would take a giant swig of his water, perhaps in an attempt to douse the fire burning within his soul. It could be seen just behind the blue orbs staring befuddled into the eyes of his wife. It appeared like a lot to take in, and Hermione wondered if Ron would throw the entire table over in a flare of anger—he had a foul temper when push came to shove. Never towards her, no. Ron was simply passionate.

It surprised her when he simply picked up a fork and jammed it into the last egg roll, piking it before pointing it at the exit door. "So none of this is real?" His voice cracked on the last word, moving up an octave. "Hermione, come on. Even I'm not that daft. Is this some sort of prank? Who put you up to this? George?"

"This isn't a joke, Ron," Hermione twiddled her thumbs together, staring evenly at his face. "It's real. All of it. The only part of it that isn't real… is, well, you."

He glared, taken aback by her words. Ron abandoned his egg roll, tossing it onto the table before reaching over and clasping one of his large, warm hands over hers. She nearly wished he wouldn't—it felt too nice. He wasn't real, she kept reminding herself. This Ron wasn't her Ron. Her Ron was…

"I'm real, Hermione." He leaned over the table and placed her knuckles to his lips, kissing them. "I'm right here."

"But you're not." More tears came, streaming their way down her cheeks in a messy display. "As much I want you to be, you're still gone!" She pried her hand away from his, stifling a muffled sob. It took her a minute to collect herself, and when she did, she met his calm stare.

"Prove it, then."

Hermione thought about it. How could she? She glanced down to her left hand, where a glistening, simple diamond rested inside a white-gold setting. Her wedding ring… She hadn't pulled it out of her jewelry box in ages, and yet here it rested on her finger where Draco's should have been. Draco's…

She presented her wand and, painfully, whispered the spell, pointing at the ring. "Aparecium." Ron's ring, so simple and yet so eloquent, gave way with a shimmer, as well as did the entire building. He gasped, watching his own hand glisten like a hologram in front of him, then looked to Hermione's hand for his ring. In its place sat an oversized diamond ring with topaz accent stones. The same color of the dress Draco purchased for her, and then, later, discarded in their first intimate encounter. Such a sly Slytherin…

Ron's eyebrows pulled together, and he became unsettled. "Hermione?"

"You died, Ron. Three years ago." She stared down at Draco's ring, pensive. A sense of calm filled her, as if the ring solidified the falseness of this alternate reality. It reminded her what waited for her on the outside—who was counting on her to succeed in her mission. No matter how beautiful this moment, sitting across from Ron, was only a reflection of what could have been. A dream. Diggle, the bastard he was, still was correct on this. It was all false.

"Whose ring is that?" Ron whispered.
"Mine. Well, I…" She laughed, though it was hollow. "It's my engagement ring."

"Engagement ring? Where's your wedding ring?"

"I still have it," she assured him, slipping Draco's ring off her finger to hold between them. "When you died, I was… destroyed. I couldn't think, or eat, or function properly. All I could think was how happy we were, and how I never thought I could live the rest of my life without you in it. -This ring was given to me by someone who helped me bring in the person responsible for you being torn from not only my life, but Harry's, and Ginny's, your family's… our friends'..." A new tear slipped down her cheek, but this one wasn't meant for Ron. "He's, really, a wonderful man… deep down."

"And rich to boot," Ron muttered, eyeing the ring with suspicious intentions, "Merlin's beard, that's an expensive looking ring, Mione." He attempted to soften his features, though the redness of his face countered the try. "This must have cost a small fortune…"

"He could afford it."

"Do I…" Ron coughed. "Do I know him?"

She nodded, slowly.

"Tell me who."

"You won't like it."

"Tell me."

"You'll only grow angry."

"I'm already angry. -Is it Diggs?"

Hermione laughed coldly. "Circe, no." Her eyes drifted up to his.

"But it's someone we know. Someone who can afford a ring like this. And someone I wouldn't approve of." The cogs in his head began to turn, piecing the bits together. "No." His eyes flashed up to hers. "No."

"Ron-"

"Not him, Mione!" Ron shook his head, face flaring the color of wine. "You know -I could, maybe, sort of, handle this fantasy that I'm 'dead'-" he put the word in air quotes, "-And I managed to stomach the bit where you think it's all real, but this?" He gestured to the ring. "Bloody Hell! Not Malfoy!" He pushed his chair away from the table, rattling it as he stood. "If you're seeing him behind my back, the least you could do is be honest about it! You don't have to go making up a story like this!"

"Ronald, think logically!" she begged, slipping the ring back on her finger, noticing how it pained him to watch. "Please! Why would I make up a story like this? Have you ever known me to tell tall tales?"

His eyes widened as he tried to come up with some lame way of rebutting, but found it useless. "So say this is all real, Hermione! If what you say is true, it means Diggs was also telling the truth!"

"I really wish you wouldn't call him Diggs…"

"Was it true? What he said about you sleeping with Malfoy not even a year after I'm 'dead'?" He did
the air quotes again. "Was any of that a lie?"

Guilt. All she could feel was guilt. Guilt for putting Ron through this torture. Guilt, because she couldn't deny any of it. Guilt, because she didn't want to feel guilty. "It's more complicated than it sounds."

Ron glared at her, mouth open, face as red as his hair. "Bloody fucking Hell." He reached into his back pocket, pulled out his wallet, threw a bit of money on the table, and started towards the door.

"Ron! Wait! Where are you going?"

"I need to process this!" He shouted over his shoulder. "Malfoy! Fucking Malfoy!" He pried the door open, but Hermione caught it and followed him out into the fresh air. "Hermione, no offence, but leave me the Hell alone right now." He fumbled around in his pockets until he brought out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

"You don't smoke," she muttered. "Stop it." Hermione reached for the cigarettes, but Ron pulled them back, shaking his head.

"I didn't used to, no. But I picked up the habit a year ago. You know that." He pried one out of the pack, lit it, and tucked the rest back into his pockets.

"Why?"

"Being an Auror is stressful, Mione." Ron took a thick drag and held it for a moment before exhaling. The hand holding his cigarette shook, but the rest of him remained still. "These help me cope with flying off the handle. -And, if what you tell me is true, these won't kill me, anyway. I'm already dead."

"Ron," she scolded. The corner of his lips turned upwards, despite his anger. He took another successful puff of his fag and offered it out to her. She shook her head, and he shrugged, knocking the tip of ash into the ground below. He stared out into the parking lot for a time, not saying anything at all, only trying to calm himself. When he seemed sure he wouldn't raise his voice, he tossed his cigarette to the ground, snuffed it out with the toe of his shoe, and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I don't want it to be true. It just can't be."

"Believe me, I don't want it to be real, either. But it is."

"...Diggs wouldn't kill me," Ron mumbled, shaking his head.

"Not your Diggle, no. This is all a fantasy life. The real Diggle… he's much more of a headache."

"Headache is putting it lightly, don't you think? Considering we're talking about my own murder." Ron cleared his throat. "How… how does it happen?" He glanced down to her ring again, trying so very hard to will it to be his own. He absentmindedly began to turn his wedding ring around his finger with his hand while prying his eyes away.

Hermione didn't want to tell him. But she knew she must. "You were working on internal affairs in the Auror Department. Noticed money missing, traced it back to Diggle. You… um… you confronted him about it," she squeezed her eyes shut tight, willing the words to come. "He showed me his memories. You were kind, even then. He asked you to let him explain, and when you arrived at the place you were to meet…" She choked back the urge to cry. "He conned you. Tried to get you to join his ranks, but you refused." Sniffling into the back of her sleeve, Hermione forced her eyes
open. "You drew your wand. He rendered you unconscious and… there was this box." Their eyes met. "A Pandora Box. It's soul purpose was to drain someone of their magic. And once enough magic is obtained, it explodes. He locked you away with it." She wondered if telling him Draco's responsibility in all of it would send him over the edge, so she withheld for now.

Ron paled exponentially, fumbling in his pockets for another cigarette. Hermione reached out, stopping him from completing his actions, compelling him to listen.

"I'm so sorry.."

Firm hands reached out suddenly, and she found herself being pulled into a gripping hug which nearly toppled her off her feet. "I don't want to be dead."

Though she knew he was entirely serious, she still laughed. "No one does, Ronald." Her laugh set off a chain reaction, and he did as well, nestling his face into her hair. Warm hands gripped her tight, rubbed soothing circles down her back. "I should be comforting you," she admitted, though she loved his touch.

"It is a bit much to take in all at once." There was a pause. "How's my family?"

"They miss you terribly, but I still come for the holidays. It makes it easier on them, I think."

"Gin?"

"Baby number three on the way." She laughed. "A little girl. Lily."

"That's wonderful." His voice held so much sorrow. "Harry. How's Harry?"

"As broken as me, I'm afraid." She leaned back and held his face in her hands, studying every detail. "You motivated him to work harder, to become better. He became Lead Auror -not Diggle."

"And… Malfoy?" He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to broach the subject. "How does he come into all of this?"

She sighed. "It's… complicated."

"With Malfoy, it usually is." Ron searched her eyes. "I'm not going to even try to begin to understand how you could fall for him. It's… well, it's bloody disgusting, isn't it?"

"He's different than before," she automatically defended. "We worked together to bring down Diggle and developed something in the process. He has a little boy -Scorpius. Having a child changed him."

"I highly doubt that…"

"Ron, be serious."

"I am, Hermione. I just don't get it. But... maybe, I'm not meant to." He gave a sad, lopsided grin. "Understanding's never been my strength. That's what you're for." Leaning forward, he kissed her forehead. "I want to believe this is all some delusion you're having, but… something inside me says it's real. I can feel it in my bones. -So... if I'm dead, what am I doing here then?"

"This mirror is meant for Diggle to face the repercussions of his actions and feel remorse. But he means to trap us here and -oh, Ron. There's just so much going on, and if we don't get out of here…"

"Malfoy's going to die."
"Yes."

They stared at each other.

"You love him."

Her cheeks warmed. "Yes."

Ron's face scrunched up, and his nose crinkled as if he were smelling bad cabbage, reminding her of Harry. "Really, Hermione?" He raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Ferret face?"

"Ronald."

"Blimey..." He shook his head. "That snarky git won my girl's heart?" He snorted a laugh. "Fucking Hell." Then he scratched the tip of his nose. "I think I'm going to be sick." With gentle fingers, he reached down and clasped her hand in his, weaving their fingers. "I love you."

Those three words fractured Hermione in the most exquisite way. "I love you, too."

"Look, we both know I'm, um, not good with words. So... You're... you're my home..." His free hand tilted her face up, his fingers gently resting underneath her chin. "I don't tell you that enough."

Sniffling, she smiled back at him. "You're always with me."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't tempted to ask you to stay," he admitted. When she opened her mouth to speak, he cut her off. "-But I know I can't. Forget about Malfoy -I can't take you away from Harry, too. I don't think he could take it. He's so sensitive." He flashed her a depressed wink. "Will I... I won't exist, once you're gone, will I?"

Hermione reached up and touched her heart. "In here."

It was in moments like these, with Ron's hand in hers and that goofy grin on his face, when all the world felt like a fairy tale. Love -true love -never goes away. Not really. Hermione realized this the moment Ron tilted his head forward, eyes fumbling closed before he pressed his warm lips to hers. Time scattered and crumbled in on itself. The world was a simple grey pallet against Ron's soothing aura. His kiss, so gentle and foreign, slipped her into a nostalgic trance that made her hands cradle his cheeks and forced her up on her toes to deepen the kiss. There was nothing -nothing like the taste of Ron, and this mirror image of him fit every memory, down to the softness of his tongue. She sobbed into the kiss, refusing to break it, even when heavy tears spilled down her face.

Before she knew what hit her, Ron had backed her up into the building's wall, resting a large hand on the back of her head to dampen the impact as her back collided with the bricks. He pressed his body against hers, throwing himself into the heated kiss, his free hand smoothing down her cheeks to wipe her tears. Hermione whimpered when he pulled away and smiled gently.

"I want you to remember that," he said, grinning larger than before. "Every version of me, real or not, loves you unconditionally."

Hermione nodded, breaking out into a smile despite her tears. "I love you, too. So much."

"And... Malfoy?" he sneered the name dully. "Does he love you?"

"Very much so."

"And you're in love with him?"
"Ron, I know you won't understand-"

"Do you?"

"Yes," she replied, meekly.

"Yeah. Still disgusting. That's going to take me a moment to process." Ron stuck out his tongue, though his tone was teasing. Hermione swatted him on the arm, and he continued, "Alright. Let's do this, then." He pried them both off the wall. "And I'm not doing this for Malfoy. I'm doing it for you. -Let's go find Diggle and fuck up his day."

Greg Diggle snorted a laugh, staring up at the obnoxiously large silver M boasted on the medical shop door. Such prideful creatures, those Malfoys. But how did Draco fair in this alternate world? Greg supposed if he never attempted his nefarious deeds, he would have never met Draco Malfoy, and, therefore, would have never introduced him to his ex-wife, Astoria. It came as a bit of a surprise to him when he spotted, through the doorway, the witch seated at the desk of the shop, sipping tea and reading. He narrowed his eyes, pushed open the door, and listened to the ding of magical chimes announcing his entrance.

Astoria looked up from her book, smiling sweetly. "Welcome to Malfoy Apothecary."

Greg smirked, glancing about the shop. It was riddled with shelves of colorful bottles, labeled for headaches, colds, dragon pox, and more. "My," he said, "what a selection you have."

"Thank you -is there anything I can help you find today?"

"Yes. An old acquaintance, actually. Possibly the owner of this shop. Draco Malfoy?"

"My husband. I'm afraid he's out at the moment."

"Shame." Diggle clicked his tongue. "Husband, you say?"

"Yes."

"Well… Draco, certainly, faired a special prize, didn't he? Not quite as fetching as the dollop in my eyes, but you were always a pretty thing."

Astoria's smile faltered slightly. "Well, you're a charming one, aren't you…"

"Forgive me." He gave a small bow. "Do you know when your husband might return?"

"I'm unsure." She raised a superior eyebrow. "But I could tell him you stopped by, Mr…?"

"Diggle." Greg flashed a set of his pretty, white teeth. "Gregory Diggle, Lead Auror of the Ministry of Magic. Well, soon to be. Once I'm sworn in."

The chime of the bell rang out once again, and he turned around, not expecting whom he found standing in the doorway, but glad to see her nonetheless. "Hermione! What a pleasant surprise! You're a quick tracker."

"All I needed to do was follow the scent of manure," she quipped back, crossing her arms. "We need to chat."

"By all means. Shall we do it here?" Diggle threw his hands up and gestured to the shop. "I take it you did read the sign on the door." Giddy, he chewed his lower lip, noticing the small twitch at the
corner of her mouth. "Yes, you did, didn't you? Forgive me, where are my manners? Mrs. Weasley, I'd like you to meet." He waved his arm over to Astoria, "The wife of our dear friend, Draco. What did you say your name was, love?"

"Astoria," the witch replied. "And I didn't."


"That's hardly any of your concern," Astoria sneered gracefully, crossing her arms. "Look, Mr. Diggle. I have no qualms about escorting you outside on your posterior. If you'd please be so kind, do take your leave, or I'll be forced to kick you out myself." She waved a slender arm towards the door.

Hermione, instead of replying to Greg, or even giving into one of his taunts, moved past him and reached out, grasping Astoria's bare arm. "You're cured."

"Excuse you! Take your hand off me at once!" Astoria moved to draw her wand, but Greg was quicker, pulling a newly discovered wand out of his pockets (hurrah for alternate realities) and brandished it at the witch.

"If you harm my friend, I'll be forced to harm you." His protective nature towards Hermione short circuited any common sense he had, even when he knew it wasn't prudent. "Answer the lady's question." He noticed Hermione's glare and added with a smirk, "Please."

"I'm not sure how the two of you knew about my condition," Astoria said, wrenching her wrist out of Hermione's hand, "But if you must know, Draco cured me."

"Cured you? How?"

"Look around, dear." The witch smirked. "My husband is one of the most sought after theoretical alchemists in Europe. He double majored in Healer magic as well as magical Chemistry."

"No. No, that's not right." Greg shook his head, angered by her words. "Draco Malfoy is a self-centered twat who wallowed in self-pity, vainly trying to obtain a way to remove his Dark Mark."

Astoria considered Greg carefully, narrowing her eyes. "Perhaps, in the beginning, when I first met him. But the moment he learned of my blood curse, he threw all his efforts into saving my life. Successfully, I might add." She looked to Hermione. "Who are you?"

"She's my wife," came the voice of Ron Weasley, simultaneous with a new chime from the door as he stepped inside.

Hermione felt the flutter of her heart, and her lips pulled back in a smile as her eyes connected with Ron. He grinned back at her, blue eyes twinkling with happiness. "Hi, babe."

"You know I hate it when you call me that," she said with a laugh.

Diggle glanced between the two. "Oh, goody. Just what I need. -Look, Weasley, if you've come to try and guilt me, it won't work."

"I dunno, Diggs," said Ron, spinning his wand in his fingers, perfected from years of practice. "I'm pretty convincing, when push comes to shove. Of course, when I talk, I don't spout out bullshit everywhere I go."
"Says the pale imitation."

Ron's face fell, and his cheeks burned bright. "And whose fault is it I'm not the real thing?" He took a step towards Diggle. "You can stand there. Insult me. I don't care. I might not be the smartest, or the most cunning, or the bravest, but I have one thing you never did -Hermione." Another step closer. "And that just eats at you, doesn't it?"

"Hmph." Diggle rolled his eyes. "It used to. But then I took it all away in the blink of an eye." He raised his wand. "By killing you, I set her free."

"You can't, honestly, believe that," Hermione gasped.

"Think about it," he said, glancing her direction. "This oaf was never good enough for you. He's right. He doesn't have the brains, guile, or the gut to be with someone as fetching as you."

There was that word again. Fetching. It was a trigger for her in so many ways, and like lightning, her hand went to her wand and she ran forward, poking Diggle square in the Adam's apple with the tip. "That day in front of the Wizengamot -was that all a lie!?"

"No, Hermione," he whispered gently, leaning into her wand so that it pressed harshly against his throat. "I've told you before, I never lied to you. I was sorry. I let the Gray consume me, and in doing so, I was sorry for taking the one you loved the most away from you. But if he's what you desire, far be it for me to stand in the way of it."

"And in return, you kill Draco," she whispered softly so Astoria could not hear. "Funny, it doesn't seem like penance as much as revenge to me."

"Whatever's going on here," Astoria piped up loudly with a bored edge in her tone, "could you not take it outside?"

"No worries, ma'am," Ron smiled, passing Diggle and stepping up to the counter to present his Auror badge. "Deputy Auror Ron Weasley. This man is a criminal."

"Maybe in another world," sneered Diggle, "But here, I'm a saint. -And your superior, I might add."

"Well, like you said before, Diggs. This is just a pale imitation."

"I don't have time for this." Diggle stepped back, preparing to, no doubt, Apparate. Until, he found he couldn't. He stared in horror, glancing about the shop. Quickly, he backed his way to the door and reached for the handle, which flared bright orange and burnt his hand, causing him to yip forward, away from the offending object. "Set some traps, I see."

"Not as brainless as you claim, I guess," Ron smirked, crossing his arms. "Come on, Greg. Face me like a man."

"You're an image in a mirror. Hardly a man."

"You're a murderer." Ron flexed his hands, cracking his knuckles while balling them into fists. "Out of the two, I think I'll take the former."

Diggle snorted a laugh. "You have no idea why I want to stay in this mirror, do you?"

"Probably something to do with feeding that ego you've got," Ron countered, glancing to Hermione. "He's like a stronger-jawed version of Malfoy."
"Do not compare me with that loathsome inbreeder," Diggle spat out. "You want to know why I stay, Weasley? Why I have no guilt in my heart? I'm sure it's no surprise to our dear Hermione, considering she's the brightest witch anywhere she goes." Hermione's heart gave a startled leap in her chest, and she prayed he wouldn't say the words. It was in vain. "Because I've offered her a way to bring you back, and she refuses to take it."

Ron lowered his wand. "What?"

The front of the shop tinkled, and the door swung wide open, revealing a tall, slender man with his arms full of paper bags. His silver eyes settled on the sight before him; his wife tucked behind the counter, two men with their wands drawn, and… "Granger?" He scrunched his face up.

"Draco."

Hermione, for half a moment, felt compelled to greet him with a warm smile, but then she remembered -this wasn't her Draco. This was a figment version of him. A could have been. One who set his bags down on the floor and, very slowly, reached for his wand in the holster of his belt. "Astoria. Is everything alright?" His eyes fell on Ron. "Weasley?"

"How'd you get past my wards?" Ron said at once, scrunching his face.

"Well, they weren't that difficult to outmaneuver, were they? It makes sense, now, how I was able to bypass them so easily, considering they came from you." He glanced to his wife. "Astoria?"

"I'm fine. They're all a lot of barking lunatics, but I'm fine. Yet, somehow, that one-" she pointed to Hermione, "-knew about my condition."

The room grew quiet as Draco crossed the shop directly up to Hermione and stared down at her with superiority and confusion. Hermione thought he might say something demeaning, or perhaps grill her with interrogative questions. Instead, when he was no more than a foot away from her, he smirked. "Astoria, do you know who this frizzy haired mess is? This," he gestured to Hermione as if she were a planted pot, "is the decorated 'War-hero', Hermione Granger. Brightest witch of our generation and all that." He rolled his eyes. "So it's no wonder she figured out your plight, considering she's an insufferable know-it-all with her talons in the Ministry."

"Oy, oy!" Ron said, "That's my wife, Malfoy! Watch your tongue."

"Shut it, Weasley. You're in my shop, violating about seven Ministry regulation rules, if I'm not mistaken." His gazed lingered over Hermione. "Weasley, hmm? Suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You always did have a soft spot for oddities. My condolences." Draco's eyes trailed over to Diggle. "Who are you?"

"Gregory Diggle," he replied, extending his hand. "My apologies for my colleague's outburst."

Draco raised a haughty eyebrow, eyeing Diggle's hand but not taking it. "So you're an Auror then? What's the phrase dear?" He called to his wife. "Aurors never age?"

"That's the one." She nodded.

"Look, we don't have time for this." Ron charged across the room in a flash, giving Diggle no time to counter as he punched him square in the nose, knocking his wand out of his hand in the process. The resounding crack of Diggle's nose being broken echoed inside the small shop, and three pairs of eyes watched in horror as Ron threw Diggle up against the shelving of the left wall. "Look at me!" he shouted. "Fucking look at me, you worthless peice of shit."
Diggle laughed like a mad man, throwing his head back against the shelf behind him. "Ohoh… that… that packed a punch." Without warning, Ron jerked him forward and then back, smashing his head into a bottle in the process. Blood poured from Diggle's ear, but he only chuckled with a daze of dizziness. "I can see why you like him!" he called to Hermione. "He's got matzi!"

"Shut up!" Ron shouted at once. "You don't talk to her! You have something to say, you say it to me. Get me?"

Hermione saw, out of the corner of her eye, Draco poised to stun with his wand, and countered it with a quick flick of the wrist, "Peterificus Totalus!" His body tensed up, and in a fitted rush, he fell backward onto the floor. "Sorry." She pointed her wand at Astoria. "I really am. Please, don't make me."

With a maniacal laugh, Diggle leaned forward into Ron's face. "Such a loyal lap dog you are, Weasley. This must be so difficult for you, knowing you don't exist."

"Oh, I exist alright, Diggs." Ron narrowed his eyes, rarred his fist back, and smashed it into Diggle's jaw. "And I don't care what you have to say. You're going to shut up and listen. Got it? I've had one Hell of a day." Both his hands dug into the wizard's robes, and with brute force, he slid him down the rows of medical vials, knocking some of them to the floor. They cracked and hissed as pretty smoke fell out of a few, while others bubbled and eroded the wooden slats beneath their feet. "I won't let you stand there and fuck up Hermione's life not once, but twice!"

"Hahaha! Is that what I've done? Weasley, Weasley, Weasley. Look at your little outburst! Is this," he wiped his bloody mouth, "any way to act in front of the woman you love?"

"Don't talk to me about love, Diggle," spat Ron, "Don't you fucking dare." He threw Diggle to the floor, causing him to land on his arm. Crack. Diggle cried out in pain, but Ron simply kicked him over onto his back before taking his foot and jamming the heel down into the broken arm.

"Fuck!"

"I might not be real, but I bet that pain is, isn't it?" He twisted his foot harder, and Diggle seethed between clenched teeth, throwing his good arm out in search of his wand. When he didn't find it, he drew his hand into a fist and rammed it down on Ron's ankle, but he wouldn't be budged. "I hope you realize the pain you're feeling now -it's nothing compared to what you've done to Hermione." Ron dropped to his knees, pinning Diggle under his weight while drawing his fist back and whacking Diggle in the ear with it.

"Look at her!" Ron grabbed Diggle by the scruff of his collar and yanked him up, even as he sputtered blood. "She's already lost me! How much more is she to endure at your hands? Own up! Apologize!"

"Never." Diggle shook his head as it bobbed. He was, obviously, disoriented. Blood poured from his nose. His left eye was swollen. Still, he managed to smirk. "Don't you see? I can give her this. I can give her you. -I don't want her forgiveness. I want her to be happy."

"Murdering Malfoy won't make her happy. I'm not real." Ron's face flared red, and his eyes watered. "I'm not real…" His voice quivered. "You want her happiness? How about you ask her what she wants for a change! You can't make her decisions for her!" He sniffled, angry and solemn all at once. "If she doesn't bring me back, that's her choice! It isn't yours to make for her! You shouldn't force the people you love into doing things because it makes you feel less guilty! Love is giving the person
you care about a choice and accepting whatever they decide!" He drew his fist back, ready for another blow, but caught himself as Diggle winced beneath him. "Love is letting them go, even when you know it'll break your heart."

Hermione swiped at the free flowing tears down her face. "Ron…"

"You care about Hermione? You want to make it up to her? Look at me! Own up to the fact you took that choice away from her! Look me right in the eyes and admit you made a mistake by killing me! Admit that you never really loved her! Admit you're worthless, and a murderer, and own up to what you did!" He pulled his fist back.

"I admit it, alright!?!" Diggle threw his hands up. "I took that choice away! But you should see the way her life turned out! She moved on from you, Weasley! And with the man who developed the weapon which killed you, no less!"

The tension in the air hung so thick one would think it would suffocate all those in attendance. Very slowly, Ron's eyes trailed up to find Hermione, who couldn't remember how to breathe.

"Malfoy created that box?" He scowled. "When… when were you gonna tell me, Mione?" His face resonated with betrayal.

Her wand quivered in her fingers, gripping it so tightly she ran the risk of snapping it. "It isn't as simple as that, Ron. Draco didn't create it to explode. Only to drain the power. -He holds himself accountable every day for his transgressions."

"As he should," Diggle interrupted, catching Ron's attention. "You really want to send her back to marry the man who aided in your untimely demise?"

Ron faltered, releasing Diggle's collar and sending his head crashing into the floor. For a moment, it looked as if all hope was lost. Ron's eyes drifted over to the stiffened Malfoy across the floor, hurt etched in eyes. Then he looked to Hermione, licking his dry lips. "Why? How… can you forgive him?"

"You wouldn't blame Ollivander for Fred's death because he created the wand which caused it, would you?" she whispered. "Ron, Draco's in trouble. Please." She knew she walked a tightrope, but she had to try. "I can't lose him, too."

His face softened, and, with a heavy sigh, he nodded. "Okay." He pried himself up off of Diggle, yanked him up by the broken arm, and forced him on his knees. "Look at her."

"You're not going to, honestly, subject me to this, are you?"

Ron fisted Diggle's hair and turned his head to Hermione. "Look. At. Her."

Diggle's emerald eyes turned to Hermione.

"Admit your mistakes to her. Mean it. If you care about her... you'll do it. Otherwise, you're no better than the man who killed your father."

Ron smiled sadly, meeting her stare.

"I never told you how beautiful you always were to me. Or… how I always love the way you chew on your lip when you're thinking. Or even bossing me around." He laughed, a single tear falling down his face. "I loved every moment, Hermione." He sniffled into the back of his hand. "Bloody Hell… I'm gonna miss the Hell out of you."
Hermione laughed between tears. "I miss you. Always."

"I lov-"

And then, he wasn't there.

Hermione blinked, and the medical store was gone; in its place: a white, vast nothing. The only other thing in this bleak eternity was Greg Diggle staring at her with wide-eyes. He said nothing for a time. "Have I..." He stared down at his hands. His arm was no longer broken. He wore the same robes from before the mirror. "Is it true? I've never thought myself... like him." He pinched his eyes shut tight. "I remember the pain the night I watched my father slip through my fingers. How devastated... how unearthed..."

And then, there were tears.

Greg Diggle was crying, softly, prying his eyes open to look at her. "I never once considered how I put you through that same pain. I... I see it now. Oh God... what have I done?" He fell on his knees, eyes shut tight and his head in his hands. He rocked forward and backward, lost in his own little world. "Sorry..." he choked out. "I'm... I'm so sorry..." His hands came out, and he fell forward at Hermione's feet. "I'm no better than him, am I, Hermione? I'm no better than my father's murderer..."

So many thoughts drifted around her head, each one begging to be analyzed for hours on end. But she ignored all of them, except for the one, obvious deduction: Greg Diggle was broken. There was a guilt in feeling satisfied for it, but it was far outweighed by the moment of triumph. She extended a slender arm and placed a gentle hand on Diggle's head. "Swear your allegiance to me. Promise to keep Draco safe, no matter the cost. This is how you will prove yourself in my eyes."

"I-I promise." Diggle peered up at her through reddened eyes. "You have my word."

"I'll need more than your word, Greg." She offered out her hand. "I'll need your vow. Your Unbreakable Vow."

Draco's heart pounded as they stepped out of Weasley's vault and headed back towards the cart, sword in hand. Harry insisted he didn't want to carry it, and Draco agreed he wouldn't mind taking on the responsibility. Tonklin eyed the sword with great interest as the two wizards bundled inside the cart, but said nothing as he started up the vessel with a bit of magic and set a course back the way they came.

As they neared the corner they were to meet Hermione and Diggle, his stomach twisted. What if things hadn't gone according to plan? What if Hermione were in danger? He gripped the sword tighter, making sure he dare not touch the stone, though it was tempting.

His heart slammed wildly in his throat as they turned the roundabout, and he released a sigh of relief. There, standing next to a disheveled, but otherwise healthy-looking Diggle (disguised once again as Dean), was the love of his life. She wore a determined smile on her face and held a thick, familiar book tucked under her arm.

"Feeling better?" asked Harry as the cart came to a stop.

"That depends on your definition of better," muttered Diggle, swooping into the box first to take a seat next to the Lead Auror. Hermione approached slower, her gaze only on Draco, causing his stomach to knot in the loveliest of ways. He offered a hand out to her, and she took it, her touch warm and inviting.
"How are you?" he asked quietly.

A single tear escaped her eye as she took a seat and wiped it away. "I'll be alright." She touched her fingers to her lips and smiled, thoughtful. "I'm going to be better than alright." Her hand squeezed his. "I have you."

"Damn right you do," he whispered into her ear. "I'm not going anywhere. You have my word."

"I'm holding you to that. You're to stay alive, you hear me?"

"Are you kidding me? And sully up my perfect face by becoming a corpse? Don't be daft." He smirked, whispering, "I'm here. Always and forever. No matter..." He glanced down at the sword, and then the book. Now, there was nothing stopping the inevitable. Nothing to stop Weasley from returning and shattering Draco's perfect world. "No matter what choice you make when this is all over."

To Draco's relief, not a word was said the rest of the way to the entrance. In fact, no one spoke a word until they stood back on the streets of Diagon Alley. It was Potter, who, after cloaking the sword with a spell, finally broke the silence.

"Well," he said, looking around to the group, "Who's ready to kick some Malfoy arse?"

Chapter End Notes

Until next time! Please leave a review? I worked really hard on this chapter, and would love your thoughts!

~A.
The feedback I received from the previous chapter was nothing short of spectacular! Oh my goodness! Thank you to everyone who read and reviewed this last chapter, because it gave me such inspiration to continue on with this story and give you (hopefully) some amazing dramione fanfiction. This chapter, originally, was going to be one long chapter, but, after some careful consideration, I came to the conclusion that it needed to be broken up into two parts. So, expect a second chapter up this week sometime soon. I promise more Jameson, Astoria, Scorpius, Dean and crew next chapter. Expect some big reveals, along with a fun build up. Hopefully, these two chapters will leave you wanting more.

Special thanks to waymay, of course, for her diligent efforts in keeping me up to task, even when I nag the crap out of her. Special love to her and to LightofEvolution this week. You both are amazing, vibrant women that I could only hope to mature like one day. In the meantime, my childishness and I applaud and thank you.

~A.

It's not the way that you saw your life
The one you love she's not your wife
You only wanted to make your father proud
And buy your mom a house

If you could do it again
How would you do it
Would you go back
And do what you never got round to

But you know, yeah you know that's not how it works

If you could be someone else
Would you do it
If you could choose from a shelf
Would you take a new self

But you know, yeah you know that's not how it works

"If You Could" by KONGOS

"Are you sure you two want to do this?” Harry asked, fidgeting nervously with his wand as he stood in the center of the room. Hermione, kneeled across from Diggle, who also held the same stance, nodded.
"Yes."

Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced over to Draco, who sat in the very corner of the Inn's provided bedroom, leaned against the wall. His knees were drawn up, and he glared towards the pair with an obvious disdain. He was nervous. It was written over every line in his face. He made his opinion known the moment Hermione proposed it to the other Aurors: he didn't trust Diggle, and he didn't want to watch as his future wife bound herself to him in a killer contract. He knew what it felt like first hand to be on the end of one, not once but twice. And he didn't want her caught up in it.

"It's the only way," she said to him quietly, earning a scoff in return as he tore his eyes away from her. She would talk to him about it once they were through.

"Shall we get this over with?" Diggle sneered bitterly, offering out his hand. He refused to look Hermione in the eye since they arrived back at the tavern, no doubt absorbed in his new found guilt. He would need to look at her, however, when the spell was cast. Otherwise, the repercussions could result disastrously. Hermione, in a show of confidence, thrust out her hand and clasped Diggle's tightly. It was, then, he chanced a glance at her, the dark circles under his eyes ever prominent. He nodded once, firmly, and gave a half-smile. "On we go."

Harry stepped forward, extending his wand arm and pointing towards the pair. "On the count of three? One."

"Two." Hermione swallowed a lump in her throat.

Diggle pursed his lips. "Three."

"Will you, Gregory Diggle, do whatever it takes to ensure Draco fulfils his Unbreakable Vow?"

"I will."

A thin stream of flamed rope emitted from Harry's wand, coiling around their hands like hot wire. The sensation burned but only slightly.

"And will you stand by his side, no matter the outcome, and ensure his safety as well as his life?"

"I will."

Another curling of flames, much tighter this time.

"Even if it means sacrificing your own?"

Diggle frowned, though he nodded and said, "I will."

A final strip of flame escaped Harry's wand and bound their hands tightly together. The flames burned brighter for half a moment before fading into their linked hands, leaving behind a faded red mark where the fire ribbon once lay.

"It's done," Harry said.

Hermione released Diggle's hand at once and rose to stand. She didn't dare look over to Draco -not yet, in any case. She and Harry exchanged telling glances before he looked down to the downtrodden Diggle and said, "Right. Let's go."

"Go?" Diggle muttered aimlessly, staring at the floor. "Go where?"

"Do you, or do you not, want to ascertain, once and for all, who your father's murderer is?"
"You… would do that?"

"Not my idea. Hermione's." He gestured towards the brunette. "She pointed out even if you are the world's most insane criminal, your father still deserves justice. So, let's go look into Lucius's memories. Maybe you'll see something she's missed."

Another scoff was heard from Draco's corner of the room, but the rest of the party ignored him. Diggle glanced up at Hermione, face stern and soft all at once. "Thank you."

There was a tear in Hermione's emotional barrier - she still loathed Diggle with a passion, but she also felt pity on the man. Ron's memory had done a bang up job of breaking the nearly impenetrable psyche of Greg Diggle, though she still wondered how well she could trust it, even now.

"Come on." Harry walked to the door, Diggle following closely behind. "Let's give these two room to talk."

When the door shut behind them, Hermione turned to Draco, crossing her arms. "You could have been a little more supportive, you know."

"Oh, yes. Let's do that. Let's be supportive of putting someone else in harm's way on my account? Even if it is fucking Diggle…" Draco pulled his knees to his chest, resembling Scorpius after he threw a temper tantrum. Like father like son.

"Is that what this is about? You're… worried for Diggle?"

"Worry is putting it strongly." A cold smirk cracked his exterior. "Don't get me wrong. If the sod drops dead, it'll be swift justice for all the pain he's caused. But I know the burden of an Unbreakable Vow, and how heavy it weighs on one's chest. I wouldn't wish it on my greatest enemy." He simmered in his own thoughts for a time, giving Hermione the cue she needed to sit down beside him. "I can't wrap my head around it. How the mirror was able to crack him open like a dragon's egg."

"Ron." She could already feel the tears pressing under the surface of her eyelids, begging to be spilled. She fought them back, for now, hoping to ease his mind. Though, she knew that was a fantasy. Anything she said about the events in the mirror would only shake him. But they needed to be said, and she needed to be the one to say them. "Even after death, he can build a pretty convincing case."

"Are we talking about Diggle now? Or you?" His silver eyes drifted in her direction, but they concentrated on the ringlets of her hair, never quite meeting her gaze.

"I suppose I deserve that," she whispered, scooting closer to him. Hermione didn't take no for an answer as she reached over and wove their fingers together. "Ron's death is always there, just beneath the surface. We should have known it would come up, eventually."

"We've been fooling ourselves into thinking we could ignore it. -And now, with the stone and the book…” He cleared his throat. "Well, I could use a drink. Shall I fetch something from the bar downstairs and bring it up?"

She nodded, daring a soft smile. "Something strong, I imagine. We're going to need it."

An owl arrived late afternoon informing the search for the estranged kitten would be called off, and the hold on the Auror Division would be unfrozen. Dean sighed a breath of relief when he received the news, though he still didn't feel confident in the knowledge he would escort two of the wizarding
world's most hated socialites home. It wasn't that he despised them - quite the opposite. Narcissa Malfoy, for all her cold upbringing, seemed to have a softer interior when given the opportunity. And Lucius Malfoy, the bastard he was, still posed no threat anyone, what with his powers stripped away. If anything, he pitied them as he gathered his coat and casework from his desk, hastily shoving papers into his briefcase.

Auror Jameson, to no surprise, arrived at the edge of Dean's desk, arms folded and face stoic. "Any news?"

"No. But Luna will get to the bottom of it. She's great at her job, no matter what the tabloids say."

"Isn't the Quibbler, in itself, a tabloid?" Dean's eyes snapped upwards to Jameson, who added, "Pardon. I meant no disrespect."

"You wanted someone without the Ministry's teeth sunk in already, remember? She'll get there. Just give her time."

"Of course." Theodore nodded. "Thank you again, Auror Thomas."

"Sure." Dean pocketed the last of his things and forced a smile, despite feeling overworked and emotionally spread thin like butter. "Although, I can't help you if I can't get ahold of you. - I'm all for an owl for pleasantries, but the wizarding world really should catch up with technology."

"It is my understanding that electronic devices short circuit easily around magic."

Sigh. Of course, Theodore would have an answer to everything. "Maybe there's another way." Dean sat his bag down, pulled out a two spare bits of parchment from his desk, and waved his wand about. Then, he handed one to Jameson. "Two-way parchment."

Jameson stared down at the paper with awe. "Creativity at its finest."

"More like childishness - but it'll get the job done. If either of us have something to say to each other, we write it down. Yeah?"

"Yes." Jameson nodded. "Agreed."

"Great." With a hefty tow of an overly stuffed briefcase, Dean made his way over to the Malfoys, who, once again, found themselves in the corner of the room, shunned by most. Astoria Greengrass was in the process of buttoning Scorpius's coat a healthy footage away, and it took everything in the Auror not to go up and say goodbye. Duty before personal endeavours. "Missus Malfoy. Mister Malfoy. Are we ready to leave?"

"That sounds marvelous," Narcissa replied, patting her lap. Though her tone was chipper, her face said it all; she was emotionally drained, same as Dean. "Perhaps... you'd like to join Lucius and I for dinner?"

"Cissy," snarled Lucius, but she would have none of it. "I make an excellent roast, when push comes to shove. My mother's recipe. We could speak on happier times..."

Dean knew where she was going with this. She wanted to discuss Draco: his life before now, of Scorpius, and all she missed. It was easier than thinking of the alternative: discussing Draco rotting in a cell right about now.
"Sure, Missus Malfoy. I'd appreciate it."

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There's a rustling in the trees. Harry stands next to Diggle, watching him stare around the soon to be crime scene. He recognizes the look from years of working together; Greg is casing the area for important details. A pop nearby catches both their attentions, and they turn together, following the sound. Three cloaked figures stand near the edge of the road. Their backs are turned.

Diggle makes no qualms about crossing the threshold of the soppy grass (it looks like it's rained recently), stopping just short of the Death Eaters -obvious from the masks they wear.

"Are you sure he will be here?" asks one, his voice low and gruff.

"Do you doubt me?" This second one is higher and carries arrogance.

"This wouldn't be the first time you've been a disappointment to the cause."

A scoff. "This coming from someone who spends most of their time with their tail tucked between their legs? Do not get cocky. I am still within the Dark Lord's favor. A high bit more than you."

The third figure remains quiet, staring down the road as headlights breach the horizon.

"Are you sure he will have it?" sneers the first voice.

"My sources are absolute. He knows the location. We will simply need to… persuade him to talk."

Greg audibly snarls under his breath, balling his fists. "No doubt about it. Lucius Malfoy."

"Yup," Harry agrees. "The second one sounds familiar. Crabbe Senior, I think?"

"Pudgy enough to be," comments Diggle, circling the rounder Death Eater. "Though I never came across him personally to know." He looks to the third cloaked figure. "Which leaves door number three…"

The headlights brighten as they approached, and it's written all over Diggle's face: the torment, the anguish. Watching this murder will not be easy for him. Good, Harry thinks. Let it be a reflection of what he did to Ron's family and friends. Let it be a reflection of the pain Hermione and I have suffered these three years. Let him hurt.

When the car is but a small distance off, Lucius raises his wand and whispers, "Noctes." The engine roars once before sputtering and clicking. At the same time, the headlights dim, then fade. The car comes to a rolling stop before the three, silent as the grave. Only the wind howls through the tree branches, casting an ominous impression on the scene.

The car door creaks open, and a man steps out of the car. He wears a tailored, three piece robe ensemble, which fits his slender frame quite nicely. He wears his brown tresses slicked back, accentuating his rugged features. All in all, he looks precisely like an older version of Diggle, save but for the eyes, which are narrower, blue, and hold a sense of wisdom far beyond his years. As he steps around the car door and shuts it, he unclasp the first button of his robes and tilts his head. He might appear calm on the outside, but it's written in his eyes: he's nervous.

Douglas Diggle clears his throat. "So, it's come to this, has it?"
"We needn't shed blood here tonight," says Lucius, stepping forward. "We come only for that which is requested. Have you brought it?"

A chill jolts down Harry's spine. This is his first witness of these events, and already, the tables have shifted. He watches Greg hackle, sputtering out, "No. No, he wouldn't-"

"I have. As agreed." From inside his pockets, Douglas presents a book. "But I must have your word on this. My family is to be left alone."

"Of course." Lucius steps forward, his hand out. "As agreed."

Douglas is poised to hand over the book when the third Death Eater finally reacts, stepping past Lucius and waving his wand over the tome. There's a hiss, and with the flick of the wrist, the book is sent hurdling across the road, landing smack into the car windshield. "You dare present us with a fake?"

A smirk traces Douglas's lips. "I suppose Death Eaters aren't mindless trolls as previously perceived."

"Insolent-" The man raises his wand arm, but Lucius grabs it and yanks him back.

"Calm yourself. Think rationally." He pushes the Death Eater back behind him and steps up to Douglas, squaring him up nose to nose. "You would do well to heed my warning and show gratitude where it should be given." He snaps his fingers in Crabbe's direction. "Search the car."

Crabbe Senior makes quick work of stripping the car bare, searching for any unforeseeable magic. "It's clean. It isn't here."

"You test my patience, Diggle. Your ties to the Ministry will not protect you out here." Harry recognizes that tone instantly. He's heard it in Lucius Malfoy's voice many times; it's desperation. "After all, how will a lowly squib such as yourself defend against three of The Dark Lord's most faithful followers? You'd do well to answer our questions, or we'll be forced to play rough."

"Do what you will. I do not fear you."

Lucius replies back with a smirk of his own. "That is a shame."

"Why do you waste time with this worthless swine?" sneers the third man behind his mask, wand already pointed at Douglas's head. "Crucio!"

Douglas falls to his knees, crying out in unspeakable pain. All Diggle and Harry can do is watch helplessly as he writhes before Lucius, teeth gritted and face reddening.

"We need him!" Lucius shouts.

"It's obvious he doesn't wish to share his information willingly. It is up to us to work on behalf of the Dark Lord. Or have you forgotten your oath?"

Lucius falls quiet as the spell is released from Diggle, who hacks sporadically to catch his breath. Crabbe Senior (presumably) walks up beside the two and brandishes his own wand. "You lot can't have all the fun, now." He points his wand, and white light shoots out of it, slashing across Diggle's face. Giant welts rise up as if he were hit with a small, hot iron. "Heh. That's an improvement, wouldn't you say?"

Douglas is shaking now, on his knees, but still he does not give into the torment. He simply stares up
at the men challengingly, daring them to continue. There's another moment Harry recognizes in Lucius - the want to discontinue their efforts, but he pushes onward, grabbing Diggle up by his hair and tilting his head up. "This is a stroll in the gardens compared to what will come. Make this easier on yourself, won't you? Perhaps your death will be painless, at best."

Strong silence sits between the two, until Diggle spits on the mask covering Lucius's face. "Have at me! I will gladly die tonight if it means keeping the Gray away from the likes of your kind!"

"Crabbe. See to it our dear Diggle has a lesson in what it means to respect his superiors." And with that, Lucius steps aside, letting Crabbe take the lead with his powerful fists - Harry winces as he watches Douglas get pulverized again and again, not by magic but through brute strength. It's terrifying, horrific, and he can only imagine how Greg must be feeling as he watches. Harry saves himself, deciding to stare at his ex-Auror counterpart instead. The amount of dismay on Greg's face, paired with the gritting of his teeth, say more than words could ever. He's forced to watch his father get beat into a pulp in the jaw, the nose, the ear, the eyes. He watches as Crabbe tosses him to the ground and gives a swift kick to the ribs. Bones crack. It's humbling in ways that can only be described as pure terror. Douglas begins to vomit blood, but Crabbe continues kicking, hitting, leaving Diggle's face nearly unrecognizable.

Finally, he crouches down beside the broken man and smirks. "I don't need magic to take care of a pompous sod like you." He grabs Douglas up by the scruff of his bloodied collar and stares, hard, into his eyes. "Got something to say, squibby?"

Douglas gargles on his own blood. How he is still conscious is anyone's guess. He manages to say, just above a whisper, "D-Death to the Dark Lord."

Crabbe raises his fist, but it's Lucius who catches it, holding him back. "Enough. If you kill him, the Gray will be lost to us forever."

Crabbe snorts an indigent laugh and jerks Lucius off of him before standing. "Go on, then."

Lucius steps forward, leans over Douglas, and tucks his hands behind his back. "Do you really think a worthless squib such as yourself will make any headway in The War? Think of your family, Diggle. Think of what will happen should you deny us what we seek?"

"I-I am." Douglas falls back against the street, his head smacking on the concrete. It's obvious he has no energy to sit up a moment longer. "I b-believe in Harry P-Potter."

A sinking hits Harry's stomach, and he chances a glance back at Greg, whose eyes have already drifted to the Auror. "He said that a lot, you know. Any time I would question our place in the War. 'I believe in Harry Potter.' He makes a displeased sound in the back of his throat and crosses his arms, turning back to his father.

Harry is about to answer but then thinks better of it. No need to poke the hornet's nest.

"This is shite," says Crabbe, removing his mask. "We should just kill 'im and get it over with!"

"He's right, Malfoy," says the third man. "It's obvious we shall receive no further information from him. We should have some... fun." The chuckle which escapes his lips is nothing short of maniacal.

"That laugh... " Greg narrows his eyes.

"You know it?"

"Jugson..."
Lucius removes his mask as well, releasing his mane of silver-blond hair. "The Dark Lord's success could be elevated by the use of this object. We should continue our interrogation as planned."

"As if I'll take orders from the likes of you." Jugson points his wand at Lucius. "Maybe once, but not now. You're simply a subservient footrest to our Lord's 've grown soft -the Dark Lord sees that. It is obvious this squib needs to be taught his place in the world." He leans over Douglas and jerks his sleeve up, ripping the fabric in the process. "I suggest you clench your jaw, less you bite your tongue off. This will hurt you more than it will me, after all." Jugson presses his wand into Douglas's flesh and begins to carve, the tip lighting up in red.

Slowly, he carves the S. The Q. The U, I, and finally, the B. Each letter brings forth a new sense of agony in Douglas Diggle as he cries out, screams, and jerks helplessly. His body is far too tired to struggle, so he sobs as his arm cuts open like a hot blade being pressed into his skin. When it's over, he puts his free hand over his face and tenderly cries.

Harry snaps his eyes over to Diggle, who allows a single tear to drip down his cheek. There's more heart here than Harry has ever seen him give. More humility. More humanity. That mirror must have broken him something good, or, at the very least, somewhere inside the calloused individual still beats the heart of a man. He reminds himself there's a monster inside, too. A dark, feral creature who has only recently been tamed. But for how long remains a mystery.

Jugson laughs, throwing his masked face back with enjoyment. Then, like slow motion, he jerks his wand upwards, shouting, "Ascendio!" Douglas flies up into the air. "Ascendio!" Further he goes.

"What are you doing?" Lucius shouts.

"Having some fun, Malfoy! You should try it sometime. Ascendio!" Over and over he sends Douglas higher into the air, letting him fall a ways before doing it again. Fear grips Harry's heart as sympathy courses through his veins. He wants to step in, to stop it all. He isn't the only one.

Greg charges the memory of Jugson, falls through his body, and topples to the ground. The scene continues, unabashed.

"Remember this, squib! Because I come for your family next!"

And with that, Jugson withdraws his wand and sends Diggle on a crash course towards the pavement.

"No!" Greg shouts just before the body cracks against the rough surface.

Harry closes his eyes. He can't will himself to look a moment longer.

"Father!"

He doesn't need to open his eyes to know Diggle takes off at a dead run towards his father.

"Greg!" Harry shouts. "You can't save him."

With a flurry like mud being mixed from the bottom of a lake, the scene dissolved around them, and Harry pulled his head from the Pensieve. He yanked Diggle out as well, meeting green eyes as round as gold galleons. Diggle's breathing was rampant, but after a time to collect his thoughts, he settled into an icy, fixed stare.

"You said Jugson," said Harry, "Are you sure?"
"Yes. I'd remember that laugh anywhere. He laughed the entire way through his sentencing. I was the Auror to bring him in, after all…"

Harry nodded, knowing the name sounded more familiar than just another Death Eater from the past. "Jugson's already in Azkaban- He's the same Death Eater who-" He cut himself off, realizing…

Diggle nods. "-Yes. He murdered Dean's father, too."

Chapter End Notes

Please, leave a review if you could? It fuels my fire and stokes inspiration. Selfish, I know. I'm still working on that.

~A.
Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone for your wonderful reviews! My hat goes off to waymay, who stayed up and helped me proof this chapter. She's so kind, and such an inspiration. ~A.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lift me up on my honor
Take me over this spell
Get this weight off my shoulders
I've carried it well
Loose these shackles of pressure
Shake me out of these chains
Lead me not to temptation

Hold my hand harder
Ease my mind
Roll down the smoke screen
And open the sky

Let me fly
Man I need a release from
This troublesome mind
Fix my feet when they're stumbling
And well you know it hurts sometimes
You know it's gonna bleed sometimes

"Sweet Talk" by The Killers

Half a bottle of firewhiskey into Hermione's recounting of her time in the mirror, and Draco could already feel the whisper of alcohol's breath against the back of his neck, beckoning him to drown his depressing sorrows. It stung like bees down Draco's spine as he listened to her tell of Ron Weasley's act of heroism. The kissing… well, that was something else entirely. Something he would stew about six ways till Sunday. But it was her retelling of Weasley's final words which had Draco knocking back his whiskey and staring intently at his bride-to-be.

Even a mirror image of Weasley knew what love was. It was about sacrificing one's own happiness for those they loved. Draco knew all about that. The stone and book sat not five feet away from them on top of the dresser.

When she finished, Draco nodded once, poured himself another glass, and downed the whole thing in one go.

"Say something," she whispered.
"Fuck."

His lips curled up at her frown.

"I was hoping for a bit more than an explicit."

"You don't know me at all."

"Draco."

"-Hermione, I don't know what you'd have me say." He noticed how she barely touched her drink. "Even in death, Weasley trumps me five to one. I'm never going to be able to compete with him."

"He's dead."

"But he won't be." Draco glanced to the nightstand. "We both know it-"

"Draco."

"-It's just a matter of time."

"Draco!"

"No, bugger it, Hermione! We're talking about this!" He slammed his glass down on the floor and glared at her. "I want to be mad at you. I want to be so fucking mad at you for kissing some mirrored version of your dead husband, but I can't. Because I know what he meant to you. I know if it weren't for my doings, you'd still have him."

"You don't know that."

"The Hell I don't. I'm so sick of everyone excusing me for my transgressions. Not just you -Potter, Dean, Astoria. All of you learned to forgive me so easily -covered up my involvement in some psychopath's estrangement because you all feel some sick sense of loyalty to me. But I won't have it. You can't always look the other way and pretend I didn't do the things I did, Hermione. I thought, for a long time, I could... that I could imagine a life like this." He shook his head. "My dragons are finally coming to roost. If I die tomorrow-"

"-You're not going to die. You hear me? You're not. You promised." A tear slipped down her cheek. "You promised me you were too stubborn to die."

"I might not have a say in the matter come morning, love." He threw her a cold smirk. "And if it happens, I need you to promise me something."

She wiped her tear and sniffled into her sleeve. "I won't promise you anything, because you're not dying."

"Oh, and you honestly think Diggle's going to make sure I don't bite the dust?"

"The bastard is self-preserving. I'm counting on it."

"Stop it." He shook a finger at her. "Stop trying to protect me. I'm not a little boy. I'm a grown man."

"A man with a death warrant."

"Yes! And I made the choice! -Hermione." He lowered his voice, trying to calm his nerves. "You know I love you. But I've been giving this some thought -quite a lot of thought, actually."
"Giving what thought?"

"My death, of course." His eyes were full of sadness. It literally oozed out of every pore. "Diggle might come through, he might not. But he won't stop it, if my time comes. I've done a lot of bad things. I've harmed too many people, and I can't take back what I've done. But if I die, Hermione, you aren't to bring me back."

She stared evenly at him, though the corner of her lip twitched ever so slightly. "Preposterous."

Frustrated, Draco rubbed at the stubble on his cheek and attempted a new way of approaching it. "Out of the two of us... if you were given the chance to bring one of us back... it should be him, Hermione."

"Ron's dead. He's been dead for years." She dipped her head low, staring at the floor. "I love you."

"But out of the two of us... you were never meant to be mine." He cleared his throat, feeling nervousness spread through his system. No, he needed to say it, damn it. Nerves be damned. "Believe me. I want to be alive. But when this is all over, you're going to need to come to a decision. And if I'm dead, I don't want you to have to decide anymore. If I die, that's it. I'll have atoned for my sins. Bringing me back, and not Weasley, wouldn't be fair."

"And what of Scorpius? And Astoria? Dean? Harry? Your mother? What would you have me tell them, Draco?"

"That I didn't want to come back," he replied. "You tell them the truth."

"This isn't fair!" she shouted. "You're resigning yourself to die!"

"I'm facing facts! It's time you started to as well! Merlin's beard, Hermione! I'm not a Saint! I've done terrible things! If anyone deserves a second chance, it isn't me." He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to ease his breathing. "It's Weasley."

"And if you live, Draco? What will happen then?"

"Then... I'll respect whatever decision you come to. It's what I expect of you, after all." He made a point to narrow his eyes and pierce them directly into her soul, standing his ground. "Weasley is dead. Do I think it's unnatural to bring someone back from that? Of course, I do. But do I understand why you'd want to? Hell yes. And when it comes down to the line, I'll gladly step aside to make you happy."

"You make me happy," she insisted, scooting her way across the floor until her knees touched his. Then, she placed a gentle hand on his leg. "I love you, Draco. I'm not settling for you, for Merlin's sake. I fell in love with you because, despite your flaws... the potential for your soul is astounding." She stared gently into his eyes. "Yes, you've done bad in your life, but haven't we all? That first day we practiced your Patronus, do you remember how many tries it took you? Two. Two tries. Not even Harry accomplished something like that. -There's so much good in you, Draco. I see it. You told me you wanted to become an Auror to build a name for your son. Don't you see what you've accomplished?"

"None of it would have been possible if you and Potter didn't cover up my transgressions to the world," Draco grumbled, a flush washing over his cheeks.

"We did it because everyone deserves a second chance."

"Even Diggle?"
She frowned. "That's different."

"No, love. It isn't." He leaned forward, drawing their faces closer together. "You know I love you. You know I'd give anything to make you smile." He reached over and traced her cheek with his thumb. "But given the choice of two men, I'd rather you take the one who deserves you."

"You deserve me. I deserve you. We deserve to be happy -together."

He smiled, sad. "You know I want to believe that. But things aren't always as simple as that, are they? I'll promise you this: I promise to try to stay alive, if you promise not to bring me back, should I fail. Can you do that for me? Please?"

He listened to her jagged breathing, watched as tears fell down her cheeks. He hated making her cry, but he was mighty good at it.

"You're impossible, you know," she whispered.

He leaned forward a bit more and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. "I know. You wouldn't have me any other way, though, would you?" And then he pulled her against him, on the floor, and held her, the bottle of firewhiskey long forgotten about. Tomorrow, they would face terrible hardships. Tonight, all that mattered was her breath against his neck and her heartbeat. As long as she was alive, it was enough for him. As long as everyone he loved was safe, he would be fine, come what may.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

---

Auror Jameson stepped through the Floo first, wand brandished as he took in the grand den of the Malfoy Manor, determining its safety. No grey kitten loomed over the sofa, but he would need to make a sweep of the grounds to assess the wards and double check. The fireplace whooshed behind him, and out bounded Scorpius, with his mother in tow.

"Mummy, again! Do again!"

"No, sweetie," she said, a hint of aggravation in her tone, "Not again, I'm afraid."

"Awww..." Scorpius released his mother's hand and ran over to Jameson. "You take me?"

A small swell of pride filled Theodore's chest, and he exchanged warm glances with Astoria before saying to the boy, "Perhaps once I'm done with my rounds."

"What wounds?"

"Rounds, Scorpius. I need to check your home for..." He thought of how best to put it. "-for any silly things that shouldn't be here."

"Ooh! I help! I help!"

"No. You need a bath," Astoria said, pointing up to the staircase. "And some supper, and then off to bed with you. -I really can't believe we spent all of our day in the Auror Division. I never was this near invested with the Ministry when I was married to your father! Now, up you get. Go find some bath toys from your room. I'll meet you up there shortly."

"Okay, Mummy," Scorpius charged up the staircase with inhuman speed. Toddlers had far too much energy, Theodore noted thoughtfully. When Scorpius was out of sight, Astoria walked directly up to
Theodore and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You're simply wonderful with him. Thank you."

Theodore felt the familiar crawl of blush spread across his cheeks. He was so unaccustomed to the sensation, but lately, in Astoria’s presence, it's all he ever seemed to do. He swallowed a thick lump in his throat, his mouth suddenly dry. "Of course."

"Would you care for some dinner? I can have the elves prepare something."

"Actually… would you mind if I cooked?" Theodore offered.

"Let me get this straight. You're handsome. Intelligent. Gentle. Impressive with a wand. And you cook?"

He blinked, not getting the message. "Yes. I suppose so."

"How is it a witch hasn't snatched you up already?"

Theodore gave a gentle smile, feeling a pang of sadness in his heart. "Another story for another time, I'm afraid. I'll see to the house and then begin preparing dinner." Something inside of him took control, and he found his hand at her cheek, stroking down the ivory skin with tenderness. "I'm very pleased I was assigned to you, Miss Greengrass."

Astoria's green eyes glistened back at him, and she brushed her lips against his palm, sending an electric current up his spine. "As am I, Auror Jameson."

"Would you care for more, Auror Thomas?" Narcissa offered, holding out a bowl of roasted garlic potatoes. Dean, leaned back in his chair, unhooked the button of his pants and cast his hands up, shaking his head.

"Couldn't possibly, Missus Malfoy. Three helpings is my limit, I'm afraid." He gave a lopsided grin and patted his stomach. "You're a bloody brilliant cook. I'm surprised Draco wasn't the size of a car in school."

"A… car?"

"Er… muggle device. For travel." Dean attempted to sit upright, but his stomach was so full he found himself back against the splat of his chair, so he resigned himself to it. "Harry and Ron flew one to school our second year."

"Yes, it was all over the papers," Lucius replied curtly, so disinterested in the conversation one might think him asleep if his eyes weren't already open. "Cissy, I'm not feeling my best. I think I will retire for the evening."

"Let me get you your tea, then," she offered.

"No. I'm fine." Lucius coughed, proving to the table he was, most certainly, not fine. Still, he ignored the concerned look from his wife and stood, reaching for his cane. He allowed her to feed him a few loving pecks on the cheek and lips before he left the dining room without another word, heading towards the staircase of their chateau.

Dean watched as Narcissa sighed and began to gather the plates. She didn't even bother to use magic, so far gone in her thoughts. So, Dean did what he'd always done best; he used humor to
lighten the mood.

"Are all Malfoy men born with a wand up their bum, or is that a right of passage?"

"A Malfoy man is, unfortunately, shaped into his cool demeanor. It was that way with Draco as it was with Lucius. However, I do hope our sweet Scorpius has enough loving individuals in his life to prevent said wand from going up said bottom." She flashed a cheeky smirk and handed her plates to a nearby house elf. "Tell me about him. My grandson."

"Scorpius? Well, he's a good kid, I can say that much," said Dean as Narcissa took her seat back across from him. "Sometimes spoiled, but not the way I imagine Draco was."

Narcissa raised an eyebrow. "You assume Draco to be spoiled as a child?"

"Well… wasn't he?"

She chirped in laughter, giving way her daunting persona. "Despite my best efforts, yes. Lucius would let that boy want for nothing."

"Though it seems like now the things he wants, money could never buy him."

"You speak of our approval on Miss Granger."

Dean nodded. "If he gets out of Azkaban, he's marrying that witch. Not a damn thing anyone says or does could get in the way of that. But I know it'd mean the world to him if you supported it."

Narcissa sighed, bringing her stemmed wine glass to her lips to sip from the burgundy liquid. "Contrary to what you think you know about my husband and I, I assure you, Draco has my full approval."

"He does?"

"Of course he does. I've spent the better part of ten years trying to win my son's affection's back to no avail. That he should find happiness can only bring about my own. Lucius, on the other hand…" Her eyes trailed to the doorway. "When I met him, we were children. Though he tried to carry his father's spirit about him, I knew better. He always had the capacity for good in him. But his father snuffed it out."

"How does one go about making a xenophobic arsehole?" Dean asked politely. "And why would a nice lady such as yourself marry him?"

"You're not very subtle."

"Wasn't trying to be."

They glared each other down, assessing one another. Finally, Narcissa gave in. "Abraxas Malfoy was a man of many hats. Patriarch. Political Influence. Pureblood Pride. He expected nothing less than perfection, so he married Winifred, a beauty of perfection but with sawdust in her head. Lucius's only substantial influence in his life was his father, who carved out any hope for Lucius's humanity and replaced it with a longing for acceptance. It is, after all, why he asked for my hand in the first place."

Dean blinked, processing her words. Then he furrowed his brow. "Come again, Missus Malfoy? Are you telling me your husband didn't marry you for love?"
"Oh, no. I dare say he loved me, and I him. But, it was no secret I was not who he truly desired above all else." She laughed lightly, downplaying the seriousness of her words. "We all loved someone before we love another. For Lucius, her name was Irma. She was successful, beautiful, pureblood to boot, but Abraxas only saw her love for others as weakness. I suppose that's why Lucius chose me, after all was said and done. While I might have a heart, my mother taught me one thing: never show your cards to the table." She took a strong pull of her wine before continuing. "You ask how I could marry a man like him, but for me, it was simple. Deep inside, despite all that Abraxas had tried to wretch out of him, Lucius still carries that glint of kindness. Draco didn't get the capacity for compassion from me, I'm afraid. Only his need to hold all of his cards close to him."

"Are you kidding me? You're plenty compassionate."

"Only to those of value to me. I care nothing of strangers or acquaintances. It is a flaw I've lived with all my life. But my son doesn't hold this trait. Despite what he says, he cares a great deal for the world, the same as Lucius. It's why they're so passionate, you see. While Lucius might have sided with the wrong side of the War, he only joined because he thought he was doing it good."

Dean snorted a disbelieving laugh. "Massive genocide of muggleborns is good?"

"I did not say it was right. Only that he thought it was. My feelings towards the muggleborns has, and will always be, indifferent. Draco mistakes my indifference for disapproval, but I still do not think him any lower simply because he wishes to marry this muggleborn witch. As long as she is good to him, and a fit mother for Scorpius, what do I care?"

"Damn, Missus Malfoy. That's cold."

"That's about as good as you'll get from me, Auror Thomas."

Dean nodded, feeling his cell phone buzz in his pocket. He reached down, pulled it from his pockets, and checked the screen. "Erm, excuse me. I'll be right back." He found a quiet spot on the balcony outside of the dining room and pressed the 'call back' button, pulling the phone to his ear.

Ring. Ring. Click.

"Dean?"

"Hey, Luna." Dean grinned. "You've no idea how great your voice sounds right now."

"I imagine it sounds a bit higher. This is the Trunberry mating season, you know, and they tend to sprinkle the air with higher concentrations of helium, which would make my voice sound higher, and thus more appealing to those of the opposite sex."

Merlin, he loved this woman. Even if she was raving mad. "Great. That's... cool, Luna. But did you get anything on Bolt?"

"Yes. Do you have a pen?"

"I always carry the one you got me for our anniversary," Dean said with a smirk, reaching into his breast pocket and producing said pen. He pulled out the two-way parchment, which would relay everything to Jameson on the other end, and braced it against the patio table. "Lay it on me, babe."

Dinner went well enough. Theodore cooked roasted carrots, snap peas, and cauliflower in a mixture of seasonings paired with a thick cut of lamb, which, apparently, was mighty impressive according to Astoria. Scorpius, however, turned his nose up at it and demanded pancakes. Theodore offered to
make some for the lad, but Astoria forced five bites out of him before sending him up to bed with a kiss on the cheek.

"He needs to learn pancakes are not acceptable for every meal," she explained when they were alone.

"Are you sure about that?" Theodore grinned. "He might be on to something."

Astoria's eyebrows shot up, impressed. "Did you just make a joke?"

"I believe I did."

"I didn't know you were capable."

"When the need suits me," Theodore shrugged, "I find I can be quite humorous."

"So it seems." She shot him a wink. "One simply needs to look at your face."

It was Theodore's turn to raise eyebrows, and he did. "Is something wrong with my face?"

Astoria laughed into her hand as she stood from the table, sauntered around it, and leaned over, touching nose to nose with him. "Never change, Auror Jameson." Slowly, she found her way into his lap, wrapping one arm, and then the other, around his neck. Theodore only stiffened in his chair, far too afraid to say anything. This gorgeous, intelligent, wondrous woman was sitting in his lap. Words escaped him. They seemed plenty fine from her mouth, however. "Did I ever tell you why Draco and I divorced, Theo?"

He shook his head meekly in response.

"I thought, at first, it was because of his Auror status. I've never found the profession endearing, mind you. My father made it clear Aurors lived short lives and to never involve myself with one. And yet, here I am, with you, and all I can think about is kissing your lips. Why is that, do you think?"

Hot. It was entirely too hot in this Manor again. A few cooling spells would come in handy right now… "I haven't a clue, Miss Greengrass." Though he nearly wished she would act on her impulses; he could never bring himself to.

"I think it's because I know I, myself, haven't long to live." Her green eyes searched his, telling.

Theodore frowned. "You speak of your illness. The one which darkens your veins."

She nodded, pulling back her arm to slip her sleeve up and reveal her blackened wrist. There were tears in her eyes, but Astoria Greengrass was a strong woman, and she stayed her crying. "A blood curse. It skips generations, but I'm the lucky candidate this time around." She laughed depressingly. "The knowledge it will not touch my son gives me great joy. -All this time, I wanted to live out a full life. And now I find myself falling for you, and I fear by putting myself in your way I'm disabling you from finding someone of whom you could truly give everything to." She glanced down to his lips, once, before removing herself from his lap entirely. Astoria, in her embarrassment, brushed down her dress skirting and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "Listen to me, going on as if we're meant to be. We barely know each other. Forgive me for my forwardness."

Astoria made to leave, but Theodore reached out, wrapping his fingers around her wrist to halt her. Hazel eyes met green, and he found himself once again wishing he knew how to read faces. To Hell with it all, he would say what he had to say and be done with it. "I feel as if I've known you my
whole life, Astoria. Perhaps we did know each other in a past one?"

A smile breached her face, and she nodded thoughtfully. "It would explain a lot, wouldn't it?"

"You could still, very well, live a prosperously long life."

"Says the man with a death warrant hanging over his head every time he steps out in the line of duty. You're one to talk about the longevity of life."

"Well, then." Theodore attempted a smile. He hoped it would do. "I promise to stay alive if you will."

Silence. And then…

"That so?"

"Yes."

In a flourish of movements too fast for Theodore to comprehend, Astoria threw herself forward and into his arms, landing a thick, robust kiss on his lips that had him nearly falling out of his chair. Hands found their way through his hair. Lips brushed against his own. Then a tongue. By the gods, this woman tasted divine. His hands found life of their own, despite his eagerness to remain chaste with her, and they traveled around her waist, pulling her into his lap once again. Minutes carried on until the grandfather clock in the corner of the room struck nine, startling them both enough to cease their ravenous make out session. Astoria grinned ear to ear as she planted one last kiss, this time to Theodore's cheek.

"I best go kiss Scorpius goodnight."

"Of course." His ears pulsed with warmth.

"You'll stay the night, of course?"

"Of course. I'll be in the room down the hall, should you need me."

Astoria sent him a saucy wink as she plucked herself from his lap —yet again. "Need you, Theodore?"

"I… what I meant was—"

She placed a finger to his lips, silencing him. "Settle down. I knew what you meant." Her finger dragged down his lips in the most appealing way. "I'll see you in the morning, Theodore."

"Theo," he whispered. "You… you may call me Theo."

"Right… Theo."

And with that, Astoria Greengrass departed from the room, leaving Jameson a puddle of hormones, confusion, and elation in his chair.

At a quarter past midnight, Theodore finally managed to find the will to douse the fires in the den's hearth and sleep, though he couldn't bring himself to crawl the staircase to the guest bedroom as planned. It was far too close to Astoria, and he wasn't sure he could stop himself from tucking himself in the doorway just to watch her sleep.

Was that as creepy as he thought it sounded? Great Circe, what was happening to him?
He was just about to check his two-way parchment from Dean, just to see if anything new had developed, when Scorpius's Sneakoscope, abandoned on the coffee table from earlier this evening, began to spin like a top.

"Interesting…"

Theodore reached for his wand, brandishing it in front of him. He plucked the Sneakoscope from the table and rested it in his free hand, circling around the room. The closer he walked towards the hallway nearby, the quicker the scope began to spin. Yes, he knew it was simply a toy, but a toy not to be taken lightly. He pocketed the object, prepared himself, and leaped out into the hallway.

"Aha!"

No one was there.

"Well… that was mildly disappointing."

"Auror Jameson?"

Theodore whipped around to find Astoria standing in front of him, dressed in a thin negligee which left little to the imagination. "Astoria. What- what are you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep," she said, crossing her arms. "Thought I would find myself a glass of warm milk. You seem to have made yourself at home. Playing pirates?"

Theodore tucked his hands behind his back, thoroughly embarrassed. "My rounds."

Astoria raised an eyebrow, noticing his blush. "Of course." She unfolded her arms, and Theodore tore his eyes away at once, trying very hard not to notice the pert breasts nearly spilling out of Astoria's nightgown. He was raised with manners, after all. "Are you alright, Auror Jameson?"

"Astoria, please. Theo will do, as I've said," he muttered. "Aren't… you a bit cold?"

"Cold?" Astoria glanced down, and then she laughed. "Oh. No." Her head drew back up, and she stared at him in the most peculiar way. "Do you find me attractive, Theo?"

Damn it all. The cooling charms he set to his clothes earlier must have worn off, because Theodore couldn't think straight, too flustered. "If tonight's dinner was any indication…"

"Let this happen, Theo."

Theodore struggled to remain focused. A man of many morals, he felt going all the way with Astoria, without having asked her on a proper date, most certainly wasn't the way to go about wooing her affections. He opened his eyes and peered down at her, breaths overlapping one another.
from the friction in his pants. "This is much too soon."

"Hmph. You always were one for taking things slow, weren't you?" Astoria peered up at him, an unfamiliar smirk grazing her lips. Theodore scowled, eyes trailing down to his wand. There, he noticed the subtle details for the first time. Astoria's arm wasn't marked by curse.

"You're not Astoria. -Who are you?"

"Aww, Theodore. Don't you recognize an old friend?" Astoria pouted her lips. "I'm hurt. Really I am."

WHAM! Pain! Theodore fell forward, sick to his stomach from the immense, sharp pain between his legs. Stars formed in front of his eyes like white bursts, and, in a moment of foolishness, he dropped his wand as he felt to his knees.

Astoria laughed, picking it up. "Jameson, you dolt. Pretty women have always been your weakness, haven't they?" The woman before him changed in front of his eyes. Soft, chestnut hair turned dirty blonde. Stunning green faded to dusty blue. Her built grew slight, short, and nimble. When the transformation was complete, the woman leaned forward and tapped Jameson on the head with his wand, smirking.

"Lindy…"

"Don't tell me Britain's most gifted Auror is down for the count already? And we were just getting started."

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to leave your thoughts!

~A.
Hey, everyone! Sorry I've been MIA this last week. I'm recovering from being sick, as well as having some personal things go on in my life that made me contemplate why I'm writing. The things aren't happening to me, per say. But things are happening around me. Friends. Loved ones. Even those I've despised. And it made me realize how lucky I am. That's not a bragging thing. It's just... around the holidays, I think we're all forgetful for what they really mean. I've done my fair share of bad in this world. I've always come to fear my dragons will roost one day. So far, the turn in my life has been for the better, and I'm ever so thankful. I'm thankful for my husband and my son. My mother. My newly acquired friends, and my old ones. I'm so lucky to have so much. So, this holiday season, please give thanks. And remember: no matter the situation you are going through, never forget to be there for others. Let's, as a fanfiction community, be there for one another to build each other up. Not tear each other down.

Thank you to waymay for proofing this chapter, and for allowing me the experience of going with her to Harry Potter World next week! OMG I'M SO EXCITED I CAN'T EVEN. DO YOU SEE ME CAN'T EVENING?

Shout out to LightofEvolution, who needs all the warm fuzzies.

If you want to follow me on facebook for sneak peeks at chapters, to be updated on new stories and chapters, as well as communicate with me quicker, please look me up! Facebook page is 'MrBenzedrine' -handle is MrBenzedrine89. You can also find me on Tumblr, DeviantArt, and a whole mess of other social media. Go to my author's page for the info! :3 Also, expect a Christmas Fic soon!

~A.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Her dirty paws and furry coat,**
She ran down the forest slope.
The forest of talking trees,
They used to sing about the birds and the bees.
The bees had declared a war,
The sky wasn't big enough for them all.
The birds, they got help from below,
From dirty paws and the creatures of snow.
"Dirty Paws" by Of Monsters and Men

---

Theodore was livid. It took quite a bit to set the young Auror off. He was always bragged upon for having a cool head and objective point of view, situation be damned. Well, almost always. Because,
right here in this moment, he could feel the pinprick of anger cascade up his neck and into his brain, rewiring it for action.

In a quick burst of actions, he thrust his hand out and produced a hot, white ball of magic, sending it hurtling towards Lindy at alarming speed. It struck her clean in the chest, sending her toppling backwards into a portrait of Lucius Malfoy, whose eyes went wide upon impact. Lindy smacked hard into the painting, becoming disoriented enough to drop his wand. Theodore wasted no time; he thrust his hand out again, this time beckoning his wand to him with a show of wandless magic.

"No you don't!" Lindy shouted, "Expelliarmus-"

"-Protego Maxima!" A magical shield countered Lindy's spell, which rebounded and bounced off into an expensive looking vase inside a glass case. The glass shattered, and the vase tipped, ready to fall. Lindy took her chance, waving her wand and sending the vase hurling it at Theodore's head. He smashed it with a wiry red light from the tip of his wand and glared in Lindy's direction.

"That's more like it," she smirked.

"You're one of the White Wolf's animagi," Theodore scrambled, trying to catch his breath.

"Catch on quick."

"You're an Auror!"

"I was an Auror," she said, nearly proud. There was a stiffness in her tone, however, as if the words tasted bitter on her tongue. "Things change. -Serpensortia!" A white light erupted from her wand and transfigured into a snake, causing Theodore to throw up a thicker protection spell. The snake landed with a thwack before falling to the floor and hissing. Quickly, he hopped over the snake and cast a wordless transfiguring charm, morphing the reptile into a plush doll.

"Why?"

Lindy waved her wand over her head and sent a gust of freezing rain, which pelted upon impact like shards of tiny glass. Theodore, in turn, twisted his wand wrist and evaporated the water into small puffs of steam.

"Why?" he asked again.

"I don't need to explain myself to you. -You just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?" Lindy raised her wand arm to cast a spell, but Theodore was quicker, shouting, "Bombarda!" The young witch was sent flying backwards through a hallway window, the glass shattering upon her impact. Theodore rushed after her, peering his head out the window to find her sprawled out on her back, arms extended, blood pouring from a cut on her cheek.

"Shall I help you up?" he called out the window.

"Quit being studious!" she shouted back, sending a full binding curse his direction. Theodore blocked it simply and hopped out the window onto the ground just beyond the gardens.

"Lindy, let me help you." Theodore watched her wand hand twitch. "I can-"

"Stop it," she scrambled to her feet. "I don't want your help, you idiot! I want you out of my way!" With quick precision, she sent the shards of glass around her in Theodore's direction. He blocked most of them, though there were a few that managed around his spell, slicing into his shoulder. He ignored the pain and took a step closer. "Stay back!" she warned. "I don't want to do this, Theodore,
but you brought this on yourself. *Crucio!*

Theodore was quick enough to dodge the spell and retaliated. "*Impedimenta!*" Bolt was hit in the arm with a blaze of turquoise light; she tensed up, unable to move. "*Expelliarmus!*" Her wand was cast from her hand and landed across the lawn. "*Accio wand!*" It landed safely within his grip. "*Petrificus-*"  

"*Confringo!*

A fireball the size of Lindy's fist zoomed through the air. Theodore made quick use of his magic. "*Aguamenti!*" The fireball snuffed out.

"You think you've won?" she seethed.

"I'm not trying to win," he said, his voice grave, "I'm trying to understand why you would turn on the Ministry."

"The answer is obvious, isn't it?" The restricting spell released her, and she stumbled backwards. "You, out of everyone, should understand his vision."

"What vision, Lindy? Attacking children? What honor is in something like that?"

"He isn't attacking them. He's helping them form their full potential."

"You can't, honestly, believe that."

"I do!" She stomped her foot on the ground, determined. "Abraxas isn't the enemy here, Theodore. The Death Eaters deserve what's coming to them. Do you not remember how it was? What it was like? What the War took from us?"

"Of course I do." His voice grew quiet. He didn't want to relive those painful reminders. He didn't want to think about any of it.

"Then you know protecting them is wrong."

"No, Lindy," he shook his head. "I don't. *Incarcerous!*" Thin chords burst from his wand, and the next moment, she was on the ground, bound and gagged.

A shrill gasp sounded from behind them, and Theodore whipped his head around in time to catch Astoria standing at the broken window, mouth agape, eyes wide. "What on… earth…Theo?"

"Astoria," he called back. "Put the kettle on, would you? I think I fancy some tea right about now."

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"This is everything?"

"Everything Luna could find, yeah. Do you think it's wise? Keeping her here, I mean? We should inform the Ministry."

Jameson's eyes locked with Dean's, and the younger Auror shook his head. It still amazed Dean how a man of Theodore's ranking could still command authority. "-If Lindy defected from the Ministry, we can only assume others have as well. We can't make it known we have her in custody until we ascertain all we can about the situation. You should contact Auror Potter, though."

"Already on it." Dean waved his phone as Astoria, seated across the table, gave a dramatic sigh. The two men turned their eyes on the witch, who looked overjoyed to be included, finally, in the
"What will you do with her?"

"Interrogate, of course."

"I don't like the idea of that woman being anywhere in the same vicinity of Scorpius. -How did she get inside the wards in the first place?"

"That's the question, isn't it?" Dean gave a hefty smile, despite being pulled out of bed in the middle of the night to floo over to the Malfoy Manor. Lucius and Narcissa sat in the parlor room, after also being flung out of bed in the middle of the night to accompany him. In all honesty, Dean was thankful he had business to attend to now, instead of facing the wrath of Draco's parents. Especially Narcissa, who had mumbled something about 'beauty sleep' being not just for the young.

"The wards I set up were careless," mumbled Jameson as he began to pace the floor. "I took into account for animagi after the kitten debacle at the Ministry -I didn't think about metamorphagi."

"She's a shifter?" asked Astoria.

Dean picked up the list Luna sent him and exchanged glances with Jameson, who nodded his head. Indeed, it would be in their best interest to keep Astoria in the loop. "Luna says Lindy's parents died during the Second War, and she was adopted by the Bolt household shortly after. Her real name is Lindy Travers. Niece of the known Death Eater Laurence Travers."

"How could the Ministry miss something like that?" Astoria demanded to know.

"Sealed records. The adoption was a closed one -Ministry staff have no ways of looking those up without a warrant. Thank Merlin for Luna Lovegood. -But now we know Lindy's true origin."

"Which would explain why she's in cohorts with Abraxas Malfoy," said Jameson. "She's a Sacred Twenty Eight member. And a talented one at that. We can only assume he's had his talons in her for a while now…" He sighed, strumming his knuckles on the table. "Let me talk to her first. I grew up with her. Went to school… maybe I could reason with her."

"Oh, yes," Astoria snapped, waving her hand about, "By all means, reason with the witch who runs ties with one of the most powerful wizards in all Britain." When the two Aurors gave her quizzical looks, she shrugged. "What?"

"How do you know Abraxas is all that powerful?" asked Dean curiously.

"Because, dear, I was a Malfoy once. The library is full of rich family history. Abraxas was a talented wizard. Top marks in NEWTS. Excellent at wandless magic. A true tour de force."

"Yeah, well -if he's so powerful, what's he doing with all these kids?"

Jameson answered with a look of serious concern. "He's building an army. One he knows we wouldn't touch, with our morals the way they are."

"That's bang out of line," Dean mumbled.

"Indeed. Please. Give me ten minutes with her," offered Jameson. "If I can't strike a nerve, you're more than welcome to try whatever means necessary."

"Alright." Dean nodded. "Give it your best shot. We're all counting on you."
Hermione fell asleep with her head in Draco's lap sometime ago, while he nursed on his liquor respectfully. Harry and Diggle arrived through the door thirty minutes before, disheveled and unhinged. Diggle said nothing as he approached his once enemy and picked up Hermione's untouched glass before throwing it back in two gulps. Then, he poured himself another, retreated to the window overlooking the town, and peered up at the moon. Harry, on the other hand, took a seat on the edge of the bed, rubbed his tired face in his hands, and sighed.

"You two sort everything out?"

"As much as we could," Draco replied, absentmindedly stroking curls out of Hermione's face. She looked so serene like this, as if the world wasn't being held together by a frayed string. He wished he could peer into her mind and see what it is she was dreaming of (and in all honesty, he knew he could), but he focused his attentions on Harry, adding, "You look like you've seen a ghost. The both of you."

"It's… a long story," Harry said, glancing sideways to Draco. "Anyway, you should be resting. Big day tomorrow."

Draco snorted a laugh. "When was the last time you got a wink of sleep? Days, I imagine."

"Something like that," Harry gave a sideways grin, though it was hollow. "Dean sent me a text."

"A what?"

"A message to my phone."

"Oh. That muggle thing," Draco sneered dully. "What did it say?"

"Jameson has Bolt in custody."

Draco nearly flung himself upright, but caught himself at the last moment, moving gently as to not disturb his blushing bride-to-be. Hopefully. If he stayed alive long enough. "That's brilliant. Serves the little cur right, pulling one over on a Malfoy." He gave a snooty scoff to repress the feeling of inadequacy he felt. He'd been willing to believe himself the lowest of the low for allowing Lindy to die; the knowledge she was alive and arrested should have put a warmth back in his bones, but it only hollowed out his heart more. The one time he trusted someone new, let them in just a little, and they worked for the enemy the entire time. What a load of bollocks. "They get anything out of her yet?"

"Jameson's up first. Hopefully he'll get something we can use before morning."

Draco nodded his head, hopeful. His eyes trailed over to Diggle, who seemed off in his own little world. "Hey, asshat."

"Eloquent with your words, as always," Diggle's lips curled upwards, though his eyes didn't steer from the moon lighting the room. "To what do I owe the displeasure?"

"What happened in the pensieve?"

"Ask Auror Potter. I'm sure he'll love to clue you in."

"I'm not asking Potter," Draco said tersely, "I'm asking you."

"Malfoy," Harry warned, but Draco would have none of it.
"-So, what's the verdict, then? Is my bastard of a father responsible for all your emotionally unstable discrepancies?"

Finally, Diggle moved, though it was to tuck his head and stare into his glass of amber liquor. Seconds dragged on until he sighed and spoke. "It seems... I owe you an apology, Draco Malfoy."

Draco's first instincts were to glance to Harry to make sure he, indeed, heard correctly. Judging by the look of sheer surprise written across the other man's face, Draco had most certainly heard at least what he assumed was correct. They couldn't both be wrong, could they? "Pardon. I seem in need of an ear-cleaning charm, because I must have misheard you. That sounded oddly like an apology. Come again?"

"Don't be a worm," sneered Diggle, turning his green eyes on Draco. "You heard me perfectly well."

"Maybe I did." Draco forced a smirk, though his heart was pounding. "Still, it isn't every day your arch nemesis admits to being wrong. And on such a grand scale."

"I thought I was your arch nemesis," Harry said with a calculated grin.

"Things change, Potter. Don't get jealous on me, now."

"Ugh. Your blossoming friendship is enough to make me vomit where I stand." Diggle took another sip of his drink. His eyes shifted over to the book and stone nearby, but Draco wasn't concerned. He had already set up several containment spells, as well as stinging hexes should anyone attempt to remove the items before tomorrow morning. He didn't need to tempt fate by allotting one of the most dangerous criminals in history a chance back at the very thing which turned him evil. "So, what now? Who plans to wield the Gray Magic?"

"I do," Draco said firmly.

Diggle outright laughed. "You? You've no idea what to do with it. It isn't as simple as picking up a wand. There's layers of unraveling the Gray's potential."

"Hermione seemed to do just fine," Harry said flatly, crossing his arms. "Defeated you without a day into it."

"Yes, well, she's the brightest witch of our age, isn't she? -Malfoy's fear will consume him. It will consume you, Draco Malfoy. Mark my words."

"You have any other suggestions on how this works? Because we're not giving it back to you,"

Draco leered.

"I'm the most capable candidate," Diggle said definitely. "Besides Hermione. But if you let her walk in on that battle, you're walking her into a death trap. Surrounding her with purebloods with a vendetta against muggleborns? Do you think it wise?"

"She can handle herself," Harry snapped. "She's been through bloodier battles."

"And besides," Draco added, "She'd never forgive us if we kept her out of the fight. She's as stubborn as they come."

"So I'm to be offered up to Abraxas tomorrow with no means of defending myself? Or you?" Diggle pointed an accusing finger while gripping his glass. "I haven't forgotten about my Vows just yet. And I rather enjoy living. I'm to keep you alive at whatever the cost. So give me the tools I need to
"Forget it." Harry shook his head. "You're not getting your hands on the Gray again."

"Then you're sentencing both Auror Malfoy and I to the green mile." Diggle's eyes met Draco's, exchanging solemn glances. "You know what I speak is the truth. You know the only way out of this is if we work together."

"And I'm supposed to trust you? Just like that? After all the years of backstabbing and terrible things you made me do? After all that you've done?"

"You seem to forget that before you decided to walk away from it all, we were allies. I didn't force you into it. We did well as a team."

"I have Hermione now. I don't need another partner."

"And at what cost are you willing to put her in danger for? The Gray chose love from Miss Granger because she is filled with so much of it. Look inside yourself. How much love do you truly possess, Malfoy? Is it enough to sate the Gray?"

"I don't see you with a Pandora Stone to quench its thirst this time around." Draco raised an eyebrow. "So what could you possibly have to offer it?"

Diggle smirked. "Anger. So much of it. I'm filled to the brim with it. I could harness it as a weapon. My hate for pureblood elitists is stronger than any love someone could offer the Gray." He glanced to the other men and shrugged. "Think on it. You want to keep Auror Malfoy alive? This is the best chance you have."

"We'll take our chances with Hermione, thanks," Harry replied gruffly, making Draco swell with pride. At least he wasn't alone in the sentiments. "If you think we're handing over The Gray to a murderous psychopath like you, you've gone round the bend even further than we thought."

Theodore inhaled through his nose and exhaled through his lips. He did it to calm himself - the dungeons were as stuffy as they were foreboding. Lindy Bolt sat in a metal chair, arms bound behind her back with magic dampening cuffs (Ministry regulation, of course). Ten feet across from her, on the other side of the damp, stone environment sat another chair. This would be the one he would interrogate her with, once the time was right. But, for now, Theodore wanted answers: ones that couldn't be given under Ministry time. Even still, he brought down with him an ever-quotes quill, a bottle of fresh ink, and a lengthy parchment, setting them all down on the table in the far corner of the room.

Lindy stared down at the floor, eyes narrow and irritated. Even he could tell the emotion written across her face: contempt.

"I've come to talk," he said once setting up the quill. His feet echoed in the sparse room as he made his way to the spare chair and took a seat. "Just you and me."

"And an ever-notes quill," she sneered.

"I assure you, it's simply for precaution."

"Your tone indicates I rub you the wrong way."

"Oh, was it the tone?"

His eyebrows bunched together. "Sarcasm."

"Yes, Spock. Sarcasm."

"Star Trek references? Really, Lindy?"

"I'm impressed." She raised an eyebrow.

"Just because we're magical doesn't give us the right to be ignorant," he said indignantly. "Besides," he added, "It isn't the first time someone has made that reference."

Lindy nodded slowly, and then she tilted her head to the side. "So, off the record… what is it you wish to ask me?"

Theodore cleared his throat and placed his hands in his lap, wand within his grasp. "How long have you known you were a Metamorphagus?"

"How long?" she repeated the question, pursing her lips together. "Since I was seven."

"When did you realize?"

"I was at a birthday party with my friend, Trish. You remember Trish, don't you? If I recall, you were quite smitten with her when we were little."

"We barely knew each other then, just as we are strangers now," he said curtly.

"How quick you are to dismiss your roots," she noted. "Anyway, your knowledge of Trish isn't important, except for her beautiful hair. You remember how it flowed in golden ringlets down her back like honey. I'm sure you remember. No boy could keep his eyes off her."

Theodore sat quietly, waiting.

Eventually, Lindy continued. "I remember being so envious of her silky locks. I was a redhead, and was constantly picked on for it. The fact anyone associates redheads with being soulless harpies is nearly the most insulting thing." She shrugged. "I wanted her hair, and the next thing I knew, I had it."

"That explains why you're listed as a redhead on your file," he said. "Yet you're not a registered metamorphagus. Nor are you registered as an animagus. Recent discovery?"

"Hardly," Lindy snorted a laugh.

"On the record then." He sat up straighter. "How long have you been working for the White Wolf?"

Lindy sat stark still, eyes flitting gracefully over Theodore's features. It made his stomach turn in knots. "You should let me go, Theodore."

"Not on your life, Bolt. -Why are you working with the White Wolf?"

"You're so sure you're on the right side of the War. But are you, I wonder." She leaned forward. "Tell me, Auror Jameson. Why did you become an Auror?"
"That's hardly relevant."

"Oh. I think it is. I feel our resolves flow down the same path. We both lost something that day. Someone." Her eyes bore into his. "The sooner you admit it, the sooner you can begin to see my side of things. When this is all through, Theodore, you're going to be begging me to take you with me. You're going to realize why The White Wolf's way is the only way. And you're going to turn against the Ministry. Mark. My. Words."

Chapter End Notes

Please feel free to leave a review, if possible. Keeps me spirits high!
~Happy Thanksgiving to those who celebrate. I stand with Standing Rock.
~A.
Did you have to do this? I was thinking that you could be trusted
Did you have to ruin what was shiny? Now it's all rusted
Did you have to hit me, where I'm weak? Baby, I couldn't breathe
And rub it in so deep, salt in the wound like you're laughing right at me

Oh, it's so sad to think about the good times, you and I

"Cause, baby, now we got bad blood
"Bad Blood" by Taylor Swift
(Sam Tsui a capella version is best)

"Do you remember the day we met, Theodore?" Lindy's blue eyes glimmered in remembrance.

"Of course," he whispered back, straightening his posture in the chair across from her, hand clenched tight around his wand. "Under that bridge in Glasgow. My family had just returned from our stay overseas… I was five."

"So was I. Do you remember what you said to me? Back then?"

"I thought you had silly boots," his eyebrows furrowed. "I can't even remember why they were silly. Were there dolphins on them?"

"Whales."

"Ah."

"You said you'd never seen the snow before."

"My family traveled quite a lot," Theodore clarified. "My mother was a theoretical alchemist. My father was a Healer. They looked for ways to cure the sick- muggle or magical. Of course, the Ministry frowned upon their combined practices."
Lindy nodded. "If I recall, your family was in hiding. And I kept your secret."

"You were five. You couldn't understand the parameters of what such a secret was."

"Even still, I didn't tell- not a soul that I met you that day."

Theodore's eyes glistened in the dimly lit dungeons, and he clenched his wand tighter. "Which is why I'm extending this common courtesy to you, Lindy. I need you to tell me what is going on with you. This isn't the girl I knew back in Hogwarts."

"That girl was unsure of herself. She didn't have a clue in the world how life actually worked. Being a Bolt… it was dull. Lackluster. Tedious."

"Being a Bolt was the best thing that could have happened to you," Theodore muttered, jaw set tense. "All these years, and I had no idea you were a Travers."

"... For the longest time, neither did I." Her demeanor shifted, and Lindy leaned forward in her chair. A disheartened look spread across her pretty face. "You have no idea what the Ministry did to me."

"... Are you implying the Ministry modified your memories?"

"I'm not implying. I'm saying it straight on." Lindy's eyes danced with fury. "I don't remember them, Theodore. My parents. Every memory I have, since the beginning of my life, has the Bolts plastered on like a poorly constructed craft project."

Theodore shook his head. "No. The Ministry wouldn't-"

"-They would. They did. -Of course, I had no clue. Not until Abraxas appeared to me. Explained my gifts were because of my true nature."

"And so you'd abandon everything? Just like that?"

"Just like that," she confirmed. "It wasn't just because of my modified memory. That I might be able to forgive -children adopted because of the War tend to be scarred. It's why we all became Aurors, isn't it? We've all lost someone close to us. Someone we can't replace. You told me as much our first day of training."

Theodore sat quietly, knowing full well she was right. "I became an Auror because of Professor Longbottom," he tried to reason. "He told me there were ways of defending the ones we loved without the need for brute force."

"What is the Auror Division if not a stronghold of brute force?"

"It's a shield."

"It's a weapon," Lindy snapped. "An Auror took my memories away from me, Theodore. Not a Healer. Not a Memory Modifier. An Auror. Because he was in search of my uncle and found my parents instead. He tortured them for information. Right in front of me. And when he was through… Well, they were never themselves again." A sickening silence fell over the room.

Theodore swallowed audibly. "They were killed in battle. It says so in the adoption records."

"Lies."

"Then what's the truth?"
"They live. Their minds are mushy soup, but they live, in the Janus Thickey Ward. The same Ward where your dear mother resides, if I recall."

"Enough." Theodore stood up from his chair. "I've had enough of your lies, Bolt. I'll have Auror Thomas round up some Veritaserum."

"By all means. You'll be disappointed, however, when you've realized you've wasted time hunting down a lie that is, obviously, the truth."

"So why tell me any of it? What could you possibly have to gain by spilling these secrets to the Auror who has bested you?"

"I'm not talking to Auror Jameson. I'm talking to Theodore. The boy one year my senior. A fellow Hufflepuff. My friend." With a precise smile, Lindy scooted forward in her chair, tilting her head to the side. "We can heal her, Theo. We can fix your mother."

Theodore scoffed at the idea. "Impossible."

"It isn't. Auror Malfoy is hand delivering him the tools to make it happen. Haven't you wondered how the former Auror Diggle nearly took over the entire Ministry of Magic? Whatever this power is, it's strong. And formidable."

"You'd work side by side with a mad man to obtain it?"

"I'd do anything to restore what was taken from me." She narrowed her eyes. "Wouldn't you give anything to bring your mother's mind back?"

"There are limits, Lindy."

"Of course there are," she sneered. "But Abraxas will use the Gray to cure my parents. I have to believe it. And if you let me go now, we could be heroes."

"Turning our backs on the Ministry to do so wouldn't constitute us as heroes."

"The Ministry would seek to hide Gray Magic once again. They don't see its potential! Sometimes you have to do a bit of bad in order to do a whole lot of good. Even Abraxas knows that."

"How long has he had his claws in you?" Theodore asked in wonder.

Lindy purposefully ignored him, persuading, "If you let me go right now, Theodore, when this is all through, I promise to help your mother."

Theodore strolled forward, directly in front of Lindy, leaned his face close to hers, and said, in his darkest tone, "I don't know what happened to the little girl, I once knew, in Glasgow. I hope she returns to us, one day. But the woman before me now is a pale comparison of the Lindy Bolt I knew in Auror training. I will never side with Abraxas, nor will I never turn my back on the Ministry." He straightened his posture and walked to the staircase.

"What would your mother say, Theodore, if she knew you were turning your back on her?"

He paused, his back to Bolt. "She would be proud of the man I've become. She would tell me to keep moving forward and never make deals with the Devil."

"Theodore. Theodore, don't you walk away from me! Get back here! Release me! This is my only chance, Theodore! My only chance to save my parents!"
Hermione, awoke in the middle of the night to find herself tucked between Draco's arm and chest, snuggled next to him on the stiff bed of the Inn. She didn't remember falling asleep, but she must have. The darkness of the room was only illuminated by a small candle burning in the corner of the room, next to a forlorn looking Gregory Diggle rooted in a chair, waving his hand over the flame to make it grow and douse in size at his leisure. Hermione stirred, careful not to wake Draco as she caught eyes with Diggle, who gave a sideways smirk and nodded his head in acknowledgement.

"Your magic's at full strength again, isn't it?" she asked quietly, side shifting off the bed.

"Oh, Hermione. It never left." Diggle's eyes danced in amusement at her surprise.

"Why haven't you-

"-Attempted to escape? To be honest with you, I didn't see a point in all of it. I knew wherever Draco Malfoy would go, you would soon follow."

"So you stayed for me? That's not as flattering as you think."

"Oh, I'm aware." He gave a low chuckle.

"Where's Harry?"

"Downstairs. He received a few interesting texts a short while ago in reference to Auror Bolt." He shrugged. "It's interesting, knowing the woman I could have fallen in love with in another life is working for the man who wants me dead. Ironic, wouldn't you say?"

Hermione crossed her arms. "You made your choices in life."

"I did. As did you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Whatever you'd like it to mean. -Pay no attention to me, Miss Granger. I'm a bitter man trying to grasp what little sanity I do have in order to formulate a plan to keep your precious Draco, and thus myself, alive."

"I'm sure you'll think of something."

"Indeed, I already have. Unfortunately, the cavalry sees fit to keep me from it." His eyes trailed over to the dresser, and more importantly, to the Gray book.

Hermione gave a chirpy laugh. "You're daft if you think we'd let you anywhere near it."

"Yes, your charming counterparts said as much. -But you and I both know I'm not entirely off my rocker." He waved his fingertips over the flames and shifted them into a silhouette: one that fittingly resembled Draco. "What happened to your husband was my fault. I take full responsibility for my loss of sanity. But if you let Draco Malfoy walk in with that Gray Magic, with his emotions every which way they are," the flame flickered blue, then green, then black, then gold again, "the Gray will react accordingly. If he feels weak, it will become weak. It's a mirror magic, reflecting only what's already inside of us." The flames flickered in and out, and the silhouette fell to its knees. "Draco Malfoy will fail, should he try to wield the magic. He's too kind for it, but not kind enough to convince it, as you do. Abraxas most likely already expects a rebellion from his grandson. It's simply..."
a Malfoy's way, being paranoid. He will expect an attack from him. He will expect Harry's involvement. This plan will fail."

Hermione's heart deflated, but she refused to let Diggle's words soak in. "This plan has been ran through with a fine tooth comb."

"Has it?" Diggle raised an eyebrow. "Does no one think it interesting that such a bright, capable witch such as Auror Bolt would reveal herself to Auror Jameson after getting away with her own murder? What would she have to gain from it?"

She thought it over. "You're saying Bolt wanted to be caught. Why?"

"It's what I would do." Diggle shrugged.

"And you wonder why none of us would trust you with The Gray."

"I don't wonder. But I also know you can't win without me. -Allow me to offer you this thought as a peace offering: Lindy Bolt is, most likely, a distraction for something bigger."

Hermione's mind set to work, and she whittled a response in a matter of moments. "An insurance plan to ensure Draco cooperated."

"And what does Draco Malfoy care about more than life itself?"

"Oh God." Hermione clamped her hand over her mouth. "Scorpius." She ran to the edge of the bed, shaking Draco awake. "Draco! Draco, wake up, damn it!"

"Hmm? Wah?" Draco raised his tired head, groggily sitting upright. "What's going on?"

"Get up. Get up! Get up! Scorpius is in trouble!"

A fierce look spread across the father's features like wildfire, and he flung himself out of bed at once. "What the bloody Hell do you mean Scorp's in trouble?"

"No time. Grab the book!" She grabbed Diggle up by the scruff of his robes and yanked him to his feet. "You too! Up!"

With lightning speed, she tore out the door, down the stairs, all the while tugging Diggle with her. Harry lay sprawled across a booth, dozing off with his head on his robes as a pillow. Hermione saw Draco tear down the staircase as she shook Harry awake with a firm shove to his legs.

"Huh?" Harry frowned, prying his eyes open. "Mione, what-"

"Abraxas is using Lindy as a distraction. We need to get to the Malfoy Manor -now."

"Distraction? What? Where is this coming from?" He pulled himself out of the booth, slipping his robes back over his muggle clothes.

"Think about it," Diggle interjected, coming to stand next to Hermione. "I've been mulling over the last hour why someone would so blatantly make themselves known to an Auror. Especially after going through the trouble of making themselves disappear. It's no coincidence Bolt is there."

"The Wards."

"-Could be stripped, given time. And what better way-"
"-Than a distraction," Draco finished, coming to stand in the circle. In his hands, he held the book and the stone. He looked furious, but determined. "They're right, Potter."

"Alright." Harry nodded. "So we check it out. But you're not going." He pointed to Draco decidedly.

"Excuse me? Why the fuck not?"

"If you show up, and Abraxas has one of his spies around the facility, he'll know you're on our side. There's no way we're risking that."

"It's my son."

"And this could all be some paranoid delusion from a psychopath!" Harry exclaimed, gesturing to Diggle. "Exhibit A!"

"Wonderful... " Diggle muttered.

"We'll go." Hermione said, looking to Harry. "You and I. -Hand me the book, Draco."

"Hermione-"

"Give her the book, Malfoy," said Harry sternly. "That's an order."

Draco looked pained, and above all else anxious, but he finally sighed, offering it out to her. "Please. Be careful."

Hermione nodded, extending her hand for the Gray. The closer her fingertips drew to the tome, the heavier the pulse radiated from it. Her heart rate elevated as she wrapped her fingers around the spine and pulled it to her. A familiar energy purred in sync with her own magic, begging it to come out and play. "No time for formalities," she whispered, thrusting out her hand to Draco. "Cut me."

Draco withdrew his wand from his hip and ran the tip over her thumb, whispering, "Diffindo." A fresh cut appeared across her fingerpad, and Hermione opened the book, pressing her thumb onto the first page. Her blood soaked into the pages, and words appeared in front of her only she could read.

'What have you?'

Hermione released an anxious breath she wasn't aware she had been holding and said, "I recall you liked a bit of love."

The words faded into the book, and it was silent for a moment. Then...

'The Gray accepts. Hello, Hermione.'

The magic didn't seep into her like the last time; it, instead, burst from the book in a pulse of raw magic and clamped tight to her soul, painful and numbing all at once. Hermione gasped, taken aback by the suddenness of it all, but then it hummed along her bones like an amplifier, vibrating her magic to her core. With a firm slam, she shut the book and passed it back to Draco. "Right. We'll be back soon."

"I should go," he insisted. "I can't sit here knowing my son is in danger."

"You'll put him in far more danger if you leave with us," said Harry, snatching up his invisibility cloak from the booth. If you don't hear from us within an hour, wait longer. By six A.M. this morning, the illusion spells will have faded in Azkaban, and you'll both be wanted men. You can't
run the risk of someone spotting you leaving."

"I promise. I won't let anything happen to Scorpius," Hermione whispered, placing a hand on Draco's cheek.

"Go," he said, and then he kissed her. His lips were dry, and the pressure of his lips was firmer than normal, but Hermione didn't care. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tight, despite Diggle's audible scoff. Harry put a hand on Hermione's shoulder, and she pulled away, nodding once in confirmation to Draco.

"I love you."

"I love you, too. Be careful."

Harry and Hermione set off to the door, wrapping the invisibility cloak around them. The air was cold as they pushed the door open, biting at their heels. Her newly amplified magic could feel the wards around the Inn, just as she felt the pressure squeeze them as they pushed through the barriers and into Knockturn Alley.

"Ready?" asked Hermione beneath the cloak. Harry removed his wand from its holster and nodded. Together, they Disapparated on the spot, the Malfoy Manor's gate in their mind's eye.
Anachronism

Oh my goodness! So, The Wizarding World of Harry Potter with waymay was a dream come true! I have red hair (though most of you probably don't know this) and when we walked into the Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, I was wearing my Gryffindor scarf. A worker at the counter said, "Red hair... hmm... must be a Weasley." XD The other attendant said, "Does that mean she gets a discount?" At the same time, the first worker and I shout, "Nope!" And he goes, "Double the price!" How amazing is Harry Potter World? If you'd like videos and pictures of the experience, look my facebook page up! (Mr. Benzedrine, handle is MrBenzedrine89)

Thank you, waymay, for all of the wonderful memories! And for editing this chapter. lol

"Your ghosts are real
I feel them in my lungs
Breathe them in and out as I
Breathe you in and out as I'm...
Resting on your bones
Bowing to your throne"
~"Anachronism" by Crywolf

Anachronism: an act of attributing a custom, event, or object to a period to which it does not belong.

"Hello, Bolt," Dean Thomas took a seat across from the bound ex-Auror, a pleasant tone in his voice. He kicked back in his chair, gliding a friendly smile across his handsome features. Dean never enjoyed the 'bad cop' routine so many of his fellow Aurors used (cough, Draco, cough.) He found he caught more Pygmy Puffs with honey than vinegar... well... not really. Pygmy puffs much preferred ear wax and boogies... oh, that's right. It was flies one caught with honey. "Let's have a chat."

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Well, you're a ray of sunshine..."

Bolt's eyes flickered with resentment as they caught with Dean's. "Whatever you're going to do, get it over with."

"In a hurry?" he enjoyed the agitated glare sent his way in return. "Ah, so you don't expect anyone's coming for you, then. -Shame. I suppose you're not that important on the food chain." Next, he clicked his tongue. "Shame, shame, shame."

"What are you doing?"
"Hmm?"

"You're not asking me any questions. Is this an interrogation, or isn't it?"

"This is a chat -as I've said." Dean stowed his wand inside his robes and rubbed his hands together. "Auror Jameson tells me you work for the White Wolf." He waited for a response, and when he didn't receive one, he took a new approach. "I read your file. Second ranked in your training, behind Theodore. Impressive. You show a quick knowledge of wand magic, as well as illusion charms. It's how you faked your death, I'm guessing." There was a twitch in Bolt's eyebrow -small, subtle, but it gave her away. "Oh, come on. Don't give me that look. It's rather easy to figure it out, once you shift all the pieces together. So, Abraxas Malfoy comes to you. Claims you're a descendent of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, and you just jump on the bandwagon, no questions asked. In exchange, he gathers important intel from the Ministry, particularly his grandson, and you get a guarantee to gain your parents back." He clapped his hands together. "How am I doing so far? Sum it up alright?"

She fell perfectly into his trap. "I'm not a spy."

"Seems like it. Grey kitten running about in the Ministry, leaving your dirty paws all over the confidential list of potential Death Eater marks, as well as their families."

"You honestly think that's what I was doing? You're a bigger dolt than Auror Malfoy ever led on." A simple huff, and Lindy wore down. "Look, just because I work for the White Wolf doesn't mean he has his mitts on me completely. I was using that information to help the Ministry, not him."

"Care to elaborate?"

Lindy cocked her head to the side, jutting out her chin. "If I tell you, I want a full pardon from the Ministry for my crimes."

"Not gonna happen," Dean shook his head. "You're lucky if they destroy your wand and send you to Azkaban."

"Well, I'm not talking unless I have immunities."

"You're talking, whether you like it or not."

"Says who?"

"Says your caring for Auror Jameson." Dean scratched the tip of his nose, aware he was about to hit a very tender spot for her. It was a long shot, but he had to try. He ignored the vicious glare he received in return and continued, "Don't think I can't see the way you look at him. How long?"

"What?"

"How long have you been in love with him?"

Lindy raged forward, jerking against her bindings and cuffs. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Says the woman who passionately looks like she wants to murder me for even suggesting you have feelings for the man. I might not be sharp like Auror Granger, or intimidating like Auror Malfoy, but if there's one thing I'm good at, it's reading people. My gut speaks, and I listen." He leaned forward, folding his hands. "So, if you really care about Theodore, you'll tell me what's going on. You wrote your fate the moment you sided with Abraxas. But you can make this right for Jameson."
A thin line of tears hung off the bottom of Bolt's blonde eyelashes, threatening to spill. She clenched her jaw, struggled against the restraints a few more times and then gave a heavy sigh. "You've got it all wrong."

"That so?"

"Don't sound so smug!" she snapped. "I came here to warn him."

"Warn him? You attacked him in the hallway."

"Yes, well that's because…" Lindy bit down on her lip, suddenly quiet. "I panicked when I saw him. I thought changing into Astoria Greengrass would be a viable choice. But the way he looked at me when I did... It was the way I always wished he would." One lonely tear dripped down her cheek. "Why am I even telling you this?"

"Beats me," Dean shrugged. "So, you attacked him out of jealousy for Astoria?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

Lindy gave an exasperated sigh. "He's never noticed me. Not once that way. I thought I was fine with it. I even have a boyfriend, but when Theodore looked at me that way-"

"-it all hit you full force."

"Something like that." In a sweep of movements, Lindy wiped her cheek on her shoulder, clearing her tears.

"What did you come here to warn him about?"

The young Auror looked in battle with herself as her eyes fell to the floor, and she shuffled her feet beneath her chair. Quickly, Dean reached into his pockets, produced his timepiece, and noted the time.

Three… two… one…

"Abraxas is coming."

Dean's eyes shifted up to hers. "What do you mean he's coming? Coming here? And you didn't think to lead with that?"

"Of course not. I have an unbreakable vow to adhere to, after all."

Uh oh. Dean had the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as he asked, "Unbreakable vow?"

Suddenly, there was a rumbling under the foundation: one that shook the entirety of the Manor. Lindy's glum expression only saddened, and she closed her eyes. "It's done."

"Done. What's done? Bolt. What the Hell does that mean?"

"The Lord of the house has returned."

When Theodore's teacup clamored to the floor, he and Astoria exchanged glances with one another.
"That can't be good," she said.

"Grab Scorpius. Do you remember the emergency plan?"

"I'm much more useful with a wand than you think."

"Of that I have no doubt." The candles around began to flicker as a thick gust of magical wind swept through the dining area. Theodore retrieved his wand at once, standing from the table. "Go. I'll be right behind you."

Astoria nodded, fishing out her wand as she set off towards the staircase. Theodore began to cast spell after spell, attempting to replace the wards suddenly stripped from the household. Each and every spell sluffed off like water-based paint to plastic, refusing to adhere. A roar erupted from the floo down the hallway, and Theodore fell silent, wand at the ready. Carefully, he placed a wordless silencing charm on his shoes, approached the hallway, and peered around the corner. At the end of the long corridor, in front of the guest floo, stood a long, pale figure dressed in all white robes. Two hooded cronies stood on either side. One was tall and carried a bow, and the other was short and slight. No doubt, these were the two described from Auror Malfoy's debriefing.

"Bruno," said the man in white, "Go find our dear Lindy, would you? Dessy, make a run of the house and tell me how many are present at the moment."

The archer, dressed in his darkest onyx robes, nodded once. "Of course, Master Malfoy." And with that, the man with the bow took down the left hallway, while the smaller crony giggled and leapt into the air -when she landed, she touched down as a small, wispy fox with red-orange fur, moving to the hallway at the right. The man in white smirked beneath his hood and took down the straight hallway, directly in Theodore's direction.

The young Auror wasted no time, backing into the dining hall and casting disillusion charms as quick as he could. Thinking fast, he even managed to mask his scent before the man stepped in through the archway and approached the long, rectangular dining table. Theodore pressed himself as tight to the wall as he could, assessing the situation. If he acted too soon, he would run the risk of giving himself away without knowing full well what he was dealing with. Waiting was best -for now.

"Odd…" said the man in white. "I know you're here, and yet I can't sense you. What a talent with magic you have." He turned slowly in a circle, eyeing each nook and cranny of the room.

"Masculine. A hint of fear, but not enough. You're brave. A brave man has no need to fear me. I admire such valor." There was a shrug. "But, alas. I fear you're intelligent as well, as that tends to go hand in hand with courage. You won't make yourself known so easily, and so…" He walked over to the teacup on the edge of the table, picked it up, and looked it over. "Unless you plan on cleaning up the blood afterward, I implore you to come forth now." He tossed the cup over his shoulder, shattering it. Then, he produced his wand and conjured the broken pieces into a small air funnel in the center of the room.

Bollocks, Theodore thought to himself. He tried his best to tip toe across the room, toward the entrance to the hallway. But then, just as he nearly made it, the pieces of the cup dispersed in every direction. He didn't have time to shout out a protection spell. A stinging sensation swiped across his cheek, and the man sniffed the air, thoroughly satisfied. He whipped his head around, removed the hood, and smirked. "Ah, there you are," Abraxas looked directly at Theodore through the glamours. "Well, come on. Don't be shy. I don't bite... much."

Draco paced the bedroom of The White Wyvern, arms tucked behind his back. Diggle stood in the
corner, arms crossed, eying Draco as he moved. His foot tapped impatiently, glancing over at the Grey Book every few minutes.

"We could join them, you know."

"Don't start that again."

"Start what? Suggesting we do something besides sit here with our tail between our legs? Pardon my French, but shit's hit the fan, Malfoy. We don't have much of an advantage anymore."

"We don't know they're in trouble…"

"We don't know they aren't."

"And if we go and muck it all up? You'd rather take that chance? Don't pretend this is anything but an attempt to get your hands on The Gray. I'm no dolt."

"Indeed, you aren't," Diggle stepped forward, out of the shadows. "But neither am I. My life is, quite literally, dependent on yours. If something happens to your boy, you could lose the will to fight for yourself and everything you believe in. If that happens, I'm a stationary duck in hunting season."

"Self-preserving arsehole."

"Self-righteous git. You know I'm right."

Draco felt the frustration build within him, and he nearly punched the wall next to him. The thought of pain held him back. Instead, he ran his fingers through his hair, gripping the strands by the roots. "What do you suggest? Just fall in, wands blazing?"

"I suggest we formulate a plan. One with strategy." Diggle offered out a hand, surprising the young Malfoy. "What do you say? At least hear me out."

Eyeing Diggle's hand, Draco's chest tightened. "Trusting you is like sticking my hand in an electric eel tank."

"Yes, well, siding with you goes against every moral principle I stand for, but here we are."

"Moral principles?"

"Look, do we have a deal or not?"

"No. We should have faith in the plan."

Exasperated, Diggle retracted his hand back, ran it down his face, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "You're going to get everyone we know killed. For once, this is the perfect time for you to think like the villain you've always been toeing the line to avoid becoming. Do you honestly believe your grandfather—who has a thick hatred of all things Death Eater and muggle—is really going to let you join his ranks? Think about it. You're no more than a pawn to him, as he was to me. Once you're through with your vows, he will not honor your agreement."

Draco opened his mouth to argue the point, but his thoughts fell on his father, and he fell silent. Draco's grandfather managed to take his own son's powers away for bringing dishonor to the family name. Something in Diggle's words rang true. Draco was an Ex-Death Eater with a newly proclaimed adoration for muggleborns. In Abraxas's new world, there would be no room for his grandson, no matter what promises he claimed. But Scorpius—the son of two Sacred Twenty-Eight
members – he would make a perfect addition to Abraxas's pureblood order. He was fooling himself if he thought he would remain safe after the delivery of Greg Diggle.

"So, what do you propose we do?"

Diggle's eyes scanned over the book on the dresser. "We ask The Gray for help." At Draco's glare, he added, "Yes. I want the magic. But to keep us safe. Your boy needs you, Malfoy. Are you really going to deny me The Gray simply to keep me away from it, knowing the consequences?"

"You sound like a druggy with a fix."

"One taste of The Gray, and I believe you'd understand why. I'm impressed Miss Granger is able to keep such self-control -but that's beside the point. You're going to need me -full force. Full powers. Especially if Abraxas manages to get his hands on The Gray before we take him down."

Draco tapped his foot, theatrically sighing. "I can't give you the weapon you used to kill Weasley with. Hermione would murder me on the spot."

Diggle crossed his arms. "Either way, you'll be attending your own funeral."

He didn't want to admit it, but Diggle was right. He trusted Hermione -more than anything, but he couldn't trust his grandfather. And if there was any way Abraxas was preparing an attack on Scorpius, Astoria, or anyone in his home, he didn't feel right sitting idly by and waiting for the proper channels.

"Alright, Diggle. You're on. But any funny business -any at all-"

"-You have not only my word, Draco, but Bastian Cane's as well." Diggle smirked. "And we both know Cane is a man of his word."

Draco retrieved the Gray Book from its stasis charm on the dresser and felt the magic burn under his fingertips. It jumped and twisted, excited at the new prospect of being called upon. At the same time, he reached over and snatched up the Resurrection Stone; the Gray Magic swept through Draco's arm like a current, over his chest, and to his other hand where the stone resided. In a strange burst of light, Draco stared around at the once empty room, now full of distant memories.

Crabbe. His cousin, Ilene, who had died of dragon pox as a young child. Professor Lupin. His aunt, Bella. That annoying Lavender Brown from school. Colin Creevey. His grandmother, Winifred, was also there, standing alongside someone Draco thought he would never set eyes on again. Black, stern eyes met Draco's in a rush, and his heart plummeted. "Professor Snape."

"Malfoy," said Severus with a curt nod. "Do wipe the sniveling expression from your face, boy. I'm dead, not a banshee."

Draco cleared his throat, seeing Diggle's knowing glance as he stared in what he saw was an otherwise vacant room. Feet carried Draco to the center of the space, and he spun around, looking every one of them in the eye. "How is this possible? I didn't care for half of you."

"It's The Gray," Diggle answered, pulling Draco's attention to him. "Amplifies magic, remember? Deep down inside, you must have felt guilt for each one of these deaths."

"He's right, you know." A soft, elderly voice called from the very back. The crowd of translucent figures parted, revealing a silver haired wizard with crisp, blue eyes that twinkled in the candlelight. He wore a set of lengthy grey robes which matched his beard. The wizard bowed his head once in acknowledgement, taking a step forward. "Hello, young Draco. It has been quite a time since we
spoke, hasn't it?"

"P-Professor Dumbledore." With the book in one hand and the stone in the other, Draco walked through the parted crowd and stood eye to eye with his Headmaster. He wasn't entirely sure what to say, if there was anything to say. A bit too eager, he blurted out, "I... that night in the Astronomy tower-

Dumbledore raised his hand, silencing the wizard. "-Water under the bridge, Mister Malfoy. I assure you."

Draco shook his head. "It hasn't been for me." Admitting his mistakes was entirely too real in this moment, and he didn't know how to proceed. But he knew, if there was ever a time, it would have to be now. He bowed his head in shame, catching eyes with Severus. "Th-Thank you. The both of you..."

"Water. Bridge." Dumbledore smiled thoughtfully. "My, but you've matured in your adulthood, haven't you, Draco? An Auror of the Ministry, set to wed Miss Granger."

Ah, there was that nagging guilt again. As if sparked from it, a new voice rang out amongst the crowd. One with a rare timbre Draco knew all too well. "I can't say it's the best thing I've heard since my death."

Draco's head shot up, and he spun around to stare down the one who made him feel guiltiest of all. Despite his instinctual urge to tuck tail and run, Draco forced a cunning smirk on his thin lips and quirked an arrogant eyebrow. "Red hair. Unsavory urge to nag at my conscience. You must be a Weasley."

Ron Weasley folded his arms over his chest, a smile weighted with a heavy burden falling across his features. "Hello, Malfoy. Been enjoying your time with my girl, have you?"

Harry and Hermione landed with a POP outside of the Malfoy Manor gates. The hedges surrounding the gates loomed in perpetual danger, and Hermione could, quite literally, feel a new sort of magic surrounding the edges of the estate. With a firm tug to Harry's arm, she caught him before he reached for his wand, shaking her head. "Can you feel it?"

"Feel? Feel what?" Harry turned his head this way and that.

"New warding. Different than the last." She pushed her hand out and felt the sudden urge to vomit. "Dark magic."

"Can you push through it?"

"It will take time. This isn't a spell. This is some sort of dark object."

"It's a Dragon's Scale Pendant, used for keeping those with magic in and those outside out." Lucius Malfoy stepped out from behind the hedges, on the other side of the gate. "My father's personal favorite use of magical objects."

"Highly illegal," Harry noted.

"Indeed, which is why it was kept under lock and key."

"He's in there, isn't he?"
"Yes."

"Will you help us?" asked Hermione.

Lucius strolled straight up to the gate, peering through the metal bars. "For family, Miss Granger, I would do anything. -And seeing as how I have no magic coursing through my bones..." He pulled out a small key, fished it into the lock, turned it, and yanked on the gate's frame. The passage swung open, and the magic shimmered. Hermione grabbed Harry's hand, forced a shield made of Gray Magic around them, and stepped inside.

"Thank you," she said to Lucius.

"Do not thank me. Save my family," Lucius gave a cold smirk. "Go."

I promise to reply to reviews next chapter. Jet lag has my stomach all twisty today. ALSO, Don't forget to check out The Jameson Chronicles, following our sweet Theodore! Out now! Just look on my author's page! I'd love to hear your thoughts. The story will be broken up into 5 chapters, ending with Theodore's first day in Auror Training. Hope you enjoy!

Also, a big shout out to Vicky. You're a strong woman, and the next chapter in your book has only just begun. ;D

Much love

A.
Vigilance and a Nagging Conscience

Chapter Notes

Hey, everyone. Thank you all for being so patient with this chapter. It has over 5,000 words (my normal ranges at about 3,000). I really hope everyone likes it, and I hope I continue to make this a worthwhile story.

Two days from now, I will be posting a Christmas special of HTTYA, which takes place between 1&2, titled "HTTYA: Traditions." Sam Wallflower gave me the prompt, which is about Hermione, Draco, and Scorpius and their first Christmas together. Expect some comedy; some thought provoking moments and just a whole bunch of cute Scorpius getting his father into trouble (not that Draco needs any help with that!)

My beta and friend, waymay, is sick this evening, so this chapter hasn't been proofed. That said, I think I haven't made -too- many mistakes. Tomorrow, if she feels better, she will proof it for me, and I will update with the fixes where necessary. Please send waymay some love and wish her a 'get better soon!'

Three days from now, The Jameson Chronicles, chapter 2 will be updated! :3

I wear this crown of thorns
Upon my liar's chair
Full of broken thoughts
I cannot repair
Beneath the stains of time
The feelings disappear
You are someone else
I am still right here

"Hurt" cover by Johnny Cash
Original song by Nine Inch Nails

Dean Thomas stood at the bottom of the stairs, primed for battle. His instinctive Auror muscle memory made his stance that much more daunting as he turned to Lindy when it dawned on him, "You were just a decoy to keep us occupied."

"Catch on quick, don't you, Auror Thomas? Guess that gut instinct of yours doesn't work every time."

Panic flooded to his throat, "What did you do?"

Lindy shrugged. "I gave enough time to allow one of Auror Diggle's old gems beneath the manor to strip away the wards."
Licking his dry lips, Dean felt his stomach drop. "A Pandora Box? How… we destroyed them all."

"Yes. I'm sure you did. But tell me this -do you think it was a coincidence I was 'killed' in front of one of the most close-minded Aurors on the division?"

"Your death… was to make Draco vulnerable."

"Easy as pie, really. I meant it when I told him I looked up to him, though. He's an astonishingly brilliant wizard. But I needed to break him if I was going to be able to sift through his mind. -After my death, he returned to the Malfoy Manor a shattered man. I was waiting, curled up in a little grey ball on the sofa. I'll have you know I wasn't the kitten the entire time. Only after I saw you lot doting over the one in the Auror Division that day. No one noticed when I made the switch. -Distracted by his singular working mind, I had a bit of fun digging around in his head. It turns out, some of his work was left in this very basement, untouched. With all of his plans out for me to sift through, it only made sense I use a bit of his knowledge to assure my good graces with Lord Malfoy. -Do you want to know what he thinks of you, Dean Thomas? You might not like it…"

"That's enough, Travers."

A man in a flowing, black hood stood at the top of the staircase, a glowing tip arrow pointed directly at Dean's heart.

"Perfect timing," Lindy grumbled, moving against her restraints. "Auror Thomas, allow me to introduce you to Bruno Shafiq."

Dean leered at the archer assailant. "Let me guess. Sacred Twenty-Eight reject?"

Bruno moved a few more paces down the stairs, the tip of his nose and his mouth the only things visible beneath the hood. "On your knees."

"On my knees?" Dean feigned a smug expression. "At least take a guy to dinner first. -Flipendo!"

Blue light shot out of his wand and knocked the tip of the arrow just as Shafiq released the bowstring. It set the arrow off course, missing Dean's shoulder by an inch before crashing into a set of potion vials against the back wall. As pink smoke and a bubbling hiss filled the dungeon, Dean took the opportunity to cover and conjured up a protection spell, retreating further into the smoke. Lindy coughed, directly in the prime arena of the acidic magenta cloud. Shafiq could be heard running down the staircase, no doubt to aid his counterpart, but the smoke held him back. Begrudgingly, Dean's conscience got the better of him, and he pointed his wand at Lindy, casting a luminescent protection bubble around her head. His location compromised, Dean ducked his head as another arrow, this time aimed for his shoulder, scraped across the material of his cloak and landed with a plink into the wall.

The smoke grew larger. Dean could barely see in front of his face. Arrow after arrow whizzed through the air, magicked with scourgefying properties Dean could only guess, seeing as how the fumes began to disperse. Quickly, he did the only thing he could think of. He waved his wand and snuffed the candles in the room out, rendering it pitch dark.

The room went eerily quiet. Dean struggled to recall which way the stairs were. Too afraid to move, dare he give his location away, he attempted to control his breathing. He could hear Lindy clear her throat. Could hear the footsteps of an approaching opponent. Dean closed his mouth, breathing through his nose in hopes of making less noise.

One. Two. Three. He counted the number of footsteps and heard the bowstring's singular sound as it
was tugged back. Anticipating the next move, he shouted, "Vermillion!" Red, aggressive sparks burst from his wand in the direction of where he assumed the archer was and hoped for the best. He hit his target; he could tell by the agitated shout of anger. Taking his chance, Dean used the light of the sparks to spot the staircase. He found it just before the room went dark again.

"Bruno!" Lindy shouted. "Bruno, unbind me!"

Swizz! Something grazed Dean's cheek. Clink! It hit the wall next to him.

"Lumosaddo!" The tip of Bruno Shafiq's arrow lit up, illuminating the room in a pale glow. Dean took notice of how close he was to the top of the staircase, and the door just out of his reach. So close…

"Get him!"

"Travers, if you keep distracting me, it'll be you next."

Shafiq released the bowstring. The arrow soared through the air.

Dean reached for the handle-

Astoria made it to the top of the staircase, wand in hand, before she heard the shatter of the teacup downstairs. She wasn't sure how she knew it was the teacup Theodore sipped from not moments before, but she did. Devastation burst in her chest, filling her up and weighting her legs. The more she moved, the heavier she felt.

Something approached down the hall; she caught sight of it just as it landed with a graceful bound into the foyer, turning this way and that. It gave an acute sniff to the air before setting its sights to the stairs, leaping back and forth, excited. Quickly, its springy legs took off in Astoria's direction.

"Bombarda!" Astoria shouted, destroying the lower portion of the banister. It splintered and ruptured apart before toppling over the stairs in rubble, blocking the pathway. She retreated further into the hallway on a course for Scorpius when a gripping pain shot up her arm, causing her to stop. Her breathing became ragged. Her head swam. Swiftly, she reached for her sleeve and pulled it back, revealing her blackened veins, which crept even further up her arm to the crook. "Damn it." The blood curse, she knew, worked only one way: the more strain her body took, the quicker the effects of the curse. The adrenaline coursing through her veins only helped to hinder her health, and it seemed to be doing its job quite well. But she didn't have time to worry about that now. Now, all that mattered was finding Scorpius before one of these lecherous fiends.

"Ooh, you're not looking too good there, pretty lady. The independent mother attempted to flee the scene, determined to save her only son. The suspense practically writes itself, doesn't it?"

Astoria refused to look weak in the eyes of an enemy, so she straightened up her back and turned around to meet the chipper face of a young girl in persimmon robes. Balancing on one foot at the top of the stairs, she giggled.

"Feeling a bit under the weather? How about a lie-down."

The girl snapped her fingers, and Astoria was met with a grueling weight on her shoulders that knocked her back. Her head slammed into the floor, and she saw stars. Summoning enough strength to pull herself back upright, Astoria fought through the bursts behind her eyes, wand still tight in her hand. "I don't prefer dueling with children. How old are you? Twelve?"
"Thirteen," the girl smiled. "And a half." She looked incredibly proud of herself, and far more sure than any thirteen-year-old should have. Astoria, realizing she was overwhelmed, decided stalling might be the best idea.

"Your magic is cogent. Indeed, I might be bested by a worthy opponent."

"The older woman realized she was met with a formidable foe and conceded. -Well, that's not very plot inspiring, is it?"

"What's your name?" Astoria asked, ignoring the child's quip.

"Dessamine, at your service," the girl spun in a circle before curtsying. "You might have heard of my illegitimate father, Lewis Yaxley." She dropped her cheery disposition momentarily. "Everyone calls me Dessy, though. No need to ask your name. A face such as yours is synonymous with fashion in the wizarding world: Astoria Greengrass." Then the facade was back up, along with a skip in her step. "Do you know how many articles I've read about you since your divorce from Draco Malfoy? I don't know why the tabloids care so much. A muggle sympathizer such as yourself is hardly newsworthy."

And just like that, Astoria's fake kindness fell flat like a ton of bricks. "Glad to know a sniveling, gangly teenager has time to read the gossip columns between her duties as Abraxas's minion."

"She says with conviction in her tone," Dessy giggled. "Lord Malfoy will be pleased to know you're still at home. Though, we seem to be missing someone. Dear me, where is Scorpius, I wonder? Shall we go wake him up and tell him his great grandfather has an early Christmas gift for him?"

Astoria could feel her strength wane, and her eyes blur. She struggled to stay awake, but the magical fatigue was a force to be reckoned with. Her legs collapsed beneath her, and she fell to the floor, gasping for breath.

"Looks like mommy does needs a lie-down."

Just before her eyes faded into unconsciousness, she caught sight a furry fox scurrying across the floor, snatching up her wand. Then, everything went black.

There was never such a formidable, and yet oddly irritating, sight as Ron Weasley as he approached Draco from the back of the crowd. He never had the capability of being physically frightening, but just the knowledge that Draco had a hand in his death made the approach all the more unsettling. Just when he thought he might vomit under the pressure, Weasley forwent Draco entirely, instead setting his eyes on Greg Diggle. "This cold sack of worthless shite."

And then, even though he knew damn well he shouldn't, Draco broke out into a laugh. "You're telling me." Relieved the attention is off of him, he crosses his arms, mirroring Weasley as his sights fall on Diggle.

"Hmm?" Diggle muttered. "Are you talking to me, or…?"

"Weasley says you're a cold sack of worthless shit. I daresay I have to agree with him."

"And a double-crosser," Ron continued, his voice elevating with each word. "I trusted you, Diggs. I put my life in your dirty, selfish, crime-obsessed hands! I shoulda never met up with you that day!"

He began to pace, nearly manic. "But no! I had to do the fucking 'honorable thing' and give you a sodding chance! And now look at you-nearly took down the entire bloody Ministry because of my fucking mistake! Bloody Hell, I was an idiot. I knew you always had an eye out for 'Mione, and I
looked the other way. Now my family's been hurt, again, my best friend is in trouble, my wife is about to marry a walking cock strut, and it's all your fucking fault! The worst part is, you can't even bloody hear me! -Malfoy, translate!"

Draco would have felt remorse for his involvement at that moment, except for the fact that his brain grabbed onto one key phrase and played back to him in his head over and over again.

"Cock strut?"

"A flaccid one at that," Weasley muttered.

And just like that, Draco's humility was snuffed out.

"That's rich, coming from a third-rate apparition. I can still see dirt on your face, Weasel-bee. I'm impressed to see someone can still be poor even in the afterlife."

The schoolboy rivalry, buried years ago, found its way to the surface once again. Weasley turned to Draco, fire in his eyes. "It's nice to see your respect for the dead is overshadowed by your ego. You're compensating so hard, it practically envelopes the room! I'm surprised there's enough room for us all!"

Draco scoffed at the attempt at insult and bullied back, "It isn't the only thing in this room that's big, Weasley."

"Like I said! Compensating!"

A smirk flittered across Draco's face. "Funny. Hermione doesn't seem to mind my enormous ego. In fact, I would say she enjoys it immensely. You can ask Diggle how much she enjoyed it in the shower earlier tonight!"

He realized he killed two birds with one stone, watching Weasley's face drop into a look of disgust as he gagged while Diggle rolled his eyes and looked elsewhere.

"Bloody disgusting," Ron groaned.

"Malfoy," said Diggle, "We don't have time for you to be swapping sizes with a dead man."

Draco's pride was satisfied, for the time being, and he smiled in triumph over winning the spat. "As much as I hate to admit it, Diggle's right, Weasley. We don't have time to be arguing with you."

"What are you doing working with this guy, anyway?" The redheaded apparition gestured over to Diggle, anger in his tone. "Does 'Mione know what you two plan to do?"

"I'll admit it isn't ideal, but... this is the way it has to be," Draco said definitively. "The only way I can protect everyone -my son- is with his help." He took a step toward Diggle, preparing to drop the stone and had over the book until Weasley offered something Draco never anticipated.

"I don't blame you."

Bitterly, Draco turned his head toward the ghostly man. "Of course you do."

Weasley rubbed the back of his head. "Well, I mean, a bit." His voice was nearly teasing. "But not entirely."

Draco looked down to his hands, at the stone and the book. "I do."
Diggle gave a frustrated huff. "Malfoy, they're dead. Hermione is still very much alive."

"He better keep her name outta his mouth if he knows what's good for him," said Weasley.

Draco took another step towards Diggle, hands extended. Ron's sobering face stalled him, however, and he glanced around at the dead.

As if sensing the Auror's inner struggle, Weasley continued, "I made my fair share of mistakes, too, Malfoy. I trusted Diggle with my life. -D'you really wanna hand over that kind of power to someone you know has nothing but his own interests at heart?"

Draco concentrated on the shaking in his knees, willing them to still. "I'm not strong enough to do this on my own."

The soft, easy-to-listen-to voice of Dumbledore filled the blond's ears, calming his nerves with passive authority. "Perhaps not. But you aren't alone, Mister Malfoy. You have Mister Potter, Miss Granger, and Mister Thomas. You have an abundance of friendships at your side, if only you would let them in."

Weasley extended an arm between the book and Diggle. "You say you feel guilt, Malfoy? Prove it."

"How?"

"Malfoy," Diggle sensed Draco's doubts, eyes drifting between the book and the empty space in the room.

"Don't give it to him. You wanna make up for all the terrible things you've done. This is your moment to do the right thing. Be stronger than that. Be better than that."

Draco felt an overwhelming wave of weakness, and he snapped, "I'm not a bloody Gryffindor! I can't just charge headfirst into battle!"

"Grow a spine!"

"I can't!" he stepped back, glaring into baby blues. "I've tried, for years, to pretend I have one, but I don't! No matter how much I try, I'm never going to be strong. Why do you think I followed that miserable excuse of a human being around for years? I'm never going to be the goddamn hero." He spat the last word as if it was vile.

To his surprise, it was Snape who stepped forward, his signature dry drawl making it impossible for Draco to look away. "Believe me, Mister Malfoy; there isn't a soul here who could relate to your plight more than I. Everyone always expects you to do the right thing as if were to come so easily." He scoffed. "So heed me when I say: no one is ever ready to play the role."

Draco could feel the hot betrayal of tears behind his eyelids, angry with himself for being such a blubbering coward. He was angry at himself for wanting to do what was easy instead of what was right. He was angry because he knew Hermione deserved better. "Tell me what to do."

"Alas," whispered Dumbledore, "this isn't a decision any of us can make for you. It must be your decision. But I have faith you will do the right thing, Draco. You have always been the strongest Malfoy."

His response was a laugh. "I think you might need to look in the dictionary, Professor. Strong isn't synonymous with my name."
Dumbledore smiled, amused. "One is never ready for the burden of heroism. It is what makes a hero **so great:** the ability to stand up for what is right, even when one would rather take the less demanding road. A mountain is not carved without resistance."

Draco looked to his potion's professor and godfather. "How did you do it?"

Snape raised a measured eyebrow and replied, "Vigilance and a nagging conscience."

Vincent Crabbe chimed in, "You can do this, Malfoy."

Colin Creevey nodded.

Draco looked to Lavender Brown, expecting some kind of similar cheer, but she only rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't ask *me* to believe in you. I still think you're a spineless twat."

Draco smirked.

Weasley moved forward to pat Draco on the shoulder, forgetting his place. His hand fell through, and the young Malfoy was met with a cold chill. The Gray tingled at his fingertips. Weasley frowned, apparently feeling the shake in energy as well. "I still think you're an arrogant arse," he said. "And it makes my stomach turn to think you and Hermione…" He stared down to his translucent hand, then the stone, and then Diggle. His eyes burned with loathing. "But I have faith in you, Malfoy. You *can* do this." His eyes softened, and he turned his head toward his once nemesis. "Tell them I love them, will you?"

He didn't need to ask who 'them' was. He already knew. "I promise."

"Are you done with the touchy feely?" Diggle groaned. "Can we move on to more pressing matters?" He thrust out his hand. "We need to work together to make this happen, remember?"

Draco stared long and hard at the book, a sense of purpose dawning on him. He took a step back and tucked the book under his arm for safe keeping, noticing Diggle's aggravated slump of shoulders. Next, he asked Weasley, "Would you come back, if you could?"

There was a series of emotions as the gangly giant stripped down layer after layer of pride, assessing his feelings, each one more poignant than the last. Eventually, his eyes turned to the stone longingly. "When this is over… destroy it."

"What?"

"Destroy the stone. The dead… stay dead." Weasley looked as if he might cry, but there was also a surge of anger written across his features. He turned his gaze toward Diggle and walked straight up to him, peering at his face while Diggle stared in another direction, unknowing. "I made the biggest mistake of my life trusting this one. I shoulda turned him into the proper authorities when I had the chance. My death… that's on him. Not you."

"Weasley…" Draco's pride wanted desperately to protect him, but he felt the chink in his emotional armor, rendering him speechless once more.

"He's the reason for the situation you find yourself in now with your grandfather. Whatever you do, you make sure this slimy git pays for his crimes. Hold him accountable. You've done enough for the both of you." He paused. "And, tell 'Mione-"

Draco wouldn't -couldn't- hear Weasley's next words. "-When this is all over, you can tell her." Draco squeezed the stone tighter against his palm. "I won't destroy it until you two have a chance to
Diggle went wide eyed. "Destroy? What do you mean? Destroy the stone? Are you out of your mind?"

Ignoring Diggle, Draco realized there was only one more person on his list of people to talk to. He stepped past Weasley, Dumbledore, and Snape, over to the foggy window his grandmother peered out of, down to the snow-covered streets below. Even in her elderly age, she was still a breathtaking beauty with a slender jaw and hardly a wrinkle.

"When I was a little girl, your grandfather and I used to play in the snow on nights such as this one," she said, bundling her arms around her fur shawl, though why Draco is unsure. Surely the dead couldn't feel such things as 'hot' and 'cold'? "I cannot believe Abraxas would go to these lengths."

"You must have known what kind of man he was."

The corner of her eyes squinted, revealing crows feet, and she, finally, peered over to Draco. "The man I fell in love with… he was strict in his beliefs, yes, but… to attack our son the way he did. To threaten yours the way he does now... " She reached over as if to touch her grandson, but then stopped herself, remembering her place in the afterlife. "You do what you must. For family."

Draco nodded. "For family."

"Tell Lucius…" She pursed her lips together. "I've always been proud of him. Do that for me?"

"Of course." Though he really didn't want to.

"I'm proud of you as well. I only wish I could have lived to see the birth of your son. -But remember this, Draco. Family might seem like blood, but it's more than that. It's who loves you the most in this world. Those people… they are your real family. Go now, and do what I could not. Put my husband in his place." She then turned back to the window and resumed her staring. "Winter is so beautiful in London…"

Draco couldn't bring himself to turn around and face them all again. If he did, he might never be able to let them go. And he needed to be stronger than that. "Thank you," he said quietly. "All of you. I know what I need to do." He dropped the stone to the floor. The connection was lost. Everyone was gone.

Everyone, that was, except for Diggle.

"You're right, Diggle. We do need to work together."

"As I've been saying." The convict sounded relieved. "Give me the book."

"I'll go first," Draco offered.

"...As you wish."

Draco inhaled, walked to the nightstand, opened the book, and reached over to the dresser, pricking his finger on the sword of Godric Gryffindor. Blood dripped onto the pages, and the Gray awoke.

'What have you?'

Draco thought. What did he have to offer? His insecurities taunted him, chiming in about Diggle being right all along - he wasn't strong enough for this. But Dumbledore's words echoed in his ear,
giving him hope. *One is never read for the burden of heroism.* But what did Draco Malfoy have an abundance of that never wavered? Bravery? No. Logic? Too hot headed.

*It's nice to see your respect for the dead is overshadowed by your ego.*

Of course.

"Take my ego in exchange for your help. If there's one thing a Malfoy has an abundance of, it's that."

"Vast understatement," muttered Diggle.

Silence filled the room. And then…

'The Gray accepts.'

The Gray tingled underneath his fingers, searching Draco's core magic. It climbed his arm, down his spine, and around his chest. Draco, instinctively, puffed out his ribcage. The Gray, satisfied, seeped into Draco's lungs and dug slowly into his soul. Then, with a quick bite, it latched on, causing Draco to wince. He could feel his magic amplify nearly instantly.

"That's more painful than Hermione made it sound…" He smirked, lightheaded. "Though, not entirely too bad."

"Yes, yes. Let's move on, shall we?" Diggle moved toward the book, but Draco waved his hand and snapped it shut.

"Yeah, about that," he pushed a wordless barrier around the book, concentrating on a stinging hex. The Gray guided him through the process, vibrating in his body like a purring cat. Diggle didn't look at all pleased with Draco's reaction, and made a quick moment decision; he reached for the book, but it zapped him and sent him flying backward onto the bed. "We *do* need to work together. But it doesn't mean I'm letting you anywhere near the Gray. I made a promise."

"Are you out of your bloody mind?" Diggle hobbled to sit up on his elbows, his hair standing on end comically. "You stupid -you're an even bigger idiot than I thought!"

Normally, Draco would have felt the need to snap back with some deploring quip. But the Gray tingled in his chest, and he shrugged. "Come on, Diggs. We best get to work. Grab the stone, would you?" With a wave of his hand, he yanked Diggle up, by magic, to his feet. Merlin, this took his wandless magic to an entirely new level, didn't it? "Amazing…" He glanced down to his palm, entranced.

Diggle, huffily, looked down to the Resurrection stone on the floor and frowned. He rubbed his hands down the side of his pants, pulled his sleeve over his hand, and picked it up that way, careful not to touch it with his skin. Draco noticed, thinking to comment on it, but the Gray hummed inside his brain, and he let it go, knowing full well the reason Diggle didn't want to touch the stone. He was afraid of seeing his father. Scared of seeing the disappointment in his eyes.

"Right. Now all we need is a plan of action."

Harry and Hermione took the lead on the garden path towards the Malfoy Manor, followed closely behind by Lucius, though he hobbled in pain against his walking cane. They were careful as they approached, making sure to stay in the shadows. Every now and again, Hermione would send a burst of Gray Magic out toward the path in front, searching for trap spells or alarms. Harry
continuously looked back during these times, eyeing Lucius with an uneasy face.

Finally, Lucius became fed up. "What?"

"How did you manage to sneak out to let us in undetected?"

The elder Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Not that it concerns you, Potter, but I might have taken a leave of absence to smoke my tobacco pipe before I knew the Manor would be infested by danger." To prove his point, he revealed a lengthy smoking pipe and wagged it in front of Harry's face.

"Spoken like a man who doesn't want to be caught," stated Hermione diligently, watching the smirk fall from the man's face. "Narcissa doesn't approve, does she?"

"Considering it's probably what caused his lung condition," Harry chimed in, "It's doubtful she'd be cheering him on."

"So you snuck out."

"Are you two quite through? I do believe there are more pressing matters at hand -like the fact my wife and grandson are in mortal peril?" Lucius sneered.

"There must be loads of secret entrances into the Malfoy Manor," said Harry, looking back to the coughing man. "You'll show us where they are."

Lucius looked as if he did not approve Harry ordering him around one bit, but he conceded, nonetheless. "Follow me, and do find a muse to silence yourselves. The last thing I need is for one of us to drop dead because you two couldn't keep your incessant chatter to yourselves."

Theodore knew he didn't have much of an option, at this point, but to duel with the Malfoy before him. With an honorable wave of the wand, he dropped his illusion charms, but still keeping his protective barriers intact. Abraxas Malfoy gave one of those signature smirks all Malfoy men were known for producing and clapped, slowly.

"Wonderful. Finally, someone brave to sink my teeth into."

"I should warn you," Theodore said, prepping his stance. "I don't plan to make this easy on you."

"I would hope not," Abraxas replied, readying his posture as well. "After all, where would be the fun in that?" He gave a graceful bow, his long platinum blond hair falling over his eyes. When he raised his head, the tone in those icy-grey orbs changed to one of a predator. "Let's start with something simple, yes? -Reducto!"

"Confringo!" Theodore countered, blasting away Abraxas's spell with ease. The other man didn't look at all troubled. In fact, he looked highly amused.

"Wonderful. Your turn… ah. It's only dawned on me now that I haven't caught your name."

"That's because I didn't offer it," said Theodore. Typically, the phrase would have been said with a sarcastic undertone, but not to the humor-deprived Auror. So, he added, "Theodore Jameson."

"Such manners. I can see why my dear Travers is smitten with you."

Theodore's face scrunched up in confusion, not at the reference of Lindy being called Travers, but the inference that Lindy would hold any candle toward him at all. Surely this was all some way of
Abraxas trying to throw him off his axis. "Petrificus Totalus!"

With a flick of his wand, Abraxas caused the spell to bounce off his wand and hit a painting on the wall. Effortless, Theodore realized. His movements were effortless.

"I expected more from an Auror put in charge of my family's protection. But no matter… Relashio!"

"Expelliarmus!"

Abraxas laughed. "Langlock!" This time, Abraxas's spell hit its target, causing Theodore's throat to clutch up, unable to speak. "Such an amazing spell, don't you think? My younger counterparts taught it to me recently."

Damn it. No matter. Theodore was talented in wandless magic as well. He spun the tip of his wand in an intricate design, yanking the tapestries from the wall and causing them to fall onto his opponent. With his chance made, he darted toward the foyer. He nearly made it past the archway when he felt a grand seize of magic around his stomach, yanking him backward and onto the dining room table.

Before he could get up, a glowing blue stone at the end of a walking cane was jutted in front of his face.

"I wouldn't if I were you," Abraxas smirked above him. "A worthy opponent you are, but you still have much to learn in the fine art of dueling. Your wand, Theodore Jameson, or your magic. It is your choice."

Recognizing the Pandora Stone from his briefings, he, reluctantly, thrust out his wand and dropped it to the floor.

"Wonderful," Abraxas looked behind him, leaning the stone closer to Theodore's cheek to make his point clear: if he moved, he would regret it. The Malfoy's face contorted into an impressed smirk, and he gestured his wand arm out. "Right on time!" He reached down, yanked Theodore up to sit, still holding the stone inches away from the Auror. It was, then, in which Theodore was able to see the room had begun to fill with cloaked figures, and even more footsteps could be heard down the hall. "Theodore Jameson, might I introduce you to the New Order of the Sacred Twenty-Eight?"
I want to apologize about the long wait. I suffered from a serious sinus infection this last week, and it left me foggy headed. I made a few apologies on facebook, but I wanted to formally apologize here as well.

Secondly, The Jameson Chronicles has a new chapter up! Chapter 2. Please feel free to take a look!

Third, I have written a Harmony fic titled "The Secret" and a Drinny fic titled "Christmas Desires" in case anyone wants to read them.

Thank you to LightofEvolution for talking me through this chapter and assuring me it wasn't shite. XD

Merry Christmas and happy holidays! (Don't forget, HTTTYA Christmas fic "Traditions" is out!)
~A.

I'm headed straight for the castle

They wanna make me their queen

And there's an old man sitting on the throne that's saying that I probably shouldn't be so mean

I'm headed straight for the castle

They've got the kingdom locked up

And there's an old man sitting on the throne that's saying I should probably keep my pretty mouth shut

"Castle" by Halsey

Narcissa Malfoy stared down at her wide-eyed grandson, pressing a single finger to her lips. "Shh," she told him, running her fingers through his white-blond tresses so similar to her son's. It was like staring down at a doe-eyed Draco all over again the night the Ministry came asking questions about Lucius's involvement in the First War. She vowed after the Second War to never again allow her family to be caught up in the horrors of battle. Unfortunately, she realized her vow had been all for naught, because here they were again, more divided than ever.

Scratching came from the other side of the door, but Narcissa ignored it for now. She'd placed enough spells on the door to grant her time to say goodbye to her grandson before taking her place amongst the front lines. She needed him to be safe, for Draco's sake, and for her own.
"I want Mummy."

"I know," she cooed, holding him tightly to her, "and I'll find her. But I need you to be strong, now. Can you do that for me, Scorpius?"

"Mhmm."

"Good." Narcissa scooped the child up in her arms, noticing his green and silver striped pajamas with little bowtruckle patterns. Such an innocent soul to be thrown into this mess. She crossed the room with him in tow and brandished her wand at the mirror hanging on the wall. With a groan, the looking glass swung open, revealing a passageway with stone steps and cobwebs dangling from the ceiling. "Scorpius, I'm going to have to leave you now."

"No, Gama!" Scorpius wrapped his arms tight around her neck. "I want Mummy. Daddy!"

Narcissa forced a stern look about her face and peeled the toddler off of her, though her heart ached to do it. She sat him down in the first step and swished her wand again, this time muttering, "Expecto Patronum!"

An elegant swan made of dazzling white light revealed itself from the tip of her wand, flapping its wings and swimming gracefully through the air.

"Your father used to love these tunnels… Follow the light, Scorpius."

The toddler shook his head. "No! I stay with you!"

"No," Narcissa could already feel her magic being stripped from the door, spell by spell. "Listen to me. You need to brave like your Daddy. Not a word. You have to be silent and strong. Can you do that for me?"

Scorpius nodded, and Narcissa shut the mirror, her heart shattering in the process. With one elegant wave of her hand, she removed the wards from the door. It creaked open, and a small girl with pixie hair, olive skin, and a wicked smile let herself in. "A queen locked away in her castle. Does that make me your knight in shining armor?"

Narcissa chose not to answer the girl, instead staring at her reflection in the mirror to buy time. She fixed a stray strand of hair out of her eyes, straightened the collar of her dress, and turned to her opponent. "Soldiers get younger every year, it seems."

"Where's the boy?"

"Not here, I'm afraid. Perhaps he's on vacation? -Put that wand away, dear. You won't be needing it. I'll come willingly." Narcissa smirked at the flabbergasted expression of the young girl as she breezed past her and into the hall. "It's been years since Abraxas and I last spoke. We're overdue for a nice, long chat."

"Do you have any way of getting a letter to the Ministry?" Harry asked Lucius as they stood in front of a boarded up wine cellar entrance near the gardens. Hermione took point in the tunnel first, wand extended and prepared for any threat.

"If I can get access to a floo, I might be able to get a letter through."

"Right. Do that. -I can't believe I'm saying this, but we're counting on you, Mister Malfoy."
"Do you honestly think I would sit idly by while my wife and grandson are threatened?" And with that, Lucius took his leave, shutting the rotted wooden door behind them.

"Do you think it will work?" Hermione asked, peering into the darkness with the light of her wand. "Can we trust him?"

"We have to," Harry replied, pushing his glasses up his nose out of habit. "I don't plan on dying any time tonight. Ginny would kill me."

Hermione often forgot how difficult it must be for Harry to leave Ginny and the boys, sometimes for days at a time. Her time with Draco, since they were both Aurors, hardly left any room for them not to see each other on a daily basis. To push it all aside and know it could be the end… Harry still amazed her with his bravery.

She gave a smile behind his back he couldn't see and said, "Yes, I imagine she would."

They came to a fork in the pathway, with one slanted upwards to a set of stairs leading towards a green light, and one tilting down: darker, moldy smelling, and entirely daunting.

"Which way?" asked Harry.

Hermione used the Gray magic to cast a heightened senses charm and inhaled through her nose. The tunnel to the right, which slanted up, smelled of residual potions and burnt magic. The air was fresher, but only so by some cleansing charm. The downward path nearly caused her to gag, so thick with spores and dust and grime. The air was stale, and she doubted there would be a way of value in this one. However…

"It can't be."

"What?" Harry bounced on the heels of his feet, following her gaze. "What's down there?"

"Harry, you go on ahead," she took a step toward the left path. "Take the path to the right."

"Oh, no. I've seen this movie." Harry reached out and clasped a hand around Hermione's arm, holding her back. "Splitting up never works, Hermione."

"This isn't a movie," she responded, turning to face him. "I'll be alright. -Scorpius needs you. I'll catch up."

"At least tell me what you're about to do."

"You're just going to have to trust me on this one, Harry," she gave him an encouraging smile. "Can you do that?"

It was obvious Harry wanted to argue, but he realized there would be no point in arguing with Hermione Jean Granger and dropped his arm to his side. "I've always trust you. No sense in stopping now."

"Exactly." She shot him a wink. "Be careful, please. Don't do anything reckless."

"When have I ever?" Harry smirked, adding quickly as Hermione opened her mouth, "Besides, you know, all the other times."

"I'm counting on you, Harry Potter." She poked him in the sternum. "No dying on my watch."

"Right." They squeezed hands and took their separate paths, veering in opposite directions.
Hermione braced herself as she began her slow descent, preparing herself.

The faint glow of blue didn't surprise her as she neared. Instead, it only baffled her how it was here at all.

"A Pandora Box." She clicked her tongue. "No wonder the wards are down."

Auror Theodore Jameson awoke to find himself bound to a chair at the dining room table, his arms and legs strapped to the extremities by his own magical-binding cuffs. His muscles felt stiff as boards, so he could only deduce he had been in this position for a while. Theodore didn't remember passing out, but a stinging pain behind his ear told him he'd been hit by something forceful. As his eyes came into focus, he saw a pair of sky-blue eyes staring fondly back at him.

"Hey there," said Lindy, patting a wet washcloth along Theodore's ear. When she withdrew the washcloth for him to see, it was stained with fresh blood. "How are you feeling, sleepyhead?"

He glared, jerking against his cuffs even though he knew it would be useless. "Lindy, let me go this instant!"

Her pleasant smile dropped momentarily, and she pouted her lower lip. "That's no way to greet someone who's caring for you, Theodore."

"Travers," came a cold, calculating voice, "take a seat." The young Auror instantly recognized it belonged to Abraxas Malfoy.

Lindy rolled her eyes and patted Theodore's ear a few more times with the cloth. "Yes, my Lord." Then she leaned forward and kissed her once-friend on the forehead. As Lindy moved to the side to take the seat next to Theodore, he caught sight of the many cloaked figures also in attendance around the table. Some looked rather bored. Others chattered amongst themselves in hushed whispers. Down, near the opposite end of the table, he found Astoria, bound and in a chair much like him, though she was gagged, while he was not.

"Astoria!"

A firm hand smacked him in the back of the head. "Stop that," chided Lindy. "You're making a scene."

"Really, Abraxas, is all this necessary?"

Narcissa Malfoy entered, wand in her hand but not prepared to duel. She carried herself with a graceful air as she approached, dressed in elegant evening robes and hair did up: a perfect 'representation of magical upbringing.' Abraxas gave a formal bow to the witch and pulled a chair out for her. "Narcissa. So glad you could join us this evening."

"It seems I had no choice either way. The only reprieve I was given was based on whether I wished to come quietly or not." She narrowed her eyes, standing rooted to her spot. "I suppose you'll be wanting my wand."

"On the contrary, I have no intention of disarming you. You'd be dead at the hand of one of my followers before your body hit the ground," Abraxas smirked, nudging to the chair. "Sit."

This time, Narcissa did as requested, gracefully taking her chair at the end of the table, on the left side of Abraxas's chair, which held the 'head of house' position. The right seat was still vacant, Theodore realized. He wondered who it was reserved for.
"The boy?" Abraxas asked the young girl who entered next, identified as Dessy earlier in the evening. Dessy folded her arms in a pout. "The queen plays a fair game of chess and doesn't give away her secrets."

"I see." Abraxas sat in his chair and reached for a goblet in front of him, taking a few minor sips before addressing Narcissa again. "Where is the boy, Cissy?"

"Surely you and your ruffians can sniff him out?"

The corner of the Malfoy man's lips twitched, and he set his drink down. "Don't play games with me, witch."

"Games? I wouldn't dare."

Abraxas, grazing his eyes over his fold of followers, attempted a different approach. "And your dear husband… will he be making an appearance this evening?"

"Your son?" snipped Narcissa.

The blond snorted a laugh. "He is no son of mine."

"He is every bit your child. Just as Draco is every bit mine. You managed to slip your venomous ways into him as well, didn't you?"

"Draco knows what side is worth fighting for," Abraxas said in a calm tone. "The winning side, of course."

A robust burst of chuckles and laughter fluttered around the table, and many raised their goblets at Abraxas's quip.

Theodore took a moment to pry his eyes away from the Malfoys and search the table once again for Astoria, meeting her soft, green eyes. He nodded once in confirmation, hoping it was enough to let her know he had her best interests at heart, and he wouldn't let anything happen to her. She looked weak; there were lavender circles beneath her eyes, and her skin appeared sallow.

"Lindy," Theodore said, focusing now on the blonde, "Please. Astoria is ill. Surely you can see it—"

"-Hush, Theodore," she demanded, "don't speak out of turn, or you'll be gagged as well."

"Well said, Travers," said Abraxas with a hearty grin. "While I have your attention, Lindy, it seems our sweet counterpart refuses to give up the whereabouts of our guest of honor. Perhaps you would peer into her mind and unmask his location?"

"You're welcome to try, dear," said Narcissa to Lindy, tapping her fingers along the table, "I always welcome a challenge."

__________________________

Harry followed the path up, up, up to a latched door at the base of a floorboard. With a quick *alohomora*, he unfastened the lock and pushed the door up. When he crawled out, he found himself on the dungeon floor. His heart gave a leap when he noticed Dean at the base of the steps, cradling his shoulder with his hand, his palms soaked in blood.

"Dean?"

Dean jumped at the sound of his name, straining to focus his eyes. "Harry!"
"Dean, what happened?" Harry ran to his friend's side and pried back Dean's hand to notice a wound the size of a dime bleeding profusely.

"Some magical Green Arrow type showed up and gave me a run for my money," he replied, hissing as Harry cut Dean's shirt with the tip of his wand to get a better look at the injury. "I thought I was a goner there for a moment."

"Why aren't you?"

"Because I suddenly remembered how good I am at Confundus Charms." Dean gave a smirk. "So ol' arrow boy and Lindy both think they were alone when he came looking for her. Thought it might buy me some time."

"That's brilliant," Harry applauded his friend. "But this injury isn't. We've got to stop the bleeding."

"Yeah, alright."

Harry looked around the dungeons for anything metal and settled on an iron candlestick protruding from the wall. He went up to it, jerked with the weight of his body, and broke it off. Then, he walked over to Dean, transfiguring the stick into a flat iron with a handle and gave him an apologetic look. "This is gonna hurt a bit." He sat the iron on the ground and said, "Incendio." Flames burst to life around the iron, heating it up.

"Ah, no. Come on." Dean squirmed in his spot. "Harry, you're having one off, right?"

"Wish I were," Harry said, dispersing the flames and levitating the iron up. "Pull back your shirt."

"Shit," Dean pulled at the material until a full view of his pectoral and shoulder was exposed, squeezing his eyes shut as he did.

"Silencio," Harry whispered, pointing his wand at Dean. "Sorry, mate. Can't have them hearing you." Then he levitated the iron and pressed into Dean's shoulder. His friend cried out, tears streaming down his cheeks, but no noise escaped his throat. Harry counted the seconds and chucked the iron away across the room, staring at the bright red, cauterized scar he'd left his friend with. But the bleeding had stopped, and that's what counted. "Can you stand?" Dean breathed in and out through his nose, nodding. Harry helped him to his feet, removing the silencing charm.

"Fucking Hell, Harry," Dean growled, shoving his friend in the shoulder. "Just 'cause you have a scar doesn't mean you have to go and give everyone else one." His lips turned up in a quirky grin. "Where's the bloody dittany when you need it?"

"You're welcome." Harry glanced up at the ceiling. "So where are they now?"

"No idea. But it sounds like there's more than a few up there." Dean glanced down at the cellar door from which Harry came. "Where's the rest of the calvary?"

"Hermione's with me," the raven-haired wizard replied. "Well… sort of. She needed to take care of something."

"There's a lot of somethings above our head that could use a good sorting out at the moment."

"Have you gotten word out to the Ministry?"

"I was shot in the shoulder with an arrow. What do you think?" Dean paused. "Wait. You're not the reinforcements?"
"We came here on a hunch."

"Damn good hunch, that was! Where the Hell have you been?"

"It's a long story."

"Isn't it always?"

The two men climbed the staircase, wands at their sides.

"Not even going to wait on me, boys?"

Harry whipped his head around to see Hermione Granger emerging from the cellar door, something hovering behind her. It took him a few moments to process the sight, but when he did, he blanched. "Hermione, is that a-?"

"-Yes it is," she stated, waving her hand to move the mysterious object in the center of the room. The box hovered at eye level between them, a glimmering white sheen glistening inches over the edges. "I shielded it in a stasis spell of my own design like I did when we procured the others. I thought maybe we could use it against them."

"Fight fire with a big bomb, eh?" Dean gave a thumbs up. "I'm all for it, as long is it doesn't blow any of us up."

"Do we know where Scorpius is?" she asked.

"No idea yet," Harry shook his head. "But don't worry," he added, noticing the discontent on her face, "We'll find him."

"Scorpius was upstairs asleep before all this happened," Dean offered. "Maybe Auror Jameson has him."

"Can you sense them?" Harry asked Hermione. He watched her extend her hand toward the ceiling, concentrating. With a heavy sigh, she brought her hand back down and shook her head.

"I can't feel anything. Keeping this box in stasis is draining our resources."

"Our?" asked Dean.

"The Gray and myself."

"The Gray's on our side, now? That's amazing!" Then his eyebrows knitted together. "Wait, no, it's not. The only way to get to the Gray is through... " He glanced at Harry. "Is that where you've been? Breaking Greg Diggle out of Azkaban?"

"Not me. Malfoy."

"Breaking Malfoy out of Azkaban?"

"Malfoy broke Diggle out of Azkaban!"

"Oh." Dean tensed. "Oh." Then his eyes went wide. "Oh! This makes so much sense now!"

"Great," Hermione rolled her eyes, "can we focus, please? Plans. Harry?"

"I… erm… just sort of thought we'd wing it," he told her.
"Wing it? This is my son we're talking about, Harry! This isn't some run of the mill assignment! You can't just wing-"

"Shh! Hermione, calm down!" Harry warned her. "I was only halfway joking." He looked to Dean. "We'll form a distraction." Then he looked back to Hermione. "Think you can get that Pandora Box near Abraxas without detection?"

"I can sure as Hell try."

"We'll secure any hostages. Hermione, after you get the Pandora Box upstairs, I'm leaving it up to you to get Scorpius and anyone else out of here."

"I'm the one with the Gray Magic," she argued, "I'm more valuable as a duelist."

"No offense, Hermione, but you aren't really great at dualism," Harry chided, smirking at his pun. He received a swat on the back of the head in return. "Ah! Kidding!" He rubbed the sore spot behind his ear and continued, "You carrying the Gray is the reason I need you to get the others out. You'll have a stronger defense to protect them."

"Abraxas has the Pandora Stone, Harry. If you aren't careful, you could lose your magic."

"Then we'll just have to be careful then, won't we?"

"You're liable to get yourselves _avada_ d is what you are," a cool voice spoke from behind them. "My family's not really known for being civil."

The trio spun around to find Draco Malfoy, the Gray Magic book in hand and a smirk on his face. Next to him stood a disgruntled looking Greg Diggle, arms crossed and hair standing on end.

"Come on," leered Draco, "you didn't think we were going to let you have all the fun, did you?"

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who reviewed, and thanks to everyone who has favorited/followed this story thus far. Let's get to the action, shall we?

Merry Christmas to you and yours
And happy holidays if you don't celebrate Christmas
With all my love,
~A.
Hey, all! Long time, no post. I know, I know. Over a week and no post? Crazy for me, but I had some stuff come up with my wrist, and waymay's been sick, and I needed to sort out some plot points with LightofEvolution before continuing, because I want to make sure I leave no stone unturned in giving you exactly what you deserve: the best damn Dramione action/mystery I can muster. With that being said, please give it up to the lovely Sunful824 and LightofEvolution for editing/prooing/helping me with this chapter to make it all what it could be. Light, thank you for the plot help. I couldn't sift through all my thoughts without you.

Hope y'all love!

~A.

Get ready cos here I come
I'm about to come and get me some
Hot as a smoke can get
Get ready cos here I come
(what you gonna do)
I'm gonna rock you
(what you gonna do)
I'm gonna rock you
(what you gonna do)
I'm gonna rock you,
I'll have you begging for mercy
begging for mercy ohh
I'm dangerous

"Dangerous" by Royal Deluxe

"What the Hell do you think you're doing?" Harry was the first to react, his green eyes blaring with shock and disbelief. Hermione felt her heart flutter at the sight of her fiance, while Dean looked between Diggle and Draco with amused interest.

Draco appeared taken aback by Harry's abrupt anger, and he acted accordingly, sneering out, "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm here to save your arse, of course."

"My arse doesn't need saving, Malfoy. We had a plan-"

"-A terrible plan," said Diggle, attempting to slick his frazzled tresses down with his hand. "One that's liable to get you killed."

"How'd you get in here?" asked Harry."The whole place has been sealed off…"

Hermione could feel it radiating off of the blond and answered before he could. "Draco's in possession of the Gray Magic." She watched him smirk. "What did you trade for it?"
"Does it matter?" he shrugged, swiftly approaching the group. He enveloped Hermione in a hug with one arm, cradling the Gray book with the other. Their magic sizzled between them, setting off small electric sparks.

With a blush, Hermione kissed his cheek and whispered, "Our magic seems to like each other quite a bit."

"Probably all the wild sex we have," he chuckled into her ear so only she could hear. Then he said, a bit louder to Harry and Dean, "Your plan won't work. You'll become the hostages you plan to liberate. My grandfather leaves no room for error."

"Then what do you suggest we do?" Harry crossed his arms.

"Allow me to fulfill my Unbreakable Vow."

"Whoa, there's a vow, now?" Dean crossed his arms, observing his friend with interest. "Just what in Merlin's name have you been up to this week?"

Draco ignored the comment, instead saying, "I can be the distraction. Let me bring Diggle to my grandfather. I can shield you all under the Gray's magic."

"That's your grand plan?" Diggle seethed, stepping up to the group. "Not happening. Abraxas Malfoy plans to kill me. You're just going to hand me over to him? After all I did for you?"

"Like kill my husband?" shot Hermione.

"And Romero?" Dean interjected.

"And wiped out an entire class of young Aurors?" pointed out Harry.

Draco added, "Let's not forget exposing our major magical landmarks to the muggle populations and nearly overthrowing the Ministry…"

"Alright!" Diggle threw his hands up in the air. "I'm a real tosser. Is that what you lot want to hear?"

"Yes!" They all said in unison, nodding their heads.

"Fine!" The convict crossed his arms. "So you turn me over to Abraxas. What's next?"

"We wait for him to reveal his plan," answered Draco, looking to the group, who stared back with disbelief. "Look, you have no idea what he's planning."

"Do you?" asked Harry.

"If I did, don't you think I'd have told you by now?"

Hermione could sense the tension between Draco and her best friend, and she placed a hand on each of their chests, saying, "He has a point, Harry. We need to know what Abraxas is scheming if we're to take him down for good."

Harry gave an irritated huff and pushed his glasses up his nose, glaring at Draco. "When this is all through, you and I are having a serious heart to heart in my office about the importance of following orders."

Draco smirked, quirking an eyebrow. "I'll take that as a thank you for saving your arse." When Harry didn't respond, the blond looked to him in confusion. "What's got you choking on your
jockstrap, Potter?"

"Do you have any idea what it means to stick to a plan? Seriously, I knew you grew up as a Malfoy, but the entire world doesn't revolve around you and your 'brilliant' mind."

Hermione waited for the proverbial backlash, but was shocked when she found Draco soaking in Harry's words before nodding in agreement and saying, "My apologies."

Harry paled in response, looking over to Hermione with sheer bewilderment. "Hermione, does Gray magic make you ill?"

Narcissa gave no indication Lindy Travers was succeeding in her endeavors, and judging by the thin sheen of glistening sweat on Lindy's cheek, the mind of the Malfoy woman was stronger than anyone the younger witch ever encountered. There was a slight discomfort on Narcissa's face as Lindy probed deeper, attempting to crack her shell, but it was to no avail. Lindy threw a thick bolt of light up toward the ceiling with her wand in frustration, swaying the chandelier above everyone's heads.

"You're strong," Lindy noted, cracking the joints in her neck and rolling her shoulders to loosen the muscles.

"Years of practice with the Dark Lord," smirked Narcissa, shifting her eyes over to Abraxas. "As much fun as this is... perhaps we could spare the theatrics just the once and have a discussion like two civilized magical folk. I know how difficult that is for you."

"Not as difficult as sending out invitations to a soiree in my own home."

Draco Malfoy's heart beat savagely in his chest as he addressed the crowded dining room, and all eyes turned on him. To say the feeling of nostalgia overtook him would be a gross understatement; nearly every chair at the vast table was occupied by a wizard or witch in colored robes with their hoods drawn over their faces. It did nothing to Draco's waning courage, and he forced his knees to stop trembling long enough to push Greg Diggle forward into the room, causing the wizard to stumble forward. Diggle's wrists were bound by magical ropes, and his mouth was langlocked.

Meeting eyes with his grandfather, Draco visibly smirked (despite his growing fear) and nodded once in confirmation. "Don't tell me the invitation was lost in the mail?"

Abraxas responded with a smirk of his own, though there was a fire in his gaze as his eyes set on Greg Diggle. "Draco..." His grey orbs snapped back up to his grandson. "I knew you'd find your way here, eventually. Do come join us." He didn't look the least bit surprised to see Draco show up, unannounced. In fact, he looked as if he expected it all along. It sent Draco's insides squirming.

"First, you let my mother go," he said, pointing his wand at the back of Diggle's head. He trailed his eyes around the room, meeting the disoriented sight of Astoria and determined stare of Auror Jameson. He let his eyes roam over every single individual, and his heart sank when he realized Scorpius was nowhere to be found. "Where's my son?"

"A question for your dear mother, I imagine," Abraxas replied, waving his hand in Narcissa's direction. It felt otherworldly to see his mother seated at this table again next to a madman and with no possible means of escape.

"You said you'd leave them alone," Draco whispered. "We made a deal."

"I couldn't very well keep you on your word alone, could I, Draco?"
"So I suppose my vow meant nothing?"

"On the contrary," Abraxas grinned, "I knew you would come through on that end. Self-preservation and all… but I need you motivated for what's next." He rose from the table and a blanketed silence fell over the room. Draco concentrated his efforts on keeping his concealing charm up long enough for Harry, Dean, and Hermione to do their work.

"And what's next, then?" Draco asked.

"First thing's first… your vow, Draco."

"Yeah, yeah." The blond pushed Diggle forward onto his knees in front of Abraxas. "Sorry, I didn't gift wrap him. Couldn't find a bow that suited his eye color. It tends to change."

"He appears to be wrapped enough." Abraxas halted in front of Diggle and lifted his chin with the tip of his wand. "Hello, Bastian Cane. So pleasant to make your acquaintance again."

It was Narcissa to speak next, gasping. "This… this is Cane?"

"Not nearly as intimidating without his Gray Magic to keep him company," Abraxas smirked. "Now then," he waved his wand and removed the Langlock spell, "how has my favorite Auror been? Did you enjoy your days rotting away in Azkaban?"

"Indubitably, it's a far stretch nicer than ever seeing your face again," Diggle scoffed.

Abraxas rolled his eyes, unperturbed but the insult, and snapped his fingers. "Get him on the table."

Immediately, two hooded figures in navy blue robes grabbed Diggle up by his arms and jerked him over to the table. There, he was thrown onto the table, his magical restraints freed for but a moment to be recast with his arms and legs extended in the shape of an X.

"What do you plan to do to him?" asked Draco. He could hear the concern in his voice, trying to cover it up with nonchalance, but his grandfather noticed.

"Of course not."

"Good. Then you have but one bit left of the agenda." Abraxas extended his hand toward the book. Draco hesitated. "Why… why attack my family in this way? You were already getting what you wanted… why?"

"This is my home. Where else would I wish to create a new Sacred Twenty-Eight covenant? The fact we acted tonight and not tomorrow has little to do with you, I'm afraid, and more to do with convenience. Our dear Travers," Abraxas gestured across the table, to Lindy Bolt, whose eyes met Draco's in such a way that if they were animals, her ears would have drawn back in fear, "was able to infiltrate the home a bit ahead of schedule. She'll make a fine companion for you, when this is all over."

"My Lord?" Lindy jerked in her chair, eyebrows drawn together. Her eyes shifted anxiously over to Auror Jameson, who seemed to be soaking in the conversation with serious interest. Analytical to a fault, that Jameson was. And bloody useless tied up like that. Astoria didn't look much better off, Draco noticed; she was barely conscious. He struggled to reach out his magic and sense Scorpius, but it took everything in him to conceal Potter and Dean, who he hoped were competent enough to
pull off their parts.

"If you think I'm marrying her, it'll be over my lifeless corpse," Draco sneered. "You know all about those, don't you, Bolt?"

Her lips set in a hard line, mirroring her deplorance.

Something soft touched the base of his spine, signaling him. He knew exactly who it was: Hermione, hidden by the Gray.

"Go on," he said, using his words as a double meaning. "Let's end this."

"Very well. Hand me the book."

And so Draco did. When his grandfather's hand connected with the book, he gave a vicious smirk.

"And the stone?"

Begrudgingly, the young Auror handed that over as well, folded in a small handkerchief from his pockets. As he rested the stone on the book, he felt the indescribable shudder of magic around his wrist, releasing him from his Vow.

"Good." Abraxas's lips curled upwards. "You've served me well, Draco. Don't go screwing it all up now. After all, so many others are counting on you."

Hermione felt an anxious pull in her stomach as she stood behind her fiance and watched him take a seat at the table across from his mother, obedient to Abraxas's every wish. He played his part well, she noted, disturbed really at how well he performed. Yes, he was still snarky and bitter, but his temperament was nothing short of a grandson ready to please his grandfather. For half a moment, she wondered if he was truly acting.

The Pandora Box between her hands, still sealed in its stasis charm, she glanced about the room, figuring where best to place it. That's when she heard Diggle pipe up from the table,

"Oy, Malfoy! There a reason I'm on display here for everyone? Got a big show lined up?"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"As a matter of fact, you're the main attraction," smirked Abraxas, moving his chair back with a wave of his hand before taking a seat at the head of the table. With another wave of his hand, he sealed Diggle's lips, shutting him up. "That is better, isn't it?" He removed the Resurrection stone from the book, careful to keep it wrapped in its cloth as he scooted it over in front of Draco. Then, he strummed his fingers atop the book and grinned around at his counterparts. "I want to thank every single one of you for coming this evening. Whether it is by choice or by force is of no means to me, because after tonight, we shall all be as one. Equals, yet superior against the ever growing threat our families now face."

Although they were invisible and undetectable to the rest of the room, Harry and Dean were vivid in Hermione's eye sight, Harry standing carefully at the entrance near the hallway with his wand drawn, and Dean near the window under a daunting portrait of Lucius and Narcissa. Each was waiting for the prime opportunities to play their parts, but she could see the looks on their faces; they were anxious, ready to get started, the same as her. Still, they all needed to stick to the plan. To Draco's plan.
"Every one of us," continued Abraxas, "in some way, had something taken from us during the War. Whether it was a loved one, a family status, or a fortune, we all lost something. And, as promised, I intend to make amends for my family's part in these transgressions."

"Yes, yes," said a hooded man from the back. He removed his cowl and revealed himself; Hermione recognized him instantly as Holdus Berke, son of the current owner of Borgin and Burkes. "That's all well and good, Malfoy, but how will you make it happen?"

"An excellent question. One, I agree, should be answered post-haste. -As many of you might know, the Sacred Twenty-Eight is not just a family legacy written by the late Cantankerus Nott. No… it is something far greater. A pact stemming back since its beginnings nearly five hundred years ago. One of which, provided is done with the strictest of cooperation, ensures the magical reproduction of the finest pureblood witches and wizards in the world. However, due to the changing times, this pact between the Sacred Twenty-Eight has dwindled, and thus, the magic has worn thin. Our families marry into muggle and half-bloods, producing vermin which choke the very essence of our magic to its dying point! With each generation, the pact grows weaker. Our magic grows weaker. Nonetheless," Abraxas gestured to the book, "With tonight's ceremony complete, we shall form a stronger magical bond between our families than our ancestors ever could! With the Gray Magic at our disposal, we will be able to not only provide our future generations with inherited magical qualities only found between our families, but we shall be able to give ourselves the advantage as well. With this ritual, we will bind our families to the Gray magic permanently. No family shall be purer than our own."

Magical pacts? Bonding the families through the Gray? Inherited magical qualities? If Hermione weren't so terrified, she might have found it fascinating.

"Are you aware of the legend of Pandora's Box, young Berke?" Abraxas accio'd his walking cane to him and popped off the bulb, revealing not one, but two blue, glowing stones, side by side. "It is said that the first witch to acquire it was stripped of all her powers, but it isn't entirely true. The box itself contained but one stone, that, should it be released, could not only eradicate one's magical powers, but those of their offspring as well. Pandora, upon discovering this, used the last of her powers to split the stone in half, thus weakening its strength and creating the first muggle: herself -or so the legend goes. However, if we succeed in the combining of the stones, we can return it to its original state."

He smirked to his grandson, and Draco paled.

"Then, we will have the power to not only uphold our legacy, but dictate the outcome of those who wish to oppose us as well. Yet, we must gather the family together if this is to succeed. Draco," he turned his attention to the blond at his right, "It has come to my attention in recent years you're quite the wizard when it comes to Legilimency. Even more versed than dear Travers."

"I am…"

"Be a good lad and search your mother's mind, would you? I grow tired of games, as I'm sure you're ever so anxious to be reunited with your son."

When Draco made no indication to move, Abraxas snapped his fingers, and a man in black robes stood up from his chair, conjuring a bow and arrow out of thin air and aiming it directly at Theodore Jameson.

"Today, Draco. Or would you let this man's soul rest on your conscience?"

"Don't do it, Malfoy," said Theodore, eyes set on the archer in front of him. "Don't you give him a
"Lord Malfoy!" A small witch sprang up from her chair next to Theodore, and Hermione recognized her instantly from her days at the Division. The infamously 'dead' Auror Lindy Bolt, back to life. "I was promised no harm would come to Theodore!"

"And it won't -if my grandson makes the correct choice. Sit down, Travers. Your darling Auror wouldn't be put in this position if you were competent in your work."

Lindy, compromised by her adoration for Theodore, took her chair with hastened motions, releasing a magical wave of aggravation from her that shook the entire room. Merlin, when that woman decided to pout, she pouted. Something shiny above caught Hermione's eye, and it was then she spotted the grand chandelier dangling above everyone's heads.

'The perfect place for a bomb.'

Draco audibly gulped as he exchanged glances with a stricken Lindy Bolt and a stubborn glare from Auror Jameson. No matter how much he wanted to resist his grandfather's demands, he couldn't bring himself to hear the thunk of another arrow moving through a chest.

"Alright," he said. "I'll do it."

"Good lad," Abraxas grinned, clapping his hands together. "Shafiq..." The archer lowered his hands, and the bow, along with the arrow, disappeared in a puff of green smoke. "Wonderful. Well, go on, Draco. We're all waiting."

Draco looked to his mother, expecting to find hate or perhaps disgust, but he only found patient understanding. She dipped her chin once, confirming what he, then, already knew. She was alright with this. But she wouldn't make it easy for him.

Though he didn't need it with the Gray coursing through his veins, he produced his wand, for show, and pointed it at his mother. "Legilimens."

Opening his mother's mind was like prying open a diary with a thick lock. He supposed she would have to be this strong. After all, she had withheld many a secret from the Dark Lord in her day, and many to date still. Dumbledore was wrong. This was the strongest Malfoy -not even a Malfoy at all, really. A Black: tough as nails and twice as sharp. Still, he knew his mother's inner workings, and coming into existence through her gave him a mental link that tethered him to her thoughts. He could feel the shackles of her mind loosening, though she fought hard to keep them tight. So close... he was so close...

A mirror. In Scorpius's bedroom. The same one Draco would use to sneak his way into the den after bedtime to read his father's books.

He snapped out of her mind, watching his mother's eyes widen in surprise. Narcissa had obviously not expected the intrusion, and she looked drained from the experience.

"Ah," Abraxas noticed the woman's weariness as well, "It seems the boy has made some progress. What a development! What talent!" He boasted around the room with vigor. "My grandson, ladies and gentlemen!"

There were a few, scattered claps around the room, though they felt forced.

"Well, Draco. I'm sure you're as eager as I am. Where is our dear Scorpius?"
Harry sucked in an anxious breath for two reasons; he was stuck between watching the madness unfold between the Malfoy family and Hermione levitating a Pandora Box above all their heads towards the chandelier. Somewhere in the mix, he knew as soon as Hermione released the box from the stasis charm, they would be on a tight schedule for their next moments with no time to lose. Still, Hermione would need to wait for his signal, so he turned his attention back to the Malfoys and Draco in particular.

"He's in the Manor," said Draco, dropping his gaze to the table, at the Gray book. His face was extremely stoic, as if he were trying to force it that way. Harry recognized the tells from the many years of watching Malfoy while he suspected him of foul play in school. This was an act, like the many times he guiled his way out of detentions. What was Draco up to? "I saw a painting… the portrait of Rederick Malfoy in the West Hall."

Abraaxas raised a curious eyebrow. "Interesting that is where he should be, considering…"

Draco stiffened in his chair. "Considering?"

"The hexed door beneath the painting- oh, come now, Draco. Did you think I would forget?" Abraaxas tsk'd before removing his wand from his ivory robes and pointed it directly at Narcissa Malfoy's forehead. "I grow weary of asking. Where is the boy?"

Draco pointed his wand at Abraaxas, and in turn, the table lit to life with wands, all pointing directly at him. The youngest Malfoy looked about the room, realizing he was outnumbered. He withdrew his wand and leaned back in his chair, shutting his eyes. Defeated, he said, "My bedroom. You'll find him in the closet, hidden beneath a glamour charm."

Abraaxas smirked, tucking his wand back inside his robes. "That wasn't so difficult, was it, Draco? We'll bully the obedience into you yet. -Dessy. Take Travers to fetch the boy, would you?"

Eagerly, the girl called Dessy bounced and giggled as she approached Lindy before transforming into a swift, red fox. Lindy rolled her eyes, muttering, "We could be human sometimes," before quickly morphing into a small, grey kitten and following her out of the room.

Harry looked to Hermione, nodding once in confirmation to signal her. As he turned his eyes back on Malfoy, he noticed the most peculiar thing; his lips were tugged up, behind his grandfather's back, with a devastating smirk.

"While the ladies are busy, I dare say we can begin our work." Abraaxas grinned down to Diggle. "Shall we begin phase one?"

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Alright! All the blocks are in place. Are you ready to watch them fall?
Thank you to everyone who has reviewed thus far. I want to take the time to talk to each one of you, but my schedule leaves me in a hurry today. Especially if I'm to update you with a new chapter VERY soon. Please, let me know what you thought, and if you'd like, a favorite is always welcome. No pressure, though.

HAPPY NEW YEAR'S EVE TO ALL!
~A.
When the Bough Breaks

I promise not to make anyone wait too long for the next chapter. Like, does this weekend sound good?

As always, the lovely waymay proofed this like a pro, and I'm ever grateful. She gave me a valuable plot device in this chapter as well.

LightofEvolution deserves a round of virtual applause, because I couldn't have come up with many of these moments without her. She says she doesn't want recognition, but here it is, nonetheless. XD This chapter goes out to Light!

~A.

"This is My World" by Esterly featuring Austin Jenckles

Heavy hangs the fear in your heart
Like cinder blocks crushing your chest
It's a prison break, escape from the dark

Can't get it out of your head

Whoa
Whoa
Woah

This is my world!
Oh, you took a wrong turn!
Now you're stuck in my world!
Trust me, this gonna hurt!
Fire it up, and watch it burn!
This is my world!

The magic in the air crackled overhead as Abraxas flipped open the first page of the Gray magic tome and gave a calculated smirk down to the helpless Greg Diggle. Draco watched on in horror, unsure to step in or allow the theatrics to continue. There was a conflict which weighed heavily in his heart; whatever his grandfather had planned for Diggle, Draco couldn't convince himself Diggle didn't deserve it.

"Now then," said Abraxas, drawing his wand over his palm to slice it; blood dripped onto the pages, connecting him to communicate with the Gray. "I come to offer power. Take this man," he gestured to Diggle, "who has used your power for corruption, and use him to repair the Pandora Stone for me. I offer his life in exchange for your power."

The room hung on bated breath for the Gray's response, but what came next no one could have
predicted.

Draco could see the words form over his grandfather's shoulder. 'The Gray rejects this proposal.' And the book slammed shut.

Silence. Abraxas's face fell into that of confusion and iron-clad refusal to back down. Just as he was about to open the book again, someone began to laugh, soft at first, until the volume grew and bounced off the walls. It came from the center of the table; Diggle threw his head back, cackling with satisfaction.

"That was your grand plan?" He continued to spill full bodied laughter, his dazzlingly white teeth glistening in the light beneath the chandelier. "That's not how the Gray Magic works, Malfoy! You can't offer up someone else! The Gray is all about self sacrifice!" His chest heaved, still spilling with uncontrollable laughter. It only added to Abraxas's humiliation when he added, "Apparently, my life isn't worth much to you! Ahaha! Oh, oh Malfoy! You slay me! Really! What did you think, you were just going to sacrifice me on a pillar in front of your followers like I'm fucking Aslan or something? White witch -white wolf -the bloody parallels are spectacular!"

Abraxas made an apparent sneer, waved his wand, and pointed it at Diggle. "Silencio!" The laughter died away instantly. He, then, ran his fingers over the top of the book, closing his eyes. "It seems only a true sacrifice will do. Very well. I'd give my very life, my soul, for the cause."

The book began to glow under his palm, and when he opened his eyes, he lifted his book opened back to him, new words forming this time:

'The Gray accepts payment of Abraxas Malfoy's soul.'

Lucius Malfoy stepped into the Quidditch shed behind the Manor, leaning against his walking cane for support. It was difficult for him to breathe, but he ignored the pressure on his chest, using the light of the moon peering through the window to search for the object of his desire. Instinct told him to raise his wand and cast a Lumos spell, but the weakness his body felt reminded him he no longer contained magic. If there was ever a time where Lucius felt more useless, he couldn't recall it. Somewhere between a hobble and a stiff walk, he meandered about the shed until he found it, hidden underneath a thick curtain.

With a smirk, Lucius yanked the tapestry down, revealing the two way mirror he'd gifted Narcissa with on their first anniversary. Though he, himself, wasn't magical anymore, the mirror was, and he stepped through the portal, tumbling out on the other side: the den of the Malfoy Manor, opposite of the fireplace. Glancing about the room, he gathered his composure, digging into his pockets to reveal the letter he'd written not ten minutes before. It was curled in a scroll and sealed with the Malfoy insignia, marking it for departure. And depart it did as Lucius tossed some floo powder into the fireplace before hissing, "Ministry of Magic," and pitching the scroll into the green flames.

Taking careful measure, he made sure the parchment disappeared before he leaned against the mantle and coughed into his hand. Blood trickled onto his palm, the crimson glaring back at him as a painful reminder of his transgressions. He silently wondered where it all had gone terribly, terribly wrong. Every decision he ever made felt like a weight, crushing his lungs like the cancer residing inside. He wiped his hand on his robes and reached inside his pant pocket, revealing the picture Draco had left him with the last time they'd spoken. Victoria Crabbe's pretty eyes glistened back at him, and his heart tugged in guilt. He wasn't strong enough, in his weakened state, to fend off the terrible blows of regret as they swarmed him, leaving him exhausted and misty eyed. He coughed again, thicker this time, and splattered the picture with his blood.
"Hello, Lucius," she said, running her hands down the skirt of her lavender dress and fixing her plumed hat just so.

"Open the tunnel," he commanded, refusing to look his mother in the eyes. Winifred's passing had been harder on Lucius - even more than that of his own father, but he would never have admitted it to anyone but Narcissa. He'd been closer to Abraxas, yes, but he knew, deep down inside, he wanted to be gentle, like his mother. Knowing he had not grown up this way, he found it important not to show his mother's painting any type of kindness, lest he break down at her painted shoes in a puddle of tears.

No. That was never the Malfoy way.

His mother appeared hurt, but she didn't comment on his lack of compassion. "Password?"

"Prometheus."

The painting swung open, revealing a baffled looking boy, his platinum blond locks sticking up at odd angles. Dirt covered the bridge of his nose and his palms, but he smiled as if he'd never been happier as he set his eyes upon his grandfather. "Gampa!" Scorpius leaped against Lucius's leg, nearly knocking the grown man over if it weren't for his walking cane. Lucius coughed, straightened his back, and patted his grandson on top of his head.

"Shh," he said, "Are you alright, Scorpius?"

"Scary," replied Scorpius, turning to peer back inside the tunnel. "Lotsa spiders."

"Yes," said Lucius, smirking as relief filled him to the brim, "I imagine so."

A strange, wispy golden light like Draco had never seen before emerged from the pages of the book, coiling up Abraxas's arm like a snake. Fear picked Draco out from a crowd and seized his entire body as he watched the Gray magic transfer itself from the book into Abraxas, crawling up his shoulder before sinking into his chest. His grandfather shuddered as the candles around the room flickered. His hands began to glow with runes traveling up and down his arms as the book was stripped blank. The temperature in the room dropped drastically within an instant; Draco could see his breath ghosting in a puff of mist before his face.

Abraxas set his hands on the table, breathing heavily. He appeared shaky, out of breath, while a new sheen of sweat glistened over his skin. He hung his head low, his hair dangling dangerously over his eyes. Then, a low, frightening chuckle emerged from his lips while his shoulders heaved with laughter. "So, this is the true power of Gray Magic. Fascinating." He tilted his head up to look around the table.

Something pricked inside of Draco's subconscious, and he could hear Hermione's thoughts in his head. 'We can't let him repair the stone!'

'I'm aware of that,' Draco snarled back inside his mind, wondering if Abraxas would pick up on their telepathy. To his reassurance, his grandfather appeared distracted, looking down at his hands and
back up to the guests in attendance.

"Now, then." His head whipped around, and Draco flinched, startled by the movement. "It appears we're not alone."

'Shit.'

"It seems you lied to me, Draco." Abraxas snapped his fingers. "Shafiq, we have some visitors in the den. See to it they attend the festivities, yes?"

Bruno Shafiq rose from the table and strutted across the room. "My Lord." He kneeled at Abraxas's feet before setting off toward the archway flanking Draco. He grew dangerously close to Dean, who sidestepped out of the way to avoid being run over only to stumble backward and run smack dab painting of Severin Malfoy.

The portrait swayed on its hinge, appearing to have moved of its own accord. All heads turned in Dean's direction, forcing Draco to swear under his breath.

'Idiot!'

Several hooded figures stood up from their positions at the table, and Abraxas waved his hand. A mighty gust of wind shuddered through the room, countering Draco's magic in one foul swoop. Draco struggled to hold on to his disillusion charm, but it dispelled anyway, revealing Harry, Dean, and Hermione at once.

"Well, well, well," Abraxas grinned, "Auror Potter. Auror Granger. Auror... " He eyed Dean with bemused interest. "I don't even care to know your name. But it is so nice of you to join us."

"Now!" Harry shouted; Draco took his grandfather's example, focusing all of his efforts on summoning a dispelling charm of terrifying caliber; he emitted a blast with his hand, vibrating the room and knocking everyone off balance, but, most importantly, banishing away the restraints on Diggle, Astoria, and Jameson.

Theodore was the first to act, kicking his feet against the table to knock himself backward in the chair. It toppled over, and, with a graceful roll, he landed right side up, throwing a wandless stunning charm at the wizard seated across from him. Panic broke out amongst the room—several of Abraxas's followers raised their wands and began to cast spell after spell, while others morphed into their furry and scaly animagus counterparts to avoid the carnage of hexes. Narcissa, not one to be timid, began throwing hex after hex, chasing wild animals about the room with only the fierceness a mother's touch could provide.

Diggle, to his own interests, rolled off the table just as a curse flew over his head, missing Hermione by inches as she appeared by Astoria's side.

"Oy, watch it!" Diggle shouted to whomever threw the curse, not because he was nearly struck, but because the spell nearly hit the woman he was in love with. He caught eyes with a man dressed in red robes. "You're going to regret that." With a swing of his leg, he knocked another wizard off balance by kicking him in the back of his knees, stole his wand, and sent a full binding jinx into the assailant's chest.

Hermione stared wide-eyed at Diggle, who smirked at her, awaiting recognition. "Well," she said, baffled, "I suppose you've earned one brownie point."

"Only one?" Diggle shrugged. "I'll take it."
"Hermione!" shouted Harry from somewhere off in the distance. "Get her out of here!"

"Right." She placed a gentle hand on Astoria's shoulder as the witch peered up at her through hooded, pain filled eyes. "Hang in there, Astoria. You're going to be alright." She exchanged a wordless glance with Theodore before Disapparating from the room, Astoria in tow.

Harry, across the room, expelled a shield from his wand just in time to block himself and Dean from several curses hurling in their direction. Animals skittered across the floor, changing at will from human to creature to avoid beams of magical light. He scanned his eyes around the room, finding Abraxas having it out with Draco. Something glistened around Abraxas's throat, and Harry felt a hunch so strong he decided to act on it.

"Malfoy!" he shouted. "The pendant!"

Draco, who was busy fending himself off as Abraxas swung his hand and sent splintered wood in Draco's direction, growled, "Little busy, Potter!" He avoided the shards by throwing up a barrier spell, but it left his flank open, and an animagus in the shape of a hawk swooped down, aiming for Draco's ribs with her sharp talons.

"Draco, watch out!" warned Narcissa, holding her own against a bear.

"Damn it, Malfoy! What are you doing to me?" Diggle took off at a dead run, sliding beneath the table like a baseball player to home plate, and as he emerged from beneath he shouted, "Bombarda!"

It sent the hawk smashing into the ceiling instead. Diggle threw his fist up in victory, scrambled to his feet, and stood at Draco's side, muttering, "You die, I die, remember?"

Abraxas took great advantage of their distraction, extending his hand and squeezing his fist. Dean screamed in agony as a snap echoed through the dining area, and he fell to the floor as his leg twisted in unnatural ways.

"Dean!" Draco shouted, a feeling unfamiliar to him rising to the surface; was this compassion? His concern for his friend, for one of the first times in his life, overshadowed his self-preservation, and the Gray magic within him exploded in a burst of energy, shattering every window pane. In a fit of anger, he raised the shards with a wave of his hand and sent them hurdling at his grandfather -who doused them all into a sheet of sand mere inches from his face.

"I grow tired of these childish games!" Abraxas yelled, and, with a mighty slam of his hand down onto the table, he brought the entire room to its knees. The only one left standing was Draco, who fought against his grandfather's magic with his own, refusing to submit. But it was a mistake, because Abraxas soon realized what Draco contained within his bones, nodding in recognition. He took a step forward, arms outstretched at his sides. A show of confidence. "So, you couldn't resist having your hand in the cookie jar, too."

"I've been told on multiple occasions how much I take after you." Draco shot his grandfather a smirk to prove his case, mirroring the generations of Malfoys with the same, daunting smile.

"This is foolish." Abraxas forced everyone further down to the floor, including his subordinates. Somewhere off in the distance, a dog yipped. "Have I not given you every opportunity, Draco? To see reason? For you to understand what must be done? Hand over Cane, and all will be forgiven."

"I can't blame you for wanting to make up for the deplorable things the Death Eaters did," Draco said, sensing something happening down the hall. He feared for Scorpius's safety, and decided to stall his grandfather as he accumulated a plan. After an attempt to contact Hermione, he realized it was useless; Abraxas's magic was like static, mucking up his signal. "But sacrifice? This futile
mission you've made to bring the Pandora Stone back together? It's madness. Surely you can see that."

"Madness?" Abraxas repeated, chuckling. "Madness is allowing the Sacred Twenty-Eight's power to dwindle while their offsprings marry into less than worthy bloodlines. Madness is sweeping these transgressions under the rug while purebloods fade away to nothing! What does family mean to you, Draco!?"

"It doesn't mean this! Killing to get what you want?" Draco gestured to Diggle, who hovered on his knees by Draco's feet. "I hate this sod more than anyone else in this room. I've earned that right! And so have you! He tortured you. Locked you up and threw away the key. I get it - believe me, if anyone understands what you're feeling, it's me. But…" he stood his ground, squaring his jaw. "But none of what you speak is worth killing for!"

Abraxas smirked. "You're wrong about that. Why defend him, Draco? Did he not, on multiple occasions, see fit to kill him yourself? Leave the worm to me. Let his death serve as a reminder of what it means to threaten the Malfoy line."

"If you think you're any better than him, you're wrong." Draco set a protective stance in front of Diggle, just as shocked as his grandfather that he would do so. Still, he carried on, offering up his softer side, trying to reach the man within the insanity. "What would grandmother say?"

"We can ask her when I revive her."

Draco's stomach plummeted. "No."

"No?"

"No. I won't allow it."

"It's adorable you think you have a choice." Abraxas disappeared and reappeared behind Theodore, holding the tip of his cane, and thus the Pandora Stones, inches away from his cheek. "Do not get brave, boy! Do you want to watch your friends fall, one by one?"

Jameson shook under the weight of Abraxas's magic, his face paling as the stone drained what little magic it could from being in close proximity to the wizard.

Draco tried to feign disinterest. "To be honest, Jameson's never been much of a friend at all."

"Let him go! NOW!" a voice shouted from behind Abraxas. Hermione stepped forward, wand at the ready, serious determination in her eyes.

"Ahhh… the mudblood." Abraxas grinned. "What is the muggle phrase? Two birds, one stone?" He reared back his cane and threw a stunning jinx toward Hermione while simultaneously preparing to drive the stones into Theodore's back - Draco raised his hand to stop him, but a bolt of lightning struck the cane, sending it hurdlng out of Abraxas's hand, across the room. Lindy Bolt stood at the edge of the foyer entrance, her wand fixed on her 'Lord.'

"Lord Malfoy! You said Theodore would be spared!"

Dessy jumped to disarm the witch, but Lindy, with years of experience under her belt, was quicker. She sent the teenager through the air and into a nearby wall, knocking her out cold. Lindy slowly turned her attention back on Abraxas, yet he didn't seem the least bit concerned. He only stared in amusement at her, tilting his head to the side.
"You wish to challenge my authority, Travers? Need I remind you at what cost you'd do so?"

Lindy glanced over to Theodore, her expression full of pain. Of friendship. Of love. She set her eyes back on Abraxas. "Reducto!" Her spell zoomed through the air, hitting Abraxas full on -but it crumbled upon impact. A light shimmer cascaded over Abraxas's body, and he grinned wickedly.

"Good try. -Confrin-"

"-Levicorpus!" Hermione shouted, sending Abraxas flying into the air. Draco, in a quick second decision, sprinted across the room, his eyes on his grandfather's walking cane. Lindy, in the corner of his eyes, collapsed to the floor in a pile. Time slowed down as Abraxas's concentration was thrown, and one by one, the warriors in the fold were released from his spell. The battle continued as Draco dashed, reaching for the cane. His grandfather landed on the floor with a THUNK, but Draco could sense he was barely injured.

"Accio!" Draco's fingers curled around the base of staff just in time to hear a child's shrill scream pierce his ears.

"Let go! LET GO!" Scorpius screamed, and to Draco's horror, he watched as his only son was dragged by the hair into the dining room with a knife held to his throat. Shafiq smirked from beneath his hood. "Daddy! DADDY! MUMMY!"

"Scorpius!" Hermione and Draco shouted together just before a flash of white life erupted above their heads, and the Pandora Box exploded.

The big finale of the last showdown starts next chapter.
I am so psyched.
~A.
Tooth and Claw

I never meant to lie to anyone. I had every intention of getting this written last weekend and uploading it. But... life happens. If you follow me on facebook, you know I've been going through some self-discoveries. I apologize to everyone I, unintentionally, lied to while not uploading this chapter sooner. If it makes you feel any better, I've only been able to upload one chapter of Squirm since that time, so I haven't been the best author lately. I'm hoping to change that. Yes, I know, I'm entitled to a life outside of fanfiction, but I don't like breaking my word.

On a side note, Squirm has been nominated for the semi-finals of the Dramione Award's "Best WIP" (work in progress) category! If you'd like the link to vote for me, please PM me! It would mean the world! Unfortunately, HTTYA wasn't nominated for anything this time around, but I'm not going to be picky. I'm just surprised and humbled Squirm made an impact.

As always, LightofEvolution needs a big round of applause for helping me with this plot, as well as doing some beta reading. Waymay is on vacation (solo trip) to London this week, so the sweet Sunful824 dropped everything to beta for me this time around! Thank youuuuu!

Anyway, I'm going to pick up Tango very soon again. My focus has been this story this week while I get back into the writing swing, as well as a 3 part story I've been writing as a birthday gift to LightofEvolution. If you're reading any of my works in progress, know I don't plan to abandon any, and they will all be updated soon.

~A.

Take an angel by the wings
Beg her now for anything
Beg her now for one more day

"Angel By The Wings" by Sia

Rubble. Dust. The air was thick with it, hanging like a guillotine ready to strike. It was the dust which brought Draco to his senses; he coughed until his lungs burned, and only then did his eyes open to the horrific sight before him.

Malfoy Manor -his home- looked as if it were cleaved in two, the central focus being the dining room. He knew it would come to this -it was his idea, after all, to place the bomb where it would go off easily, once it drained enough magic. But he never expected for everyone to still be in the vicinity when it took its revenge.

He couldn't see Scorpius, but he found Hermione not far off, blood trickling down her cheek from her nose and her eyes shut. Immediately, Draco thrust the Gray magic within himself out and felt for a pulse. Upon finding it, he relaxed slightly, and then he sent it off again, searching for Scorpius, his mother, and the others. There was Potter, and Dean... albeit, they were incapacitated. A flicker of blonde hair indicated his mother, and, despite a cut across her cheek, her heart rate was normal, indicating she would be alright. The last person he found shook his mop of brown hair, face heavy
Diggle woke up within the rubble, his head swimming with pain. His arm stung, and there was a ringing in his ear. He felt a thick, strange tingle in his lower leg, and when he glanced down, he saw it impaled with a thick shard of glass. Wincing, he sat upright, ignoring the pain, for now, to search for important faces in the sea of the incapacitated: Hermione, because no matter how hard he might try to douse them, his feelings for her would always prevail, and Draco Malfoy, whose life depended on Diggle just as much as Diggle's life depended on him. To his relief, he found the sod not too far off, just awakened.

Malfoy turned his attention on him, noticing the movement in the rubble, and the two men shared a singular thought; they were lucky to be alive. With a nod of his head, Diggle turned to see a few others stirring beneath the piles of fallen brick and wall. It's when he caught sight of two things at once; Scorpius, just past Draco near the entryway where he had last been, and the archer named Bruno Shafiq, whose hood had fallen back during the explosion. Now, Greg finally understood why he kept his face hidden; a long scar drew up from the middle of his chin, between his lips, before veering off diagonally and slashing across a milky-colored eye. No doubt, that scar was the work of dark magic. It then dawned on Greg: Bruno Shafiq had a handicap, and he still managed to be a near perfect shot. It made the realization that much more frightening when Bruno lifted his arms and formed his bow once more, aiming a conjured arrow at the back of Draco's skull.

"MALFOY!"

It was all Draco needed to act on Auror instinct, rolling over on his stomach just as the arrow jettisoned in his direction. Thanks to Diggle's warning, it missed him, soaring through the air and hitting a crumbling pillar instead. Unfortunately for Greg, it also brought his attention to Shafiq, whose lips curled back in a confident grin before taking aim at Diggle instead.

"Daddy!" Scorpius's sudden scream pulled all three men from their concentration, and all eyes turned on Scorpius Malfoy, who lay only ten feet away from Bruno Shafiq, his leg caught between a fallen wooden slat from the bones of the Manor. Shafiq, in a quick attempt, went for the boy, but Malfoy was quicker, sending his arm out and grasping the man by magical force. He swung his arm and sent him hurdling in the opposite direction, which was, in fact, closer to Malfoy himself. Shafiq transformed mid air into a light-footed tiger, landing on his paws with fluid motions.

"Diggle!" shouted Draco, throwing up a barrier between himself and the tiger just as Shafiq's claws came at him, "Get Scorpius out of here!"

"But you-"

"Bollocks to me! This is all for nothing if anything happens to my son!" He dodged a claw in the nick of time just before Shafiq transfigured into his human form once more, sending arrow after swift arrow at Malfoy.

Diggle looked between the two blonds, conflicted. That was, until he saw the stirring of Abraxas Malfoy from the center of the room, coughing and sputtering. "Damn it all," Greg cursed. He tried to ignore the pain in his leg, but found him useless to stand -so he crawled, across the floor, over to Scorpius, eyes carefully trailing between the awakening Abraxas and Malfoy defending himself, quite successfully, against Shafiq. Scorpius wiggled in fear at the sight of Diggle, but the man put a finger to his lips, gesturing him to be quiet.

"I'm here to help, mate. Friend of your father's." He then pushed the bit of rubble off of Scorpius and slung the child into his arms.
Something miraculous happened. Scorpius threw his arms around Greg's throat, sobbing into his shoulder. "Mummmmy…. I wa-a-ant Mummy….”

The crying attracted the ears of Abraxas, who sat up, smirking as he laid eyes on Greg and the child.

"Malfoy!" shouted Diggle, "We have a problem!"

Draco barely dodged one of Shafiq's arrows as it grazed him by the shoulder. Wincing, he threw up his best barrier spell and turned his attention on Abraxas. It was a mistake, because Abraxas sent a boulder of rubble toppling in Draco's direction. It smacked Malfoy clean in the chest, throwing him back against the wall to crumble on the floor.

"Shit!" Diggle looked around for anyone else to have awakened but found it useless. He saw Shafiq approach Draco, arrow drawn and pulled back against his bow -at the same time, Abraxas's eyes fell on the boy again. It was a choice -to stay and fight meant abandoning Scorpius. To leave meant turning his back on Draco's safety, which could only lead to…

He didn't hesitate. He knew the path to take, even if it cost him the ultimate sacrifice.

"Hold on tight, Scorpius! This is going to sting a little…” And with that, he concentrated all his efforts on the grounds outside, away from all of the fighting and savagery. If he was going to die, he'd die somewhere peaceful. Knowing he couldn't escape the grounds without the Dragon Scale Pendant dispelled, he focused on the one place he knew. He'd seen a picture of them once featured in Witch Weekly -the most beautiful private magical gardens in all of England. If he was going to die… it was going to be somewhere beautiful: just like Hermione Granger.

Pain ricocheted up Draco's arm with a sickening crunch as he hit the wall -the wind knocked out of him, and he was sure he ruptured something internally as he fell to the floor. His vision blurred; the pain was extraordinary. But it was nothing compared to the relief he felt when he caught sight of Diggle just before he disappeared, Scorpius in tow.

THUNK. It was hot at first, like a blazing poker stick being shoved into his stomach. The heat grew, filtering through his organs until they felt boiling. As he looked down, he saw the arrow lodged in his abdomen, pinning him to the floor. Only then did it dawn on him what the burning was -it was more pain.

"Good man," he could hear his grandfather call out, though he sounded distant, like the wind. Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Someone approached him, and he saw, through hooded slits, Bruno Shafiq above him, another arrow pointed, this time at Draco's heart.

"You sullied it up!" shouted Shafiq, less composed than ever before. "My parents -my entire world was turned upside down thanks to people like you. Tortured. Stripped of their status all because they sympathized with muggles. I ought to-"

"-But you won't," said Abraxas, laying a firm hand on Bruno's shoulder. "Come now. I think Draco's learned his lesson." At his words, Shafiq took a few lingering steps back, allowing Abraxas the opportunity to crouch before Draco, smirking. "That looks mighty painful. Shall I fish it out for you?"

"You do, and I'll spike it right through your heart," Draco sneered back, spitting blood.

"Shafiq, go fetch the boy. And this time, do not lose him."

"I'll be damned-"
PING! A bolt of silver blue light whizzed across Abraxas's shoulder, deflecting into a fallen painting. To Draco's surprise, he found Hermione standing amongst the rubble, legs wobbly, but in her hands was the walking cane. Two blue pandora stones glistened back at Abraxas as if to taunt him.

"Now, Harry!"

"Stupefy!"

The spell barely tickled Abraxas, but it was all Draco needed- he coughed up crimson as he reached for the arrow in his stomach and, with a quick yank, wretched it from his body. Before he was able to be stopped, he disappeared and reappeared at Hermione's side.

"Draco, you're hurt."

"Yes, obviously."

"So heal yourself!"

"I can do that?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, setting her hand on his stomach. The next thing Draco felt was warmth - not like the boiling before, but a soothing heat which spread through his core. When she removed her hand, his stomach was nearly like new; all that was left was a small scar from the entry wound.

"That's... " He shook his head, stirring himself from his daze. "No, I-" His eyes fell on Shafiq, who had already disappeared through the archway toward the den.

"Go," said Hermione, We've got this."

Draco didn't need to be told twice. He took off in Shafiq's direction, only looking back once to see Dean and Harry rise to the occasion, surrounding Abraxas in a triad of force.

Across the way, Theodore Jameson awoke to the sounds of a sputtering cough. His ears prickled as he jolted upright, startled and in dismay. An explosion… there had been an explosion. His first instinct was to jump up and fight until he heard a timid gasp of air close to him. Rolling over, he caught sight of Lindy, covered in soot but otherwise perfectly fine - that was, until he saw her sputter up blood.

"Lindy…" With all of his strength, Theodore crawled toward her, even though every muscle in his body ached to stay still. He managed to make it to her just as she rolled over and spewed a stomach full of near-black vomitus. Some of it landed on his lap, but he ignored it, pulling her against his chest and leaning her head back against his arm.

"Theodore," she smiled, though the obvious amount of pain she felt could be seen shimmering in her tear filled eyes. "I'm sorry."

"What happened to you?" he asked, searching her over for injury. "Were you struck? Internal hemorrhaging?"

"I... broke my...vow..."

It struck him like a house falling from the sky. It didn't matter that his parents had been healers; no amount of medical background could have prepared him for this. There was nothing he could do. And it had been done for him. "Why?"
"You dummy," she laughed, curling into his chest. "I love you. That's why. I just… wanted us to be happy."

"Lindy…" Years ago, they'd been two children who met at a bridge in Glasgow. He never noticed - not through their childhood, nor when they grew apart in Hogwarts… not even when they finally rekindled a friendliness for each other in Auror training. All this time, and he'd never seen it… Theodore cursed himself inside for the way he was; his lack of emotion was simply a barrier put up to keep from getting hurt, but if he'd actually been a friend instead of a colleague, perhaps Lindy would have never been caught up in any of this. "I…"

"Shh…" she put a bloody finger up to his lip. "I know." Lindy nodded and smiled. "I know, you big dummy."

One moment she was there, and the next she was gone.

For the first time in years, Theodore felt tears slip down his cheeks. He drew Lindy up against his chest tight, fearing to let go. The last bit of his childhood slipped through his fingers like the snow in Glasgow the fateful morning they met.

"Come on, Malfoy. Is that all you've got?"

"Dean!" shouted Harry, ducking behind a broken bit of table to keep from getting hit with a powerful stunning spell, "Maybe now isn't the best time to taunt the man! -

"Reducto!" He sent a fallen beam crumbling on top of a nearby Sacred Twenty-Eight member. One by one, Abraxas's troops were awakening, adding to the number of formidable foes he, Dean, and Hermione could take on. It was bad enough battling one over-powerful Malfoy. Sprinkling more witches and wizards into the mix only meant more unavoidable casualties. Merlin's pants, why did he agree to take on the Lead Auror position?! Why couldn't Harry have taken to something less stressful, like taming dragons in Romania or giving it a go in the Department of Mysteries as an Unspeakable?

Somehow, the three managed to scrape together behind the most solid chunk of the dining table, Hermione holding the cane in her hands as if it were a sword.

"Anyone got any ideas?" asked Dean as the table shook from the force of one of Abraxas's spells. Hermione handed the cane off to Harry and placed her hands on the table, holding it in place.

"He's after the cane, right?" Harry said, an idea forming in his head from being passed the cane. "Hot potato, anyone?"

Hermione's eyes widened, and she looked as if she could kiss him. "That's brilliant!"

"I'm game," nodded Dean, "count me in. Though I don't know how much use I'll be on this-"

"-leg…"

"Right," Harry tried to hide the amazement in his voice. The table squeaked as it moved backward a few inches. "In between being 'it', let's try to dislodge that pendant from around his throat. It's what's keeping the Ministry from coming in!"

"One," said Hermione.

"Two," Harry nodded.

"Three!" exclaimed Dean, and the three scattered just as the table barreled over their heads and smashed into the wall. Dean took off left, Hermione right, leaving Harry as living bait holding the
most glorious of prizes.

"Well, come on, then!" he shouted.

Abraxas lunged forward, but when he landed to the ground, he was no longer human. His white robes were replaced with a silken, ivory coat of fur, teeth bared and eyes glowering. The wolf took off at a dead run, and Harry threw the cane with all his might in Hermione's direction. Her Gray magic did the rest, sending it soaring into the air to land comfortably in her hand. The wolf stopped just short of Harry, head turning in Hermione's direction.

"I doubt your speed will help you!" Hermione said, disappearing and reappearing at the edge of the archway nearest the foyer. "Come on, puppy! Keep up!"

Dean tried a stunning spell to no avail. Harry realized, no matter how hard they tried, there would be no magic that could remove the pendant. So, counting his blessings he had lived this long, he did something reckless, foolish, and above all else: moronic. As Abraxas tore off in Hermione's direction, Harry ran toward the wolf, and, somehow, managed to latch his arm around his neck and swing his full body around until he was riding the wolf.

"Who-o-oah!" At first, it was simply clinging on for dear life, the pattering of feet below confirming his success. The white wolf snarled, rearing up on its haunches to rid the Auror, but Harry dug his fingers into his fur and pulled, keeping his grip. Abraxas nipped back, his teeth scraping across Harry's pant leg but missing his skin by millimeters. Later, Harry might look back on the moment and find it comical, but here, in the mix, he was terrified. Still, he had a job to do, and he wasn't about to let his fear get the best of him. After all -he'd defeated Voldemort. If he could do that, he could certainly take on - "AH!" Teeth tore into his thigh as the white wolf curled his body around. Harry, in quick succession, reached around the neck of the wolf. His fingers found metal, and he tugged, jerking, hearing the snap of a clasp before he was thrown to the ground.

"Oy, oy!" Dean could be heard yelling across the dining room. "Come and get your bone, boy." He waved the cane like a chew toy. "That's it! You smelly brute!" Abraxas released Harry's leg and tore off in Dean's direction. Squealing, Dean began to run, full strength, toward a tapestry. "Wingardium Leviosa!" He pointed to his shoes and sent himself soaring up into the air, one arm reaching out to grasp the top of the tapestry and hold on tight.

"Harry, your leg!" It was Hermione, back at Harry's side once again.

"No time. The necklace."

"Finite Incantatem."

The grounds beneath their feet shook, rumbling and groaning in desperation as the Dragon Scale Pendant's magic was dispersed.

Briefly before, at the other end of the Manor, Draco was in hot pursuit of Bruno Shafiq, determined not to let him get away. The image of Scorpius behind held at knifepoint drove the father to sheer hatred. He caught sight of the billowing wisp of robes as Shafiq turned the corner, and Draco sprinted to capture. When he rounded the corner, he found the hallway empty. The only other door in the hall was shut, and he hadn't heard it open. Which could only mean one thing: Shafiq disillusioned himself and was standing here, before him, invisible.

Draco struggled to catch his breath as he roamed his eyes down the long corridor, searching for any tells. The Gray magic in him was tired- probably because, despite his best efforts, Draco's ego
waned. He felt like a failure. So much of this could have been avoided if he'd just been a man and stood up to his grandfather in the woods instead of using the cowards way out to stay alive.

No. This wasn't helping. Self-loathing only worsened his powers. If he was going to do this, he needed to remember all the good he'd done. He'd informed Potter of his grandfather's involvement. He'd located both Pandora stones (mind you, he did give his over to Abraxas in exchange for his life). But he'd done all that he'd done to protect his family. And what good would dying do, anyway? It would have put more of the people he loved in danger, not keep them alive. When push came to shove, he told himself he did the right thing. Then, he began to believe it.

A glimmer of a human form molded to his right, and he thrust his hand out, sending the figure up to the ceiling before dropping him with a SMACK to the floor. Shafiq's glamour dispelled immediately, and Draco smirked in triumph, kicking the man in the side.

"Serves you right, you bellend."

As his confidence grew, the Gray flickered inside of him, finding new kindling in his accomplishment. So much so, he sensed another presence in the den at the end of the hall. Cautiously, he approached the door and pried it open.

"Father?"

Lucius Malfoy lay slumped in front of Winifred Malfoy's portrait, sallow and covered in blood. Draco rushed into the room, falling to his knees beside his father and immediately recognizing the puncture of three arrow wounds in his chest. The arrows, being magical, must have disintegrated, but it only made the bleeding worse as Lucius's breath rattled.

"No you don't," Draco seethed, pressing his hands over his father's chest. "You don't get to be a fucking martyr. You're not dying tonight." He prayed Hermione's healing expertise with the Gray would work for him, and he closed his eyes, imagining the wounds sealing beneath his palms. A cool tingle dripped down his arms and into his hands. When he opened his eyes again, he found Lucius breathing normally, though he still remained unconscious for the time being.

There came a mighty rupture across the foundation of Malfoy Manor, roaring and causing the structure to moan.

Lucius bolted upright, gasping for breath and staring in confusion at his son.

"Draco?"

He didn't know what came over him, but Draco found himself flinging his arms around Lucius and clinging on like a child come back from Hogwarts term. All of the hatred and resentment sloughed off like snake skin, revealing the boy underneath. The boy who just wanted to love, and be loved, by his father.

"Oh… um… are we hugging?" Lucius asked in a formal tone. He patted Draco on the back, but before long he gave in and wrapped his arms firmly around his only son.

"I thought I'd lost you," Draco said.

"For a moment there, you almost did. -Scorpius, Narcissa, are they-" but Lucius was cut off when the fireplace behind them burst into green flames. Out from the floo stepped Auror Kingston, wand drawn and horn-rimmed glasses hanging precariously off of his nose.

"Malfoy?" he spoke not to Lucius, but to Draco. It then dawned on him he was supposed to be in
"Er… fights in the dining area," said Draco, peeling himself away from his father in a fit of embarrassment. "Potter's there, in case you're wondering."

"I take it you found my letter?" drawled Lucius, smirking up at Kingston. One by one, more Aurors stepped out of the flames, each turning a curious eye on the Malfoy men.

Kingston cleared his throat and narrowed his eyes. "I'll be taking you in after this is over," he said.

"If you think you can catch me," smirked Draco. He helped his father to his feet and watched as Auror after Auror followed Kingston out of the den and toward battle.

"Where are you going?" asked Lucius as Draco turned to follow.

"What does it look like? To do my job. Someone's got to put Abraxas down."

Lucius stared firmly at his son. "Let me assist you."

Draco tried his very best to not sound cruel as he said, "You'll only get in my way." Then he pulled away from his father and retreated out of the room, sprinting down the hall to catch up. When he made it to the archway, he found Dean clinging for dear life up at the top of a tapestry, an enormous white wolf pacing back and forth at the bottom. Aurors were throwing spells right and left at him, but they bounced off, unphased.

No. No more people would be put in jeopardy on his family's account.

Draco thrust out his hand and summoned the cane to him before shouting, "You want it? Come and get it!" before disappearing with a POP!

I know, I know. Another cliffhanger. But I didn't want to force everything into one chapter. Next one is the final boss fight. Promise. I'm not trying to drag it out...

Hopefully, you enjoyed and are ready to travel with me on this adventure to the very end.

We haven't much more to go.

~A.
Together

I won't make ya'll wait with frilly words. Thank you to my lovely beta and friend, waymay, for proofing this chapter for me. Thank you to LightofEvolution, who sat up with me past her bedtime on numerous occasions to go over the finer details of this climax. Thank you to every single one of you for reading.

~A.

Strike me down, take me away

Debts are due, it's time to pay

Face what I deserve, here comes judgement day

I won't run, the guilt is mine
The landing into the garden was rougher than intended, and Greg landed with a firm smack into the ground, tumbling this way and that while cradling Scorpius Malfoy's head with his hand. When he stopped rolling, he was on his back, staring up at the star-lit sky, so clear and bright. He remembered it had been snowing in London, but here, in Wiltshire, the weather was just icy and bitter. Much like Greg's heart as he realized, with a firm solidarity, the implications of his recent actions.

He knew it was utterly selfish to contemplate his own demise at a time like this, but Greg Diggle wasn't a selfless man. From an early age, he learned the world was cruel and defecated on those deemed less fortunate. It's why he used humor as a coping mechanism, though he could hardly find it now in the murky twilight hours. One thought kept ramming itself against the forefront of his mind, angry and violent.

I am going to die.

A soft whimper hung in the air, forcing his reality. Sitting up, he found Scorpius clinging against his chest, a nest of tears on his cheeks and distraught in his silver-flecked eyes. Eyes so similar to Greg's one-time enemy. To think, he'd threatened this child's life when he was an infant… Greg thought of his mother and what she might say. Probably something to the effect of calling him a monster and then reminding him he never had any children himself.

"S'alright, Scorpius," he assured the boy, patting him awkwardly on the head. "You're safe."

"D-D-Daddy," Scorpius sniffled, rubbing his sleeve under his slimy nose.

Fighting the urge to roll his eyes, Greg peeled the child off of him and sat him down beside him. Surrounding the two were those lovely rose bushes. Beneath their feet was a flower bed of wilted, frozen plants. A ways off, a fountain could be seen, shimmering silver moonbeams in its reflection.

If I'm going to die, he thought, I could do worse.

"Listen to me, Scorpius," he murmured, already feeling a coiling around his arm of searing heat. The same coil from his vow, now broken. "Don't you worry about your father, now. He's… obdurate. Do you know what that means? Well, of course you don't. It means stubborn." He patted the crying child on the head.

"Mummy says I stu-stu-bern…"

"Yes, you must get it from him. Not to worry, though. The stubborn ones always live. Your daddy will be alright." The heat began traveling up his arm into his shoulder, and the entire limb grew heavy. "You watch. Any moment now, either your daddy or Hermione will come around that corner, right as rain. In the meantime, you have me. No one's going to hurt you under my watch."

"Pwomise?"

"Yes."

The child seemed comforted by the man's words, and he, to Greg's surprise, snuggled into his side,
wiping his snotty nose on Diggle's robes. "I Scorpius."

"Er… yes. I know. I'm… Greg Diggle."

"Geg?"

"Greg."

"Dingle?"

"Diggle."

"Dingle!" Scorpius giggled.

Greg opened his mouth to argue, but then the heat traveled up his neck and into his throat, and he decided not to worry about things so trivial in his final moments. "Quite right, Scorpius. I think everyone would agree with you."

Draco settled with a loud POP next to the Quidditch shed, unaware his father had stood here, in this very spot, only a short time ago. There was a sweat above his brow, though the night air surrounding him was icy and unapologetic. His heart stammered in his chest as he leaned against the wall behind him and closed his eyes, attempting to alleviate the surge of adrenaline in his veins.

The moment was short lived, because another POP echoed in his ears, and he reopened his eyes, expecting his grandfather but only meeting the withering gaze of Hermione Jean Granger, curls splaying at odd angles and charred ashes of the manor painting her lovely, angry face.

"Hermione-" he didn't hesitate to reach out and grab her by the hand, jerking her into his chest, the cane extended by his left hand away from them. The two embraced each other for some sweet seconds before she pushed herself back and glared with contempt.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"You shouldn't be here," was all he could reply back before another crack rang through the air, and a daunting silhouette landed some ways away.

"He's right, you know," said Abraxas Malfoy, unbutton the top clasp of his crisp, white robes now stained in soot. With a shrug, they fell to to the ground, leaving him in a casual vest, button up, and slacks combo, all still the same, fine shade of ivory. He rolled his head from one side to the other, cracking the joints. "This is a family affair, after all."

"You-" Hermione seethed, lunging toward Abraxas, but Draco held her back. Keeping a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Don't," he warned her.

"You'd do well to listen to him, mudblood," the elder Malfoy smirked.

"We have the stones. He's at the disadvantage," Draco reminded Hermione.

"For now." Abraxas gave an unimpressed yawn and glanced down at his manicured nails, as if he were bored of the entire situation. "I'm disappointed in you, Draco. I thought we came to an agreement when it came to your blood loyalties."

"All this talk about pure blood versus dirty blood, but have you thought once to assess your
Hermione seethed. "Loyal, that one," Abraxas noted. "Tell me, doesn't it get tiring scampering around my grandson's feet like the concubine you are?"

"Enough," Draco said, stepping between the two. "It's over. The Ministry's arrived. Any moment now, your followers will be in chains on their way to Azkaban. You've lost."

"Then, tell me, Draco. Why am I so calm?"

"Because you're delusional?" he offered back.

"It's a setback. Nothing more." Abraxas offered out his hand. "Give me the cane, now, and I promise to spare your whore. I might even let you keep her if you produce a few more pureblood heirs."

"Now I know you're delusional." Draco brandished the cane like a spear when his grandfather took a step closer, causing the elder Malfoy to pause. "I want you to know, when this is all over, I'm marrying Hermione. I'm going to put it in all the papers with the headline 'Malfoy Heir Marries Muggleborn, Smashing Pureblood Patriarchy.' And then we're going to have a whole set of halfblood children."

"And we'll even enroll them in public school!" Hermione shouted gleefully.

Draco turned his head and gave her a disbelieving look. "That's pushing it a bit far, don't you think?"

"Why not? I was raised in public schools until Hogwarts-"

"Maybe this isn't the time to talk about-"

Something high pitched and ear-splitting tore apart the conversation - Draco realized, in horror, it was his son. Somewhere off in the distance, Scorpius was screaming.

"I dare say the two of you are getting ahead of yourselves," quipped Abraxas, "seeing as how you can't seem to keep track of your own sniveling brat."

"That brat is the heir to the Malfoy lineage!" Draco challenged. "If something happens to him-"

"-It would be a shame, yes. Not only does he carry our blood, but the line of the Greengrasses as well. Although, I had no idea the name would besmirch themselves as muggle sympathizers. Perhaps if something does happen to the boy, it would be for the best." Abraxas took a gleeful step back, toward the gardens. "I can smell him, you know. He's frightened. And there's blood…"

"You touch a hair on his head, and I'll-"

"You'll what?" Abraxas raised a challenging eyebrow. "Just what will you do, boy?"

A fireball whizzed past Draco's cheek and slammed hard into Abraxas's stomach. The man, though packed in his youthful, resilient body, was caught off guard, and he was knocked flat on his back, his clothing singing.

"Come on!" Hermione shouted, grabbing Draco's hand and tearing toward the gardens. Draco followed suit, leaping over the disoriented Abraxas. He let her lead him, shoes clomping against the frozen dirt, until they were near at the garden entrance. He thought about following, really he did, but something nagged him in the back of his head, in the front of his heart, and at the bottom of his stomach. Something called his courageous conscience.
He ripped his hand out of hers and backed up a few paces just as Abraxas made it to his feet.

She'd never leave him. She'd never let him do this on his own, which is exactly why he needed to.

"What are you-?"

"-I love you," he said, raising his hands between them. "Which is why I have to do this." A burst of shimmering blue light expelled from his fingertips, jettisoning outwards and up. It formed a barrier between Draco and Hermione, climbing up, up, up and cascading back down on the other side of the Quidditch shack.

"No." Hermione ran at the dome and slammed her fist up against it. "No!"

Draco pressed his hand to the barrier, right where her fist sat, and gave a timid smirk. "Don't try to get past it, love. You're shaken up. Spend your energy on finding Scorpius."

"Draco, don't you dare walk away from me!" she shouted as he turned his back, meeting Abraxas's vicious grin. He didn't need to turn around to know the blue light grew opaque, solidifying the barrier and trapping him inside with no way to see or hear outside its walls.

The world turned, though it was eerily still.

"Just us?" asked his grandfather.

"Just us," Draco nodded.

Hermione slammed her fists repeatedly over the dome, screaming and cursing. She tried every which way to use her Gray magic to unbind it, but her heart was conflicted, and it weakened her powers exponentially. Eventually, she collapsed onto her knees, resting her forehead against the barricade.

"Idiot," she whispered, "You brave, pretentious idiot."

"Hermione!"

Wiping her sleeves under her eyes, Hermione turned her head to the side to find Harry rounding the edge of the dome into view.

"Hermione, what's going on? Where's Malfoy? Abraxas?"

"In there," she said, rising to her feet.

"I was afraid you were going to tell me something like that." He gave a heavy sigh. "Well, go on. Do the thing you do and tear it down."

"I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?"

Before Hermione could answer, two more faces skirted into view. Dean was whistling, staring up at the enormous dome while Auror Jameson approached with a stoic expression, drenched in blood. He didn't give introductions, instead saying, "Where's Astoria? Is she safe?"

"Yes. She's near the gate, away from harm."

"Thank you." Theodore looked to Harry expectantly.
"By all means, go," Harry waved his hand. "You don't need my permission, Auror Jameson."

He was gone quicker than a lightning strike, heading toward the gate. Without explanation, she turned toward the entryway of the garden: a latticework arch weaved with leafless vines. Just before she broke the threshold, Harry slipped a hand on her shoulder.

"Where are you going?"

"Scorpius is in the gardens. I'm going to find him and bring him to Astoria."

"But Malfoy-"

"-Has made his decision!" she snapped, jerking out of his grasp. "There's nothing I can do. The barrier is too strong, even for me." She could feel herself shaking, fear and frustration in her heart. "But I can do this. I can find Scorpius and protect him. I have to... as his mother. I have promises to keep."

She made to take a step forward again, but she felt a warm hand envelope hers, and she paused. Harry came to stand at her side, his green eyes gentle. "Alright, Hermione. Let's go find him. Together."

"Thank you, Harry." She wiped more stray tears away with her free arm.

"Well, I'm not going to stay here by myself," said Dean, stepping up to stand on her other side. "That thing," he gestured with his head toward the dome, "gives me the willies."

Together, the three of them stepped into the gardens. Hermione's heart weighed heavily, and walking away from Draco tore her heart in two. Still, she focused on the path ahead of her, spreading her Gray out in front of her to sense any sign of life. Two presences. Both in the center of the labyrinth.

"The rose bushes," she told the men, hand still in Harry's as they began to jog, then run the pathway. With each turn around another corner, Scorpius could be heard just a bit louder, sniffing and sobbing. Hermione's heart sped as they rounded the final bend.

There, resting against the basin of the fountain, his knees to his chest as he let out small whimpers, was-

"Scorpius!"

With a startled jump, the boy glanced up, his eyes connecting with Hermione's.

"Hermummy?"

"Scorpius!"

She ran to him, throwing herself beside him and scooping him up against her chest. She hugged him so tight he gave a gasp of surprise, squealing. "Tiiight!"

Now understanding Molly Weasley's overpowering hugs during Christmas holidays, Hermione released her son and began to check him over. Every bit of skin was pale and void of bruising. Aside from puffy eyes and tousled hair, he looked completely fine."Are you alright?"

"I okay!" Scorpius wrapped his soft arms around her neck. "Hermummy here."

"How did you get here?" she asked.
"Hermione," said Harry, pointing off toward the flower beds on the other side of the fountain. Scorpius in tow, she hoisted herself up to stand and carried the toddler around the display.

She now understood why Scorpius screamed. The sight of Greg Diggle, covered in blood and dripping it from his mouth as he leaned against a thorny rose bush wasn't anything a young boy should see. "Diggle?"

With a heavy cough, Greg Diggle lunged forward, hacking up crimson into his lap. Sweat dripped off the tip of his nose. He shivered, even as Dean jerked off his robes and draped them over his shoulders. Once he was through hacking, Diggle's green eyes glimmered up at Hermione, and a timid smirk breached his face.

"I haven't died already, have I?" He winced, clutching his stomach. "Bollocks. Nope. Nope, still alive."

"What happened?" asked Dean, trying to wrap an arm under Diggle's to help him up, but the ex-Auror shrugged him off and shook his head, bading to stay put.

"Dingle hurt," said Scorpius in a matter of fact tone, nuzzling into Hermione's neck.

"What happened?" Hermione asked, repeating Dean's question.

"Wouldn't you know I grew a conscience at the worst possible time?"

"...You broke your vow." She looked down at the shaking toddler in her arms, fitting the clues together. "You took Scorpius away from the Manor, and you broke your vow."

"You're dying," said Harry.

"Nothing gets past this one," Diggle rolled his eyes.

"Why?" she asked.

"Guess you taught me something in that mirror," Diggle shrugged, leaning his head back against the rose bushes. They were a rare strain meant to grow all year round, and they added an ironic backdrop to Greg Diggle's shaking form. "Damn it all, why'd you have to go and make me soft?"

"It's called a heart," Hermione kissed Scorpius's head and passed him off to Harry. Then, very slowly, she approached Greg, who stared, bewildered, as she sat down in front of him. "Thank you.

Though there were bags under his eyes, his irises gained new spark at her words. He reached out for her hand, and she let him take it. Something in her, no matter how much she loathed him, couldn't bring herself to be bitter and cold in his dying moments. "Plant a tree here in my honor? Maybe its roots will drag up the foundation, and I can finally have my revenge on the Malfoys."

Hermione felt a tear slip down her cheek. "Don't be an arse."

Diggle coughed again, wheezing for breath. "You… deserved better."

"I did."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

Greg Diggle pondered her words for half a moment.
"Did… did you make a Star Wars reference?"

With a gentle, saddened smile, Hermione Granger winked at him. "It's possible."

Greg couldn't help it -he burst into a fit of laughter, throwing his head back to look at the stars. They hung like thousands of fairy lights, beckoning him. Pain coursed through his body. He didn't want to hold on any longer. This was enough. Having her here, though he knew she'd rather be anywhere else right now, was enough. With her beautiful, brown eyes still the main focus of his thoughts, he closed his eyes, letting his laughter give way to chuckles, then soft laughter, and then, with one last breath, he let go.

Soft, white light engulfed him; the next moment, he was gone.

"Get up, Draco." Abraxas taunted from above; Draco managed to avoid a curse by rolling onto his side, careful to point the Pandora Stones away from his face. Blood dripped from a split in his lip. Most of his strength went into keeping the barrier up, making Abraxas that much stronger as he'd thrown Draco around with spouts of magic like a ragdoll, trying to shake his grip of the cane. Draco, each time, would take the blow, smacking into the dome or the ground, but he never relinquished his hold. He'd managed to counter a few times -even with fiendfyre, but Abraxas's payment to the Gray was far greater than Draco's, and he was able to douse it easily. Still, he wasn't able to shake the barrier, but perhaps he didn't want to. Perhaps he enjoyed being alone together.

In a desperate attempt to even the scales, Draco recalled the most painful spell he'd ever encountered and shouted, "Sectumsempra!"

The spell hit Abraxas full on. Blood gushed from his chest as if he'd been sliced with Godric Gryffindor's own sword. Draco thought he'd had it -he'd finally gotten him, when Abraxas ran his hands over his gashed skin and it began to pull back together.

"That tickled," Abraxas laughed. "Was that the best you could do?" Noticing his grandson's dismayed face, he added, "The Gray is bound to my soul, or have you forgotten? If I die, it dies. So you see, you really don't stand a chance. But thank you ever so much for teaching me a new spell. Sectumsempra!"

Draco tried rebounding it, but, in his weakened state, he was too slow. The curse hit him straight across the navel, searing into his flesh like a burning hot poker being dragged across his skin. Fear gripped his heart as his knees gave way under him. Was this it? Was this really the end?

"Your heart has made you vulnerable," whispered Abraxas as he approached. "I was wrong. You were never worthy of the Malfoy name." His boot came down on Draco's chest, further adding to his already overwhelming pain. Draco screamed, but no one could hear him. No one but his grandfather, who wasn't even that. "Do you know what vulnerability makes you, Draco?" He pried the cane from Draco's hands. "It makes you weak. And Malfoys are never weak. So, in essence, you were never truly a Malfoy." He smirked as he turned the cane upside down, shining the Pandora Stones in Draco's face. "And as such, I will take your undeserved gifts from you, and you can die as the muggle scum you love so much."

THWACK.

"The only scum around here is you."

Abraxas Malfoy fell to the ground, dropping the cane as he went. Above Draco stood a huffing, unruffled, undignified version of Lucius Malfoy, strands of white-blond hair dangling dangerously in
in his hand was one of Draco's old beater bats. With a hearty smirk, he extended his other hand down to Draco.

"D-Dad?" Draco winced, closing his eyes momentarily and concentrating all of his efforts, momentarily, on the gash across his stomach. He healed himself, giving a hefty sigh of relief. Then, he opened his eyes back up and allowed his father to pull him to his feet. "How did you get here? Are you here?" He thought about pinching himself. Could he be hallucinating?

"The dual mirror passage in the shed," Lucius answered, "Did you really think I'd stand idly by and allow my only son the luxury of taking down my hellion of a father without me?"

"I told you not to come," said Draco with a sudden rush of anger.

"I suppose your inherent stubbornness isn't all from your mother's side of the family. You're my son, Draco." Lucius placed a hand on his shoulder. "Just as you would never abandon your son, I will never abandon mine. That's what a father does. Though I can't say I had the best of role models..."

"Lu...cious..." Abraxas growled, still dazed and confused from the blunt trauma to the back of his head. Without hesitation, Lucius dove down and scooped up the cane. He held it to Abraxas's face, threatening.

"Father, wait," Draco placed a hand on Lucius's arm. "His soul is attached to the Gray. If you take his magic..."

Abraxas gave a low, maniacal chuckle. "Yes, Lucius. Do you honestly think you have the stomach to kill your own father?"

He could see the twitch in his father's eye. "Not alone," Draco placed his hand on the cane as well. "Together."

"Wait..."

"Together," Lucius nodded.

"No... Lucius... you're my son!" Abraxas shouted.

"As I recall you telling me, I am no son of yours."

They moved the cane in unison, and a streaming, blinding blue light burst from the end of the cane as the stones came in contact with Abraxas's face. Draco felt a tug in his chest, like a piece of him being ripped from his soul. He realized, with a start, it was the Gray. It wasn't a clean break -it was painful, and jarring, and he shouted in unison with his grandfather as a small, glowing light flew out of Abraxas's chest and was sucked up into the pandora stones.

His soul, Draco realized as he and Lucius were thrown backward with the force.

The cane flew threw the air, landing like a spike some metres away.

Abraxas Malfoy's cold, grey eyes were fixed on the stars above, but he would never look upon them again.

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I want to take a moment to thank everyone who has reviewed the last two chapters, and who might this one. I promise to answer reviews next chapter, and I will let you know I've read EVERY single one of them and cherish them all. My heart is filled with joy, and I didn't want
to make you wait a moment longer for this chapter. The next one will be up in less than a week, I can guarantee. I know the next question: how many more chapters? I'm thinking 3. And also, how does a HTTYA3 sound? Covering normal cases and life after this? Who would be up for that?

My fic Squirm is up for a Dramione award for best WIP. If you wanted to help me out and vote for me, PM me and I'll send you a link. :D

Can't wait to see you all next chapter.

With love,
~A.

Oh. P.S.

Authors can't sit around sipping tea with Satin while killing off a character. We sit in silence, shaking and defeated. Our hearts break. A piece of us dies. I have tears in my eyes, and I'm not okay. Greg Diggle has been my OC since I was 13 years old. He will always live on, in some form or another, but this tore me up. I know, I know. He's done terrible things. But even still...
Wonderful news: Squirm won Best WIP in the Winter 2017 Dramione awards! This is my first 1st place prize in writing, and it is one I will cherish. Maybe HTTYA can make the list again sometime! Sorry this chapter took so long. I picked up two Valentine's Day prompts, and have been busy working on pushing them out by deadline.

Thank you LightofEvolution for the proofing! She and I have an amazing Valentine's Day prompt coming up.

~A.

Oh, if you see ** next to a paragraph down below, know you can soon find out the back story of Jameson. Look for The Jameson Chronicles on my page! Will be updated as soon as HTTYA is finished.

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*If home is where the heart is*

then we're all just f*cked
I can't remember
I can't remember
And I want it so bad
I'd shoot the sunshine into my veins
I can't remember
The good old days

"27" by Fall Out Boy

Theodore was a mess. Not just a physical mess with Lindy's blood smeared across his cheek and on his clothes. His heart pounded in his throat, and his stomach threatened to bottom out as he ran alongside the gardens, making his way to the front gate. His hands shook. No matter how much he breathed in and out, the poignant memories of Astoria, ghostly white and sickly, rose to the surface of his thoughts, layered with images of Lindy as a child, a teen, a young adult like him in Auror training, ready to combat the world.

"Tell me, Auror Jameson. Why did you become an Auror?" Lindy's words rang through his head, clear as if she were standing next to him.

When he came to the final hedge, he paused. He couldn't believe he did, but he couldn't take a step further in that moment, thinking of his mother. Thinking of how he hadn't seen her in three months, because the Auror Division kept him busy. Thinking of her, dazed and disoriented, shivering in her hospital bed. Thinking of his father, who so diligently visited her every day to bring her soup. Thinking of Lindy, and her false promises. Of her dying in his hands.

"I love you."
"I just wanted us to be happy."

Astoria would be around this bend, and he hoped, with every shred of his heart, she was still alive.
He couldn't lose someone else so dear to him. Damn it all... all those years of turning his back on Lindy, all because of that night... **

"Astoria," he said, rounding the corner, fear lodged in his throat. His entire breath caught when he found her huddled up against the gate, a blanket, no doubt conjured, around her shoulders, and a bleary expression on her soft face. She was pale, yes, and she was shaking, but she was, undoubtedly, alive. Theodore found himself running the rest of the distance between them to drop at her side, arms instinctively cradling her against him.

Her body was warm. A heating charm, he thought with relief. Auror Granger seemed to think of everything.

"Theo," she smiled up at him through relaxed slits, reaching up with a shaky hand to touch the side of his neck. "Hi, there."

Theodore relaxed, expelling a sigh of relief. "Hello." He pulled her tighter in his arms, attempting to warm her. "Are you alright?"

"I could give two figs less about myself," she whispered, sounding parched and exhausted. "Did we win? Is Scorpius-?"

"Auror Granger was on her way to him when I left to find you. As for us winning," he looked up at the dome half a kilometer away, "That's being decided as we speak."

"Comforting," she replied, and for half a moment Theodore thought she was serious. Then it hit him.

"You're being sarcastic."

"Look at you. You're catching on." She coughed, leaning into his shoulder and nuzzling him. "I want to see my son."

"We need to get you to St. Mungo's. The wards are down. We could Apparate-"

"-My son, Theodore. I won't leave here without him."

"Of course," he replied, curving his arm underneath her legs and swinging her into his lap. "But… first I..." he brushed a lock of hair behind her ear and leaned closer. Theodore didn't have children, though he did understand they took precedence over health. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling he needed to make his intentions known here and now, what with a battle taking place in the Malfoy back yard and no guarantee of complete victory…

Theodore pressed his dry lips to Astoria's, not caring if he tasted of burnt mansion and residual spell overcast. He couldn't bare the thought of her not knowing how he felt about her a moment longer. To his relief, she didn't swat him away. Astoria melted to his touch, her hand skimming along his cheek. Theodore relaxed, even caught himself smiling as he gently pulled away and stared down into her emerald eyes.

"Once you're feeling better, I'd like to ask you for coffee."

"I believe you just did," she smiled tentatively.

With little effort, Theodore managed to push up to stand, Astoria still wrapped in his arms. He started toward the gardens, feet heavy, head exhausted, and emotions entirely overwhelmed. But knowing Astoria was alive made up for all of that. Just as he was about to open his mouth to say as much, the earth began to rumble once more beneath their feet, and the dome grew increasingly bright, causing
Theodore to stop in his tracks.

"What's going on?" Astoria asked against his neck.

"A champion," he replied, knowing no other details were needed.

"Hermummy? Hermummy!"

Hermione stared down at the lifeless husk which used to belong to Greg Diggle, flooded with a mixture of emotions, some of them mild, others ravenous and contemptual. This was the man who killed her husband, who brought her to the lowest point in her life. This was the man who took away everything from her and did so with a smile on his face. The obsessed-driven prick who took Ron away from not only her, but the rest of the world as well.

So… why was she choking back tears? Why did she feel a shred of compassion for Gregory Wallace Diggle?

"Hermione," a hand rested on her shoulder, and she jerked her head up, meeting the softening, somber face of Dean, who sat on the other side of Diggle. "It's alright."

"No, it isn't." She squeezed Diggle's hand tightly, letting the tears fall, dribbling down her chin like a leaky faucet. "It's not fair… he doesn't deserve it. He doesn't…" But no matter how hard she attempted to convince herself, she couldn't shake the sadness inside of her. "Damn you, Diggle…"

"Why Hermummy cry?" she heard Scorpius ask Harry.

He replied, with his best to-do tone, "Hermummy is sad."

"Why?"

"Because someone we've come to know has left her. And, while he wasn't the best man, he still cared a great deal about protecting her." He voiced his thoughts, no doubt knowing she was listening in. "She's sad because he was a bad man, but he did good things. Hermione always sees the best in people, whether she wants to or not. She's kind that way."

Sniffling into her sleeve, Hermione finally found the will to release Diggle's hand, folding it onto his stomach. It was difficult, nearly surreal, to know the person she'd wished the worst upon now lay lifeless in front of her, and she couldn't bring herself to feel glad about it.

"Do you feel that?" Dean asked as the ground beneath them began to quiver. All three adults turned their head in the direction of the dome automatically, watching as it glared, bright and formidable, back at them.

"Draco." Hermione jumped to her feet at once, her wand gripped tight in her hand. She rushed to Scorpius, taking him back from Harry, and said, "No matter what happens next, Scorpius, know I will never let anything happen to you. I love you."

"Love Hermummy," Scorpius said, wrapping his pudgy arms around her neck. Together, with Harry and Dean by her side, they made their way back through the thicket of the gardens, abandoning Diggle's body. They would retrieve it later. Now, the fate of them all rested in the hands of one Draco Lucius Malfoy.

Draco felt hollow inside. He couldn't completely explain the emptiness he felt; he just knew it was
there, lodged in his chest where the Gray Magic once rested. It felt surreal, staring down at Abraxas
Malfoy - the same man who used to give him sweets and call Draco his puffy-eyed goldfish - dead on
the ground. This was someone he looked up to, mourned on multiple occasions, and loved fiercely.
He hated that now all he felt was contempt and regrets. Anger and judgement. Hatred and malice.

Judging by the look on Lucius's face, his father felt relatively the same, though Draco was quite sure,
if he were in the same position, and it was Lucius on the ground instead of Abraxas, he would feel
entirely more conflicted.

Grey eyes met grey eyes, and both men gave the same curt nod. Draco wasn't sure there were words
to describe the conflict of feelings, but he summed it up when he extended an arm out and clasped it
on his father's shoulders, the both of them still laying face up against the frozen dirt. The blast of
explosive magic had knocked them backward, and above them, the dome began to fizzle out, no
doubt the repercussions of the Gray Magic being lost inside the Pandora Stone.

"Thank you," Draco whispered, fingers digging into his father's robes as if he might sink through the
earth and fall into an eerie abyss. Lucius reached over and clasped his son's shoulder in the same
fashion.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"For reminding me of what's important." Lucius rested his head to the ground, staring up at the dome
while it dispersed. "All my life, I've been conditioned to believe my father's moral codes. I raised you
in the same light, but I never imagined…" He cleared his throat. "He came after you. Your family.
Everything important to you."

"Yeah, well," Draco replied, "that included you, you old geezer."

The Malfoy men smirked at each other. "Draco, while I understand we're having a heart to heart, do
refrain from the term 'old geezer' in my presence. I am only twenty-six years your senior."

"Could've fooled me," Draco chided, watching the last remnants of the dome flicker into
nothingness.

That's when he heard his son's voice. "Daddy!"

Draco bolted upright, releasing his father as he did, searching in every direction for Scorpius. He
found him a ways off to his left, bundled in Hermione's arms at the edge of the garden. The toddler
wiggled and squirmed until Hermione had no choice but to release him, and Scorpius bounded
across the courtyard in Draco's direction. Draco moved to stand, but his entire body ached, so he
thought best not push it and sat still, arms open and ready to hold Scorpius. The boy rushed into
Draco's arms with a squeal, knocking the wind out of the father.

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! Da-ddy!"

"Scorpius," he whispered, pulling him as tight as he could be to him and cradling the toddler's white-
blond tresses in his hand. A lump formed in Draco's throat, and he coughed, expelling it as well as
some unexpected tears. They slipped down his cheeks, making his eyes red and puffy as they met
Hermione's, reading the various expressions on her face: relief, confusion, anger, and love. With his
free hand, he gave a timid wave. Her furrowed eyebrows as her response told him he was in deep
hippogriff shit. Deep.

What did the bloody woman want him to be? Dead?
"M-My Lord?" someone spoke off somewhere behind Draco, approaching. He turned his head to see, on the other end of the field, Dessy, her eyes wide in horror as she stared at Abraxas Malfoy. "No... " She raised a wand from her side and pointed it at Draco. "NO!"

"Nuh-uh!" Scorpius shouted, wiggling in his father's grasp. He broke free of the bewildered father and stood in front of him. He brandished a make-believe wand and shouted "Spell-y-a-moose!"

Green light shot past Draco's cheek and hit the witch dead on, knocking the wand out of her grasp while simultaneously sweeping her backward. Draco stared back at his toddler in disbelief - that was, until he noticed Potter in the corner of his eye, wand still at the ready and a keen look in his eyes. The two wizards exchanged half-smirks as Scorpius shouted, "You see, Daddy!? You see!?"

As Harry passed the Malfoy men, a pair of magic-binding cuffs in his hands, Draco pulled Scorpius in for another hug, kissed him on the cheek, and said, "Yeah, Scorp. You did so well. I'm glad to see those lessons have been paying off."

"Are you two alright?" a timid, feminine voice asked as she approached, and a pair of warm, embracing arms folded around Draco's shoulders and Scorpius's frame. Soft lips pressed against Draco's cheek as the familiar scent of Hermione enveloped his senses.

"Hermione..." Draco's eyes closed, and he allowed them all to remain there, together, for what felt like a blissful eternity. He placed a hand over her arm, knowing there was no need to say the words. She knew, just as much as he did, how thankful he was they were all alive; how much he loved them; how long this fucking night felt like.

But then reality set in, and he jerked his eyes open. "My mother-Astoria-"

"Your mum's alright," said Dean Thomas, collapsing to the ground just a few feet off. He leaned back on his elbows and gave a long stretch. "A knock to her head, but there's already Healers inside. I reckon she'll be right as rain in a day or so."

"Auror Jameson is with Astoria," Hermione assured him, "and while she's weak, I didn't sense any looming danger for her life. With rest, her health should return."

"Good," Draco nodded. "That's... that's good, then." He paused. "You're furious with me, aren't you?"

"That's putting it mildly," Hermione said, kissing his cheek again. "What were you thinking? You could have gotten yourself killed."

"Better me than you."

"Draco-"

"It's fine, Hermione. We've won." He pulled Scorpius tighter, not wanting him to see another dead body this evening. "The Gray is gone."

"...What do you mean?"

Draco peeked behind him and gave her an inquisitive stare. "What do you mean? My grandfather bound his soul to the Gray. His death ripped the Gray from all our bodies."

"Not mine," she said, moving around him to nearly sit in his lap on the other side of Scorpius.

"You mean you-?" but Draco paused, because he could sense it; once a carrier of Gray magic, one
could always tell when it was present. He could feel it vibrating from inside Hermione's bones, resonating with her own magic. "How?"

"Could it have been the dome? What were the parameters in which you built it?" Hermione's eyes glimmered with scholastic integrity. You could take the bookworm out of the library, but you could never take the library out of the bookworm.

"The dome…" Yes, that must have been it. "It makes sense. I wanted to build a shield not even your magic could penetrate."

"So that means… I'm the carrier of the Gray Magic, now." Hermione's voice was pensive. Draco opened his mouth to speak, to say something comforting, but a new player entered the mix in the form of Auror Kingston, wand brandished as his glasses hung from the tip of his nose.

"Commander Potter!"

"Kingston, we've been over this," said Potter, pushing a wriggling, bound Dessy toward the group of Aurors following Kingston, "you can call me Harry." As he passed Dessy off, his eyes followed Kingston's wand; Draco didn't miss the fact it was aimed directly between his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"This man is an escapee from Azkaban," said Kingston, pushing his glasses up his nose. "He needs to be detained pending investigation."

"He's an Auror!" shouted Hermione. "And he just saved your life! He saved all of us!"

"Get that wand out of my face, Kingston," sneered Draco, gesturing down to Scorpius's palming form at the sight of a wand aimed at his father. "Please," he said, much quieter. "I'll go willingly, just put your wand away. You're frightening my son."

"Draco-" Hermione began.

"Malfoy," Harry interrupted, putting a hand on Kingston's chest to back him up a few spaces, "Stand down."

"Rules are rules, Sir. Regardless of who someone might be friends with," Kingston's tone was sharp and reprimanding.

"Cut it out, Potter," said Draco, "I'll be fine. I have full confidence you'll sort it all out." He snuggled Scorpius a moment longer and whispered into his ear, "I've got to go with the ugly brute Kingston for now, Scorp. Auror business. I shouldn't be away long."

"No go." Scorpius clung tight. "Stay."

"I can't," Draco's voice wavered. "I-I can't, Scorp. Daddy did some things, and now I need to be held accountable for them."

"Where's ex-Auror Diggle?" asked Kingston, looking around the group. "He escaped as well, and I have it on good authority it was by Auror Malfoy's doing."

"He's dead," Hermione snapped at the Auror with contemptual undertone.

Draco heard the words, but it didn't fully register as he pried Scorpius off his lap and set him in Hermione's arms. He kissed her on the forehead, smiled gently, and rose to stand, even when Hermione tugged on his robe sleeve to stop him.
"Wait-"

"...Let me go, Hermione. I'll be alright," he assured her. "After tonight, it'll do me some good to be alone with my thoughts. I'll... see you soon." He refused to look over to his father, or Potter, or the withering expressions of the other Aurors, some mixed with resentment while others possibly mirrored concern. Draco offered out his hands and met Kingston's stern glare as a pair of magic-dowsing cuffs clinked around his wrists and reformed to snug against his skin. The magic within him constricted, leaving him even weaker, but he refused to show it as he nodded once to Kingston and agreed to follow him back toward the manor.

Hermione immediately stood, Scorpius in tow, and grabbed a ruffled looking Harry by the arm, shaking him. "Do something."

"I can't," he muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose while scrunching his eyes shut. "I can't, Hermione. Kingston's right. Damn it all, he's right. If I were to show Malfoy favor right now... it could do more harm than good. -Don't worry, though." His eyes came back open, and he pulled her and Scorpius in for a tight hug. "This was all under my orders. I'll have a word with Minister Shacklebolt. But..."

"But what?" her voice was hopeful and scared all at the same time.

"But Malfoy did use an Unforgivable on Diggle. That wasn't under my authorization."

"Diggle's dead, Harry."

"I know. But that's beside the point. Malfoy used an Unforgivable. It's on record. It'll be hard to talk our way out of that one, when all the smoke is cleared."

"You're saying there's a chance Draco is still in hot water."

"I'm saying there's more than a chance -more like boiling water, really."

"If this is your way of comforting me, you're doing a lousy job," she whispered, only half-joking.

"I'm going to give it all I've got, Hermione. I've got pull at the Ministry..." But even as he said it, Harry didn't sound as if he believed his own words. He released her from the hug and set his stance into full Auror mode, sloughing off his raw emotions (on the outside). "Come on, Hermione. Let's see if we're needed anywhere inside. -We need to keep ourselves busy."

Hermione knew he was right, but admitting it was something else. "We can owl the Minister - go to his office right now and-"

"-It's four in the morning-"

"-Well, we can't just stand here and do nothing, Harry!"

He gestured to the cleaved manor some ways off. "Hermione, right now, your home is cut in two, Aurors are rounding up members of some sanctimonious cult, we have injured people that need serious medical care - put your priorities in an objective list, please." He sounded nearly desperate. "Malfoy's going to have himself a cold meal and a stiff bed tonight. Right now, Astoria, Narcissa, Scorpius -your family need you. They need you to be strong for them. Malfoy can do without for one night while we make sure we tie up all the loose ends. Alright?" He then asked softer, "Alright?"

She stared into his emerald eyes, trying to do as was asked and see things objectively. Her emotions
were getting the better of her, she knew, and Harry's speech was enough to snap her out of her desperate need for control. Tears slipped down her cheeks. "I can't be objective about this one, Harry. I just can't."

"Then…. Go home." He added quickly, glancing back at the Manor, "My home. Go home to Ginny, and take Scorpius with you."

"I can't just leave you to-"

"-Hermione, you've done brilliantly tonight. The Ministry will get a statement from you later. Just get some rest-do it for Scorpius." He waved off in the distance to Auror Jameson, who carried Astoria in his arms. "I'll send someone for you if anything changes. Alright?"

"Alright," she mumbled back to him, but found herself rooted to the spot, unable to move. That was, until a hand rested on her shoulder, and a low, smooth voice said, "I'll escort you to the floo." It was Lucius Malfoy, his head held high and proud, though there were hints of stress around the corners of his eyes.

"Oh, um, that's alright," she began, "Really, I-"

"-I insist," Lucius smirked, already pushing her forward and guiding her in the direction of the manor. Hermione looked back at Harry for help, but he gave her a light shrug, as if he really didn't know what else to do. Sighing, she turned back around and wiggled Lucius's hand off of her.

"I can make it the rest of the way on my own," she said to him.

"Perhaps it isn't you who needs the company," Lucius admitted, his hand flexing before he set it down at this side. "It would do me a great favor if you'd escort me until I found Narcissa." His tone was formal and assertive, guarded as ever.

"Miss Granger," Lucius continued his brisk pace, and it dawned on Hermione how easily he was able to keep up, and without a cane. Not once did he stop to hack up or catch his breath. "While I am not one for formal apologies, I'm willing to admit…" This time, it was him to pause.

"Let's… do this later. I'm more apt to believe you if we're both not sleep deprived and not under the heavy influence of a traumatic event."

Lucius nodded in agreement, falling silent until they made it to the manor's front door, which hung sideways off its hinges. To his credit, Lucius pulled the door back and open for her, despite its state; manners were manners, after all. Hermione smiled faintly, thinking this might be the first time she'd ever smiled at the elder Malfoy, and stepped inside, feeling Scorpius's soft breath against her neck. If she had to guess, he was asleep, worn from the stress.

"Let's go find your wife," she said when he shut the door; it clamoured to the floor in the doorway, completely broken now.

Two souls, never more different, found a common interest that night: above all the grudges, hostility, and moralities family came first. And whether the two liked it or not, they were tied together as family, framed by the small child cradled in Hermione's arms and his handsome father.
If you reviewed for previous chapters, just know I have read them all and adore them! I will reply to reviews next chapter, so catch me there!

~A.
Hot Water

Here we are. The final 3 chapters. I want to thank two special ladies: LightofEvolution and Sunful824 for proofing this chapter and making it all it can be.

Follow MrBenzedrine on facebook to get updates, cover art, playlists, and more! Also, I follow everyone who follows me on Tumblr. MrBenzedrine89.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.
Here we go.
~A.
Hermione ached all over, head throbbing and even her gums pulsing. She vaguely became aware someone was talking as she was stirred from her sleep, awaking to the ceiling of the guest bedroom at the Potter's. She could barely remember what happened between stepping through the crumbling floo at Malfoy Manor and this morning. As she touched her cheeks, she felt the salty residue of dried tears.

"Drink this," someone said at the side of the bed, and Hermione attempted to roll over, caught as she discovered Scorpius curled into her side, still sleeping soundly. Ginny's soft, blue eyes greeted the brunette with understanding. "It's a pick-me-up potion. It'll help with-" she gestured to Hermione's form, "-all of this."

"Thanks," Hermione croaked, her voice dry and scratchy. She took the potion and shot it back with two gulps as Ginny took a seat next to her on the bed, her pregnant belly full of little Lily.

"You're welcome."

Hermione allowed the potion to take effect as memories flood her; the Manor, crumbling to pieces. Diggle's lifeless eyes staring up at the night sky. Draco being dragged away in cuffs... emotions hit her like a brick wall, knocking the breath out of her. Faces flickered behind her lids; Draco, Astoria, even Narcissa and Lucius.

"Gin..." She reached out and grabbed her best friend as the tears began to fall once again.

"Shh, Hermione. It's alright." Ginny patted the side of Hermione's cheek and cleared away the new tear stains.

Unknowingly, the two woke up Scorpius, who sat upright and stared at his Hermummy with confused adoration. "Hermummy no cry."

Sniffling, Hermione nodded and wiped her nose with her torn sleeve. "You're right, Scorpius. I shouldn't cry... I'm sorry you had to see that." She attempted her best smile as she reached over and hugged the toddler tight to her, to which he wiggled against her, not a fan of being squashed.

"Can go see Mummy 'n Daddy?"

As if cued, the two witches exchanged wary glances. "We can go see Mummy, Scorpius. Sure." Hermione purposefully glared over mentioning Draco, unsure if explaining the situation to Scorpius would do any good. It then hit her... "I... I'm not even sure where she is," she spoke to Ginny. "Astoria, or Auror Jameson, or-"

"Calm down," Ginny said at once. "Harry left me with a list of answers for you. Locations and whatnot. Here. I have their rooms written down and everything..." From her pockets she produced a rolled up parchment and grinned, trying to reassure her friend. "It'll be alright. You'll see. Harry's working on getting Malfoy out of Azkaban as we speak. When have you ever known Harry to fail at something he puts his mind to?"

"It isn't that," Hermione replied. "It's that I'm not there, helping him. I shouldn't be resting. I should-"

"Agreed. You should be taking a shower." Ginny reached over and ruffled Scorpius's hair. "Albus is still sleeping, but once he's awake, how about a bath and waffles?"
"Albus! Yay! And pancakes," Scorpius insisted like the Slytherin he was born to be.

"Pancakes, then," agreed the redhead. "And while we do that, Hermummy can freshen up. I've laid some clothes out for you in the bedroom."

"Thank you," Hermione muttered, the potion taking affect and alleviating some of the tension inside of her. She reached over to the nightstand beside her, snatching up her newly charged cell phone (thank Merlin the Potters had muggle things as well as magical). Just as her fingers touched the plastic, a new message buzzed onto the screen. Dean's name glowed at the top.

'With Draco. Says not to worry. Sends his love.'

"Hmph." She slammed the phone back down on the table. Apparently, she wasn't as forgiving as she had thought she was.

"Well?" Draco asked, expectant.

"I've only just sent it," said Dean, "and that's with no reception, mind you, in a remote prison in the middle of the ocean..." He gave a reassuring look at the blond's crestfallen expression. "Give it some time, yeah?"

Draco sat across a lengthy table in a proper prison uniform. He hadn't been allowed to shower, but, for once, the young Malfoy didn't seem to mind. There was dirt along his fine features and muck in his hair - so much so, Draco was sure he resembled the crazed look of his departed Aunt Bellatrix. Last night, he arrived in Azkaban and slept dreamlessly. But he had slept. It was the first full night's rest he'd been given since the night of his proposal to Hermione.

Hermione... he hoped she was alright. And Scorpius. Luckily, Dean had told him enough about Astoria, seeing as how he'd just come from St. Mungo's. With a few hydrating potions and a full analysis of her condition, nothing new had come of it. It didn't really shock Draco; he knew what was in store the moment he signed up for marriage to Astoria. The curse would, eventually, eat her lifeforce, and she would cease to exist.

Why did everyone Draco cared for have a hex aimed at the back of their heads, metaphorically, and sometimes literally?

The door propped open, and Harry Potter entered, a thick stack of paperwork in his hands. Aside from a new change of clothes, Potter looked worn. He took a seat next to Dean at the interrogation table and flicked the first stack of papers open. When his eyes trailed up to Draco, it was obvious he hadn't slept a wink last night. Maybe not since this entire ordeal began...

"So," Harry began, "from your witness statement last night and my written confirmation you worked with your grandfather under duress, the likelihood of the Wizengamot being able to hold you responsible for what happened last night is highly unlikely. And, since you actively broke into Azkaban under my orders, you should be cleared of those charges as well. However... He stared down at the papers, back up to Draco, and gave an irritable sigh. "An Unforgivable? The Cruciatous Curse?"

Draco dipped his head, suddenly finding his fingernails much more interesting than what Potter had to say. Oh, who was he kidding? He just felt ashamed. "What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to tell me you didn't do it. That Diggle was lying."

A cold smirk graced Draco's pointed face. "It wouldn't be good form to lie about a dead man's
"Damn it, Malfoy!" Harry nearly knocked the papers off the table as he slammed his hand down. "Give me something I can work with!"

"You and I both know there's nothing to say that's going to get the case thrown out," Draco shrugged.

"I told you to get his attention. Ruff him up a bit and get yourself arrested. I did not tell you to go and use an Unforgivable on an inmate!"

"No, you didn't." Draco shrugged his shoulders again. His head felt numb, like all of his emotions and blood vessels had been yanked out and replaced with sawdust.

"Was it instigated?" offered Dean.

"What?"

"I mean, did Greg threaten you in any way, or-"

"Don't do that." Draco stuck his nose into the air and crossed his arms as best he could, despite the magic-dampening cuffs shackled around his wrists. "Don't dishonor your friend's memory to get me out of what I've done."

"Don't you do this," Harry challenged.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"This!" The Auror threw his hands into the air. "This stubborn, Malfoy, aristocratic vendetta you have against your own self-worth!"

"Self worth?" Draco gave a snarky laugh. "My family are all a bunch of twiddling arseholes. None of this would have happened if-"

"-Oh, where do you get off?" Harry snapped. "Look, Malfoy. I get it. Self brooding is sort of your calling card. But you don't get to do that now. You're an adult -act like it. You're marrying my best friend. Act like it. You're a father! Act like it!"

Draco leapt out of his chair, lost in anger. His chains rattled against the wood of the table, and the guard at the door readied his wand, but Harry motioned for him to stand down. The two challengers stared each other down for quite some time until Draco spoke again.

"I am acting like it. My father was a coward, and my grandfather was a tyrant. I won't raise Scorpius to be the same way. If I teach him nothing else, it'll be to be held accountable for his actions."

"Now isn't the time to go on with your self-sacrificing bullshit. You want to be a better father to your son? Be there for him! Not locked up in a prison cell because you decided to grow a conscience at the last possible moment."

It then dawned on Draco how personal Potter was taking his choices. Whether it was out of concern for his friend, Hermione, or out of concern for Draco himself, the blond couldn't be sure. But he certainly felt flattered.

"There's no denying it in court," Dean interjected, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder to calm him. "The best we have is self-defense or finding a way to justify it."
"Why didn't you just punch the man?" asked Harry, softer.

"Why do you think?" sneered Draco. He took a seat again and huffed, "I was furious. Furious with him for the mind games, and killing Weasley, and putting Hermione through so much pain… I was furious with him for everything he'd ever done. I… I lost myself in the moment." He reached up with his manacled cuffs and ran his fingers through his hair."I'd broken Hermione's heart, abandoned my family… I thought I wasn't making out of my grandfather's bond alive. I thought 'if this is the way I go out, do I want to go out like a pansy?' No. I wanted him to feel it. I wanted him to know my wrath."

Dean stared with a wide, open mouth. "Do you think we could plead temporary insanity?"

"Temporary?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"I've heard enough from the peanut gallery." Draco rolled his eyes. "Are we done here?"

"You have to work with us," Harry insisted. "..Unless, you don't want out."

Draco smirked in response. "Of course I want out, Potter. I'm trying to be admirable, not stupid."

"I'll see what I can work out with Kingsley."

"...I appreciate it."

"You picked one Hell of a time to become self-righteous," Harry grumbled.

"If I'm going to change the Malfoy legacy, it starts here." Draco crossed his arms. "Plain and simple. No more trying to hide the skeletons in my closet."

Harry rose to stand and pushed the thick paperwork toward Draco. "Dean will stay with you while you read over the casefiles. When I get you out of this, and I do mean when, I'm going to need my best Auror in the loop."

Draco's smirk widened. "Thanks."

"But since Hermione's going to be on temporary leave, that leaves you."

"And there's the Potter that I know."

Potter gave a smirk of his own as he made his way to the door, gave one final wave, and was off. Dean stayed behind, getting comfortable in his chair while kicking his feet up on the table. Draco reached over, pulled the paperwork closer, and began reading over the cases. Two, in particular, he searched for with stealth.

The first one was Dessy. Dessamine Yaxley. Raised in Bulgaria to keep her identity a secret, she was a prodigy in her school until she disappeared over a year ago. Rumors were, she ran away and didn't want to be found. Her confession, Draco noticed, wouldn't be admissible in court. She suffered from Dissociative Identity Disorder and delusions of her life being one large stage production.

Bruno Shafiq was a bit older. Nineteen. He'd lost his eye to a Death Eater as a child, crippling his chances of professional archery. Apparently, he'd been training for the Olympics since he was five. Wonderful in school, at Ilvermorny, but disappeared off the radar nearly two years ago.

As Draco read over the rest of the names of the captured, he saw each flaw within them -could nearly understand why each would make a pact with Abraxas. Each of them had lost something
thanks to the War. Each of them contained a vendetta of their own... Much like Greg Diggle.

His thoughts turned to Victoria Crabbe -no, not Crabbe. Malfoy, really. He thought of her in Hogwarts, of all the wasted years he'd spent thinking himself an only child. How his father robbed him of the knowledge. Of all the misery Draco himself accumulated over Vincent's death. But Crabbe, Draco knew, was even more malicious than he as a child. Much like Bastian Cane, but without the smarts.

Draco looked up to Dean, whose brown eyes stared contemplatively at the ceiling.

"You alright, Dean?"

The Auror broke from his trance and stared at Draco. "Yeah, mate. I'm fine."

"It's... " Draco sighed. "What I mean is... I know Diggle was your..." Could he really call him a friend? "]-karaoke chum."

Dean shrugged. "Was."

"You... visited him. Here, in Azkaban."

At that, Dean's face grew serious -more serious than Draco had ever seen it. "It's not like I publicly proclaim it. It's an unpopular opinion to stay friends with a convicted murderer..."

"So why did you?"

Dean shrugged again. "I suppose we had something in common, didn't we? Both our fathers were killed by Death Eaters."

Draco flinched, thinking back to the revelations discovered only yesterday. "Dean, you need to know-

"-That the same man who killed my dad killed Greg's? Harry told me." Dean shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "All that time I visited him... and we talked 'bout our pain... it's surreal to know it was because of the same man. I've said it before -Diggle's the reason I became an Auror. I think about our friendship, all the drunk nights out and singing karaoke... and then I think how he tried to blow me up like the rest of our class... and..." He shook his head. "It's like, there was two sides to him, you know? Bastian Cane was real, living inside Diggle. And while Cane was cruel... Diggle was just a bloke, like us. You know what I mean?"

Irritably, Draco replied, "Scary thing is... I do." The two shared mutual glances, and Draco sighed. "Has she text-thingy'd you back, yet?"

"It's just 'text', mate. And... no. Not yet."

Theodore sat beside Astoria's bedside, reading a tattered version of The Odyssey to her. I was his favorite book, apart from a beloved muggle series called The Dresden Files, but he very much doubted Astoria would have found it as amusing. Something about inaccurate representations of wizards and all... Still, in times of turmoil, it brought him an escape.

Astoria took breath after shaky breath in her sleep.

There was a knock on the door, and Auror Granger walked in, looking restless but refreshed. At her side was Scorpius. Theodore couldn't explain it, but a feeling of great joy overtook him at the sight of
the toddler, whose grey-blue eyes gleamed at him with happiness.

"Jame-son!" he shouted, running full blown across the room and into the Auror's lap. Theodore sat stoically, trying to remain as professional as possible as the toddler began to pull on Jameson's loosened tie.

"Hey," Auror Granger whispered.

"Hello," Theodore said back, cheerful and formal.

"How is she?"

"Mummy!" Scorpius shouted, realizing his mother was there. He nearly threw himself off of Theodore's lap in an attempt to crawl onto the bed to get to her, and Theodore had to hold him back, begrudgingly. "Mummy -Mummmmmmmy!"

Astoria's eyes fluttered open. "Scorpius?" Her eyes found Scorpius, still wiggling in Theodore's arms, and then she met the Auror's eyes, her face softening. "I told you to go home hours ago."

"I did. For an hour. See? I've changed clothes." He gestured down to his less-than pristine, wrinkled attire he'd fished out of the clothes hamper. It felt entirely unbecoming, but he'd wanted to rush back as quick as possible. "Far too boring there," he added, reaching over to grasp her hand-the pale, purple lines in her arm were even more prominent against the sallowness of her skin.

"Mummy!" Scorpius leaned over and grinned, pushing between the two. "I beat a baaaaaad girl."

Astoria's face dropped. "You what?"

"Oh yes," Auror Granger giggled, walking behind Theodore and giving an indicating nod. "Took down a criminal with an Expelliarmus. You should be quite proud."

"Quite proud," Theodore agreed with a wink.

Astoria caught on and said, in comfortable knowing, "Oh, I see. Of course, I'm proud of you, Scorpius. Wonderful job."

The toddler bounced. "Last night funnnnn!" he giggled. "We do again!"

At the same time, all three adults said in horrified unison, "No!" They looked to one another, laughing with exasperated measure. Then, to Theodore's wonder, Auror Granger's expression dimmed.

"I'd like to give your condition a go, if I might," she told Astoria. "With the Gray? If you'll allow it."

Astoria glanced down to her arm, and then shrugged, seemingly impassive. "Don't go getting my hopes up, now."

Auror Granger reached out and touched Astoria's arm, closing her eyes. Theodore watched on, heart racing and brain pulsing with blood. Seconds dragged into minutes, and Auror Granger's face fell.

"I… this is old magic. Old as the Gray." She closed her eyes and concentrated once more. Then, one faint line faded away. All three adults stared at the now normal vein, amazed. "Perhaps… with time…" Auror Granger trailed off.

It was obvious to Theo that Astoria was sullen by the only slight progression in her condition.

"Narcissa is being kept down the hall. Would you mind watching Scorpius for me while I…?"
"Not at all," Theodore smiled to Auror Granger, "Take your time."

With that, the curly brunette left just as Scorpius crawled up his mother's bed, snuggling into her arms.

"To be frank…" Theodore muttered, eyes trailing to the door. "I have someone here, too."

"A girlfriend?" Astoria teased.

"...My mother, actually."

"Oh." Her face fell. "Is she sick?"

"I… erm…" He wondered how much to tell her, and if this really was the best time. But this week had taught him a lot about matters of the heart. Aurors Granger and Malfoy never ceased to say what was on their mind, and it inspired Theodore to want to do the same. Even if he wasn't nearly as articulate with his feelings. "When I was a boy…" he began, his mind racing. There was so much to tell her… he didn't want to burden her, but she needed to understand. He needed her to understand, so she wouldn't think herself a burden. "When I was a boy, I ran away from home. Overnight. Field trip... my mother and father worked on highly illegal matters, but for the good of healing those around us, muggle or wizard. We were on the run, constantly, and they forbid me from going in fear we'd be found out."

He paused, awaiting her reaction.

"Theodore…" Her eyes were full of pity. But Theodore didn't want pity. So he continued.

"Please, allow me to finish." He sighed. "When I snuck off on my field trip, my mother came looking for me. Madder than a wet hen in the middle of April showers, she was... We were followed back to the house... Death Eaters. They did terrible things to my mother and my father. They forced an untested concoction of her own design down her throat and forced us to watch…" He clears his throat. "Well… she's never been the same since. She's here, in the Janus Thickey Ward."

Astoria smoothed out Scorpius's bangs as he began to fall asleep. The look she wore was thoughtful, but weary. "Theodore…"

"I know you're concerned about your condition. I know this curse has you wondering how long you'll... but I'm willing to try. If you are, I am. It doesn't scare me, the way you think it should. And my parent's research -there was a girl… a girl I knew once." He stared at her, his eyes full of untold stories. "She had a similar condition to yours, and my parents healed her. It wasn't the same, but perhaps if I searched my parent's research archives…"

"You don't need to do any of that," she whispered, tears in her eyes. "I've made my peace with what will happen. It was selfish of me to get involved with someone when I knew what would happen."

Theodore thought about how to reply. How could he make her understand? "You asked me why I wasn't snatched up once… I was." He gave a bittersweet smile. "I thought it was fate, after my mother's deteriorating health, to hold that girl close to me… the one my parents healed. We both ended up at Hogwarts, and... I pushed away friends who cared about me for her." He thought of Lindy, and of his best friend Roger, who he left behind for Hogwarts. "Anyway, I became quite guarded when all was said and broke my heart six ways to Sunday, and she was perfectly healthy. I've been this stoic man before you ever since. But... I am tired of being guarded. I don't care if Auror Granger can heal you or not. Well, that's not entirely true," he rambled, "I would very much like it if you were, but..." He sighed, shaking, overwhelmed by his emotions. "Anyway, the point I'm
making, Astoria, is that I'd like to give it a go, no matter how long you might have." He reached over and grabbed her hand. "Because I've yet to meet someone like you, and I doubt I ever will again."

Astoria sniffled, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Circe, you make Draco's romantic endeavors look like shite."

"That wasn't my intention." Though, in the corner of his mouth, there hung a little smile. "Is that a yes, then?"

"You barely know me."

"I know enough. I know you like your tea with three sugars and dollop of honey. I know you pick the crust off your sandwiches, and you love your son more than anything in the world. I know you hate the color yellow, because you've said it looks horrible with your complexion. And I know you want this just as badly as I do."

"Goodness, you're an observant man. What is it they say about the strong, silent type?" She laughed. "Alright, Theo. You and I have a date, then."

"Great."

Theodore scooted closer to her with the chair and picked his book back up. He knew there was nothing more to say on the matter, and so he didn't. "Be strong, saith my heart; I am a soldier; I have seen worse sights than this…"

Hermione inhaled deeply and knocked on the door. It took a moment, but Lucius Malfoy opened it, startled by her appearance.

"Miss Granger…" he drawled.

"How is Narcissa?" she asked, a tad irritated by the daunting man's gaze.

Lucius raised one eyebrow and drew out a long pause before saying, "...Ask her yourself." And with that, he swung the door open to reveal Narcissa Malfoy, sitting up in her bed, reading a book and sipping water from a straw. Her eyes fluttered upwards, noticing Hermione's arrival as she stepped inside, and she gave a polite nod.

"Miss Granger. Or… should I say… soon-to-be Missus Malfoy?" An entertained eyebrow arched, but her face remained expressionless otherwise.

"That's if the man can manage to get himself out of the mess he's made," Hermione muttered, catching herself. "Erm… How are you feeling?" She gathered her nerves and took a seat in the guest chair beside Narcissa's bed.

"A slight bump to the head. The Healers say I can go home any time now, but Lucius is persistent I stay for more observations." Narcissa shot her husband a teasing glare. His only response was a smirk in return. "And Scorpius?"

"He's fine. He's with Astoria right now…" she added, "I would have brought him, but-"

"-A boy should be with his mother more than his grandmother. Not to worry, dear. I understand." The witch pursed her lips. "And Draco?"

Hermione fought the urge to snort. "Still in Azkaban, though Dean's with him right now."
"That Auror Thomas - he's unbecomingly charming, isn't he?"

Smiling just a little, the brunette replied, "He has a way of warming people up to him against their will, yes. Even Draco can't resist his charms."

Narcissa nodded appreciatively. "Lucius tells me it's over. That Abraxas is dead."

"Again," Hermione nodded.

"Well, thank Merlin!" Narcissa's eyes fell on her husband. "I never liked your father, you know."

"That makes two of us..." Lucius sneered dully, looking out the window.

"Lucius," Narcissa continued, "was just telling me about your conversation last night before you left via the floo." She looked between the two.

Hermione rolled her eyes. The woman wasn't subtle. "And I told him I didn't want to hear anything unless it was genuine." She looked Lucius up and down. "Frankly, I don't need your permission, nor do I want it, to love Draco."

"Believe it or not, Miss Granger, I am aware," Lucius replied, haughtiness in his tone. That was, until Narcissa sent him a withering expression, and he recoiled, adding, "However, in light of recent circumstances... I find it prudent to..."

"Oh, out with it, Lu," Narcissa demanded.

"You have my," Lucius gritted his teeth, "Ap-o-l-o-gies." He said the word as if he might choke on it.

Hermione smiled, figuring it was the best she would ever get. She decided to change the subject - one Lucius could handle. "How are you feeling, Mister Malfoy? I noticed you're not walking with your cane. Or coughing..."

Lucius ran a hand over his chest. "I haven't felt this good in ages, actually."

"The Gray," Hermione explained, "It's healed you. I can sense it."

Another knock came to the door, and this time it was Harry peering around the wood.

"Hermione, glad I've caught you." Harry didn't seem daunted as he let himself into the Malfoy's infirmary room, instead giving a cheerful wave to both of them, possibly out of spite.

"Harry, what are you doing here? Have you even rested?" Hermione asked, concerned to see the dark circles beneath his eyes.

"I'll sleep when I'm dead," Harry shook his head. "Or, rather, maybe when Gin forces a sleeping potion down my throat. The point is, I might have discovered a way to get Malfoy off the hook." He began to pace.

And pace.

And pace.

"Well, out with it, Harry!" Hermione ushered him on.

"It's mental. It really is. I know as soon as I say it, someone's going to tell me it's mental... but it's so mental, it just might work."
"Now you sound just like Ron," she quipped, and they both smiled, amused.

"Alright. So what if we were able to discredit Diggle's allegations against Malfoy? Retract his statement?"

"Yes, well, that would be all well and good, but Diggle is dead, Harry."

"Mhmm." His eyes gleamed with knowing.

"Harry Potter. Tell me what you've got up your sleeve right now."

Harry reached into his pockets and retrieves a handkerchief. He unraveled it, revealing a small, black stone. "Diggle is dead, yes. But that doesn't mean he can't talk."

---

Once again, I'd like to say that inbetween HTTYA 2 and 3, I will be posting the rest of The Jameson Chronicles, so we can find out about his backstory in glorious detail!

Thank you to everyone who has reviewed, followed, and favorited.
2 more chapters. Are you prepared?

~A.
The Sound of Silence

Sorry I've been MIA! I was severely ill last week, and am only now feeling up to writing again. Getting back to it.
Love you all. Thank you for reading. Thank you LightofEvolution for proofing and helping me with some funny lines!
~A.

(And, yes, there's a Supernatural joke in the first scene.)

Can you save
Can you save my
Can you save my heavy dirty soul?

"Heavydirtysoul" by Twenty One Pilots

Dean Thomas was exhausted. As he hung his cloak on the coat rack near the front door, he couldn't help but think it was useless. It was riddled in holes, burns, and the bottom had been clawed to pieces due to Abraxas Malfoy's wolf claws. Still, it would make a nice story in the morning, come time for Luna to—

"Hello, Dean."

"Jumping jellybeans!" Dean exclaimed, spinning on his spot to meet the amused, aloof smile of one Luna Lovegood; she held a tray with two teacups and a kettle. "Luna! You—I—how did you get in—"

"-You gave me a key, remember? In case of emergencies? Well, I was going to give you until the morning before I came over, but the wrackspurts were buzzing around my head so much I couldn't sleep. I thought, maybe if I made you some tea, they might leave me alone." She offered out the tray.

"You were worried about me," he said aloud, voicing her concerns. "Luna," Dean reached out, took the tray, and set it on the entryway table, "I'm fine."

"Harry owled me," she admitted. "Malfoy's trial - I imagine you're not as well as you put on. And with Diggle's funeral tomorrow-"

"-I'm fine," he insisted again. "Really. I just...wish Harry and Hermione wouldn't always ask so much of me..."

'What do you mean?"

Draco Malfoy paced his cell, scratching the white-blond stubble on his cheek. Three days without a shave, and all he could produce was stubble... it was pathetic. Almost as pathetic as not being able to wear formal robes to his own trial. He ran his nimble fingers through his unkempt hair and practiced his testimony in his head. The Wizengamot would ask him to confirm or deny his use of the *Cruciatus Curse*, to which he would tell the truth. There wasn't a point in lying about it; Greg
Diggle, despite being the scum of the earth, had done one good thing. He'd saved Scorpius' life. For that, Draco couldn't bring himself to lie on record, no matter how much Potter begged.

Draco already refused three audiences with Hermione this week. It didn't matter how much he wanted to see her—he knew if he did before the trial, he'd crack like an egg. His love for her was that powerful. And if he wanted to be a shining beacon for what the Malfoy name should stand for, he couldn't afford to crack.

No, when they'd ask him the truth, he'd give it willingly.

Auror Jameson came by his cell around noon, carrying two thermoses of something hot and steaming. "I'm here to escort you to the Ministry," he said, waiting for the guard to unlock Draco's cell. When the barred door slid open, Jameson offered out one of the thermoses to Draco, an easygoing smile across his face. "Astoria's doing much better. They've discharged her from the hospital as of last night."

"That's great," Draco muttered, shaking his container. His magic-dampening cuffs clinked against the metal cylinder as he followed Jameson down the hall. "What's in this?"

"Just a bit of liquid luck."

Draco nearly dropped the container. "You're joking."

"You're right. It's soup, compliments of Auror Granger." Jameson beckoned him on with a wave of the hand, and together, they stopped inside one of the interrogation rooms. To Draco's surprise, his favorite tailored robes were waiting for him, laid neatly across the table.

"I thought prisoners weren't allowed anything but regulation fashion faux pas." "Mmh, yes, but being an Auror still has it's privileges, I do believe," said a feminine voice from behind the door. As it swung shut, it revealed none other than the one person Draco had been trying to avoid since his arrest. Hermione Granger stood with her arms crossed, dressed in a knee length pencil skirt and blue blazer. She was the epitome of class and furiousness, causing Draco to involuntarily take a step back.

"Hermione," he tried to sound casual, "Fancy meeting you here."

"Do you mean because you've been avoiding me?" she asked, a breezy air to her tone. "Don't bother answering. Get dressed. Eat. Then we'll be on our way. I'm your second Auror escort."

"Because I'm such a dangerous criminal," Draco sneered sarcastically, rolling his eyes. He turned his attention on Auror Jameson. "You heard the woman. I have to get dressed."

"And?"

"And - get out of here. I don't need you ogling me."

"Sorry, Auror Malfoy, but section twenty eight, sub-paragraph one of the Transfer of Azkaban Prisoners clearly states two Aurors must be present during transportations for trial-"

"-Oh, shut up." Draco offered out his shackles to Hermione. "How am I supposed to get dressed with these on my wrists?"

"You're a seemingly intelligent man," she turned her face away from him. "Figure it out."
"Is this what being married to you for the next eighty or ninety years is going to be like?" he quipped.

"Perhaps."

"I was joking."

"I wasn't." She turned her back to him completely now; the wall must have been extremely interesting. Oh, who was he kidding? She was utterly pissed. "Better get to stripping."

"Well, in that case, the show is this way," he teased, stepping away from her. When he turned around, Auror Jameson was nearly nose to nose with him, his wand tapping between the cuffs around Draco's wrists. "The show isn't for you, Jameson."

"I wouldn't want a show," said the younger Auror, unlocking the cuffs. They fell to the ground with a clank. "You have two minutes to dress."

"What, no shower?"

"You're lucky you get the robes!" Hermione snapped, still with her back turned.

Draco decided it was better not to push his luck and began stripping immediately. Although, when he began to shimmy into his freshly folded underwear, he couldn't help but tease, "I wouldn't mind a strip search, Auror Granger."

"Buzz off, Draco."

"I'd be happy to provide you with one," Jameson replied, to which Draco tossed his prison regulation robes over the Auror's head.

"Touch me and I yell rape."

He finished dressing in silence, and it wasn't until the last button was done that Hermione turned around, giving him a once over. "Well, you clean up nice. - Sit down." Not wanting to poke the bear, Draco did as asked, taking a seat at the end of the interrogation table, where Auror Jameson replaced his magical shackles. Hermione strolled over, placed one of the thermoses in front of Draco, and leaned against the desk. "You must be hungry."

"Famished," he admitted.

Her brown eyes sparkled in a brilliant way that made him nervous. "There's soup in the thermos. Made it myself." She conjured a bowl and poured the soup. "I would have cooked you something worthwhile, but then I remembered you didn't want to see me. So this is as good as you're going to get."

"...Looks delicious," he tried, smiling faintly but also getting the feeling he would be in very deep trouble if he admitted he had no appetite pending his trial.

"Good. Depending on how this trial goes, this could very well be your last home cooked meal. I'd savor it if I were you."

Draco picked up the spoon provided and, despite being sick to his stomach, ladled out a noodle and chewed thoughtfully. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Thank me by eating it all," she told him, crossing her arms and staring off at nothing in particular.
"We have ten minutes before we need to leave."

"Tuck in," said Auror Jameson, opening his thermos and slurping the contents down in an undignified fashion. "See? She didn't poison it."

"Please state your name for the Wizengamot."

"Draco Lucius Malfoy."

"Do you understand the charges presented to you in court?"

"I do."

"Very well," said Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt. "Let's get started."

"Please state your name for the Wizengamot."

"That really doesn't seem necessary, does it?" Harry Potter said, glancing around at the unamused faces of fellow Ministry officials. "I was kidding… Harry Potter."

Draco felt a tightening in his throat - maybe it was the fact that Potter was about to go on record and put himself on the line for Draco—again. Maybe it was the underlying guilt he felt for it. Either way, the Malfoy man cleared his throat, trying to relieve the tension. He patted his chest, inhaled through his nose, but no matter what he did, the tightening wouldn't relent.

"Thank you, Auror Potter," said Kingsley, "Would you please, in your own words, tell us Auror Malfoy's involvement in the last week's proceedings leading up to the incidents at Malfoy Manor."

I'd hardly call them incidents, Draco thought, but kept his thoughts to himself. No need to make things worse.

Potter began to weave his web of events, from Draco's father's attack, to being summoned to Hogwarts, to Scorpius falling prey to convulsions. Each time, he gave a stunning amount of details. When he reached the discovery of Lindy's body, Draco averted his gaze to the floor. Hearing from Auror Jameson that Bolt hadn't made it out of the Manor alive at the hands of Abraxas, made Draco's insides squirm. No, he didn't appreciate being lied to one bit, but it still didn't mean he wished death upon her. After all, when he thought she was actually dead, he'd mourned her. Somehow, she'd been able to weasel her way into his heart like some sort of student he could bestow his knowledge to. A ward.

"And when Auror Malfoy came to you, what happened then?" asked Kingsley.

"We devised a plan - one to keep Auror Malfoy alive and still receive intel on Abraxas."

"Why didn't you share your plans with the Ministry?"

"We weren't sure who we could trust," Harry said, pushing his glasses up his nose. "And with good reason. Lindy Bolt, an Auror directly underneath my authority, ended up faking her own death and turned an animagus spy for Abraxas. More so, amongst the Sacred Twenty-Eight cult arrested following the attack on Malfoy Manor, two Ministry employees were discovered."

"Even so," said a pudgy witch from the Wizengamot, leaning her fluffy belly over the podium she sat behind, "you released a prison inmate - one," she glanced down to her notes, "Gregory Wallace
Diggle, known for mass murder, conspiracy against the Ministry, the murder of Auror Ronald Weasley—the list goes on."

"Under my jurisdiction, I am allowed to transfer inmates as I see fit. Auror Malfoy acted as my transfer Auror."

"A loophole," said the witch, "but one the Ministry does not take lightly."

"Look, none of this matters," said Harry, "because this has all been cleared with Minister Shacklebolt. We're here today to discuss the accusation against Auror Malfoy and his alleged use of the Cruciatius Curse."

"Indeed," nodded the witch, turning her eyes on Draco, who paled at her glare. "According to witness testimony of prisoner Gregory Wallace Diggle, you, Draco Malfoy, broke into his cell and performed the Cruciatius Curse on him continuously until guards were summoned and forced to drag you away. Let the record show that while Mister Diggle is no longer able to speak for himself—"

"-Because he's dead," snapped a voice from behind Draco's chair. He recognized it instantly as Hermione's. "Let the record state that, as well."

"Yes, yes. But the deceased's testimony still stands. So," the Wizengamot witch looked to Draco, "how do you wish to plead, Mister Malfoy? Do you concede to these accusations? What have you to say for yourself?"

Draco opened his mouth to agree—but found his voice was unable to form the words. The tightness in his throat choked him until he stopped struggling to speak. Only then did it release.

What the actual fuck? Was this some sort of spell?

"But what if it didn't?" said Potter from his chair.

"Excuse me?" snapped the witch.

"What if Auror Diggle's testimony didn't stand anymore."

"Impossible. As Auror Diggle is, in fact, dead, as Auror Granger clearly found the need to interrupt me to say—"

Once again, Hermione interjected. Draco could hear a chair scoot back, and he imagined her rising to stand. He didn't dare turn around, though, to see her sure to be wrath. "Yes, Greg Diggle is dead. But that does not mean it is out of the realm of possibility for him to speak on his own behalf."

"Are you suggesting a ghostly apparition?" asked the woman, skimming over his notes. "I see none of this in the reports…"

"Because it isn't. -May I, Minister?"

"I'll allow it." Shacklebolt nodded.

Footsteps clopped against the wooden slats of the floor until Hermione stood beside Draco, smiling confidently. Draco glanced over to Potter, who looked just as smug. What were they up to? And why the bloody Hell couldn't he speak?

"I'd like to call a character witness: Dean Thomas."

As if already cued up, Dean scrambled out of his chair and approached the witness bench next to
"You see, wise Wizengamot," said Hermione. "While Greg Diggle might be dead, we have the means to call upon him today, via something we all believed to be lost... until recently." Harry removed something from his pockets, wrapped in a handkerchief, and handed it off to Dean, who then unfolded the cloth to reveal -"The Resurrection Stone."

"Surely you don't meant to infer such a thing exists," gasped an elderly wizard from the back.

"Indeed, it does," said Kingsley, trailing his eyes around the room. "Its knowledge is classified, and we believed it to be lost, however... I've allowed a demonstration in my office earlier to prove its authenticity. It is the real thing."

Draco didn't like where this was going -not at all.

"If you'll look in the debriefings, you'll also see my connection to a rare magic known as Grey Magic," Hermione addressed the courts. "Its sole purpose is to amplify magic - it cannot create what does not already exist. What happens next will come as a shock - but I implore you to remember that under statute four hundred and twenty, paragraph 32a, added after the Great Fire of London in 1666, ghostly apparitions are given the same rights as living, corporal humans - including, but not limited to, witness testimony."

With a small nod of the head, she encouraged Dean to do something Draco strong would have advised against, had his throat not closed up immediately.

Dean Thomas closed his eyes and touched the stone.

Hermione walked up to him, placed a hand over his, and closed her eyes as well.

For a moment, nothing happened, and then - hazed in a pale, blue glow was none other than Gregory Wallace Diggle.

"Hello," he said cheerily, waving his hand about the courtroom.

Draco nearly fainted.

The gruffy, pudgy witch from the Wizengamot stared with wide eyes and a slack jaw. "Impossible."

"Ah, I believe the word you're looking for is 'implausible', darling, but I can see how the two might get jumbled together," Diggle quipped, his translucent form pacing idly around the courtroom. He gave a pleasant grin to Dean, who waved in response. "I, Gregory Wallace Diggle, would like to retract my statement in regards to the allegations against Draco Lucius Malfoy."

"Y-You what?" gasped the witch. "Why?"

"Easy, darling. I lied." Diggle flashed his ghostly white teeth and rubbed his hands together. "No, Draco thought, opening his mouth to rebuttal, but nothing came out. Diggle approached the Wizengamot. "I instigated the fight. Auror Malfoy was trying to escort me out, and I attacked him. He was defending himself when the guards came."

"What reason would you have to lie?" asked Potter with a smug tone - so smug it made Draco want to ring his neck.

"Simple. I despise the man."

"And why on Earth should we take your word now, given that you admit you lied before?" asked the pudgy witch, fascinated by Diggle.
"Indeed! Why would you?" he said. "But in that case, why would you take my testimony before, if you knew me to be a liar? Which is the truth? Which is a lie? Can you really trust me?" He shrugged. "A conundrum, for sure. If you take my testimony while I'm alive but not while I'm dead, you violate your own regulations. But can you trust my word as a dead man, seeing as how I conned every one of you while alive? Really, the only choice you have is to throw out my testimonies all together, living or dead."

Minister Shacklebolt cleared his throat, addressing the courtroom. "Auror Malfoy has proven himself to be a valuable asset to the Ministry of Magic. Without his bravery, the events at Malfoy Manor might not have ended in our favor…" he paused, considerate. "Auror Malfoy, do you have any reason to argue against Mister Diggle's testimony here today?" Once again, Draco's throat tightened, rendering him speechless. One glance at Hermione told him he best keep his mouth shut anyway, so he shook his head. The corners of her lips turned up in satisfaction. Kingsley continued, "Very well. We, at the Ministry, respect all human souls, living or dead, and we hold ourselves in high regard for keeping to regulations… we have no choice but to accept Mister Diggle's testimony and his retraction of his previous statement." He slammed his gavel down. "Draco Lucius Malfoy, your case is dismissed. You are free to go; your wand will be reinstated to you upon departure. Please see Helen in wizarding resources."

A weight the size of a hippogriff was released off of Draco's shoulders. He stared forward, slackjawed, completely baffled by the turn of events.

He was free.

FREE.

The Wizengamot began to file out, as if they hadn't just held Draco's life in their hands like it was puddy. When the room was empty, save for Hermione, Harry, Dean, and a transparent Diggle, Draco finally gave a sigh of relief.

"Okay, I'm just going to go ahead and say it -that was brilliant," Dean said to the group, who wore grins so prominent they could have been mistaken for being under the effects of a love potion. It was Harry who spoke next, strolling up to Draco with his hands in his pockets. "Did you really think we'd let you stubbornly sacrifice your life for an idiotic mistake?" He waved his hand and released Draco from the cuffs around his wrists. "How was your soup, Malfoy?"

Soup?

"Quit teasing him, Harry," said Dean.

"Oh, I think we should keep him just like this," Hermione chimed in, giving a smirk worthy of a Malfoy. "He's much more handsome when he can't speak."

"I dunno about all that," Harry laughed as Draco rubbed his sore wrists. "But he certainly does make a nice accessory to any room, doesn't he? Can't even say the portraits at Hogwarts are as quiet.

-Harry Potter."

It was as if a hand released Draco's windpipes, and he inhaled a deep, suffocating breath. His vocal chords tingled as he muttered, "A silencing soup? You've got to be kidding me…" He glared at the lot. "And why the bloody Hell did the phrase have to be Harry fucking Potter?"

"Because who else better to shut you up than your old rival? You're welcome."

"Hmph."
"Is it so wrong to expect a thank you? We did it because, whether you like it or not, we care about you, Malfoy."

"For the record, I never expected a thank you," Diggle quirked an amused eyebrow. "But I'll take one, if you're handing them out."

Draco gave a bitter smirk. "Not on your life, Diggle. -Oh, wait. Too soon?" He arose from his chair, legs shaking. He couldn't believe it… he was free. It never occurred to him he might make it out of this without returning to his prison cell. And, though his pride was in rubble, his name was cleared. And, technically, he never lied. Not once. He guessed, all in all, he could stomach that.

"Th... thank you. All of you." He let his eyes roam over from Harry, to Dean, even to Diggle, and, finally, to Hermione. "Thank you."

She released Dean's hand, and Diggle disappeared from view, though no doubt still there in front of Dean. Hermione made her way across the room as Draco stepped around Potter. There was a moment of awkward silence before Hermione wrapped her arms around Draco in a fierce hug. "I have to go pick up Scorpius from Ginny." She swiped at a few angry tears from her cheeks, releasing him. Draco kept his grip firm around her, not wanting to let her go.

"Hermione-"

But she broke free of his grasp, kissed his cheek, and turned toward the door.

When it closed behind her, Dean let out a snigger under his breath. It was silenced by Draco's daunting glare. "Something funny to you, Thomas?"

"Er… um… It's just…Greg said you were in the dog house, now."

"Yeah? Tell him I said to piss off." He smacked the stone out of Dean's hand and let it fall to the floor.

Shit. He really was in the dog house, though, wasn't he?

---

Next chapter promises to be extra long, tying everything together. How will Draco make it up to Hermione? Do you think she can stay mad for long? What about Jamestoria!? And Victoria Crabbe!? OMG SO MANY THINGS TO COVER... hope you're ready. :)

See you the next, and last, chapter of this epic journey. (Don't worry, there will be HTTYA3.)

~A.
If you read nothing else in these notes, remember: HTTYA 3 is a thing! It's happening! Make sure to follow me to get the updates!

That being said, here we are at the final chapter. I can't believe we've finally made it here. Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU to everyone who has read, reviewed, shared, and supported me in my writing. I can't begin to tell you how it drives me. To read my original novel, "A Dandy World" go to authoraetaylor dot com

Of course, the special shout outs are in order. Thank you LightoffEvolution for helping me sort out the thoughts of Lucius and Narcissa, and giving insight! Thank you waymay for proofing and helping this story through its entirety. Without these two lovely ladies, this book wouldn't exist.

Also a big shoutout to my friend Amanda for catching some previously not caught errors and beta'ing! <3

Unlike the first HTTYA, I don't have much to say. I think the lesson speaks for itself. I hope to see you around. Follow me on Tumblr (MrBenzedrine89) Facebook (MrBenzedrine) and Twitter (MrBenzedrine89) for updates, funny tidbits, and exerts from my WIP’s! Not to mention the aesthetics. XD

This story is dedicated to every one of you. Without you, it wouldn't have been possible to keep going.
With love,
~A.

"I'll paint the picture, let me set the scene
I know when I have children they will know what it means
And I pass on these things my family's given to me
Just love and understanding, positivity"

"What do I know?" by Ed Sheeran

Harry, Hermione, Draco, Dean, Astoria, Theodore, Scorpius, and Minister Shacklebolt stood around a freshly dug grave. Rain pelted above their heads onto their magically-conjured umbrellas -it’s fitting, Hermione thought, because she couldn’t shake the feeling of dread as she stared down at Greg Diggle’s casket. Dean stood next to her, holding the Resurrection stone between his fingers and talking idle chat with Diggle’s ghost, but Hermione couldn’t even begin to think of speaking with
him again. Not for a long time, if ever. She’d said her peace, and she’d closed that chapter of her life. It wasn’t her past that bothered her.

Her eyes drifted up the rows upon rows of headstones, and her thoughts fell on Ron. Just as her eyes drifted to the Resurrection stone, someone stepped up beside her, blocking her view. Draco muttered something into Scorpius’s ear while holding him in his arms, sending Hermione a humble glance. On the other side of the grave stood Astoria and Theodore. Both didn’t look particularly pleased to attend Diggle’s funeral, but all shared an unspoken gratefulness for his efforts to keep Scorpius safe. And it was common courtesy to make sure someone attended his funeral. Harry and Shacklebolt were only here because of Ministry Regulations. Dean… well, it was a mix of things.

Draco attempted idle chat above the volume of the rain. “Some shitty weather we’re having.”

“Draco,” she scolded, “language.”

With an amused chuckle, he countered, “After all he’s seen the last week, I think a few swear words are the least of his worries.”

“Even so…” It was hard to carry the conversation. Not today. She was too hurt, too frustrated. Oh, she appreciated him being released from Azkaban, and she was relieved to have him home again. She knew she should be falling into his arms, knew her anger was misplaced. But so many funerals in one’s life could ebb them into a depressive state of mind. She grew tired of seeing people die, and her friends making the bigger sacrifices for the greater good. Above all else, she faulted Draco for being stubborn with his trial, even if she understood why he did it. After all, he only wanted to give his family a better name.

Draco seemed to take the hint, so he took Scorpius with him and strolled away to join Astoria and Theodore.

A warm hand slipped into Hermione’s and gave it a firm squeeze. When she turned her head, she found Harry next to her, ironically looking more refreshed than she had seen him in quite some time. “We need to talk.” With a gentle nudge, he led her to a small tree nearby, away from eavesdroppers. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine,” she crossed her arms. “What is it?”

“The Ministry… they want the Resurrection Stone.”

Hermione was confused, but she wasn’t surprised. Of course they would. No doubt an Unspeakable had already gotten off on the thought of examining it. What confused her was why Harry would bother to tell her.

“But the Ministry is giving me a few days - to gather paperwork,” he continued. “That should be more than enough time...”
“Time for what?” she asked, though she already knew the answer.

Harry pushed his foggy glasses up his nose. “To say goodbye.”

A thick gust of wind blew through her down to her bones. “...I don’t know if I can face him again,” she admitted.

“Malfy says he promised Ron a proper send off with you.” He stuck his hands in his pockets as the two stared at Dean talking to an unseen Diggle. “We’re lucky, you know. Most people don’t get the opportunity to.”

“-And isn’t there a reason for it?” she snapped back, chewing on the inside of her cheek. “What if not being able to say goodbye is the universe’s way of forcing us to let go?”

“Hermione,” Harry patted her shoulder, “talk to Ron. You aren’t the only one who needs the closure.”

“Harry...have you...?” She looked him square in the eye. “You’ve spoken to him, haven’t you? That’s why you wouldn’t touch the stone at the trial. You’ve already said your goodbyes.”

“Admittedly, it was harder than I thought it would be...I saw all of them, you know. One by one, they all showed up.” He smiled, thoughtful. “Trust me, Hermione. You’ll be glad you did.” With a gentle squeeze of her hand, he walked away, leaving her beneath the rain-dripping tree.

Draco knew he stepped in it big with Hermione this time. A day later, and she still wouldn’t look him full in the eyes. He knew he’d pushed his relationship to the limits. He knew he should be working on it. But he had promises to keep, first and foremost, and he couldn’t do it alone.

“She deserves to know,” he muttered, sipping from his tumbler of scotch and staring idly at his father’s back. Lucius Malfoy stared into the flames of the sturdy fireplace, his back turned much the way it had been all of Draco’s life. “They both do.”

“You suggest ruining two lives instead of just one?” Lucius quipped back. “I will tell your mother...but you must let me do it in my own time.”

Draco snorted into his scotch. “And when will that be? On your deathbed? In your will?” He poured himself another glass. “No. I’m on my way to visit your affair-child as we speak. When I get back, I expect this handled.” He swigged the drink down and set it on the table next to him.

Almost desperate, his father spun around to face him. “Don’t tell Victoria,” he said immediately, his
eyes stern. “I shall tell your mother, but Irma and I have made agreements. Your sister is still but a child. Let her be one for the time being.”

Draco pondered it, weighing the words. “Fine. For now.” He glanced around at the reconstructed Malfoy Manor (refurbished from Hermione’s Gray Magic) and strode to the floo. “From this point forward, the Malfoy name will mean something. Don’t flub that up.” And then, he stepped into the floo and disappeared through the flames.

Lucius continued to stare into the flickering fire, this time in the exact spot his son left moments before. He gave a soft grunt and rubbed his stubbled chin. Things would have been much easier with magic. At least he would have a means to defend himself if his wife decided it would be prudent to hex him into oblivion. With a sigh, he strolled out of the room and followed his instincts -he found her in the gardens outside, sitting on a bench.

Clearing his throat to announce his presence, he stepped into view. Narcissa looked up from her book, raising an amused and innocent eyebrow.

“Hello, Lu.”

“Cissy…” With nervous, jerky movements, he sat beside her and reached over, pulling the book from her fingertips and scanning the cover. It was one he hadn’t read before, which surprised him. There wasn’t a single book in the Malfoy library he hadn’t given a try at least once.

“The Great Gatsby,” Narcissa explained. “Miss Granger recommended it. It’s muggle, but given the circumstances, I don’t think either one of us are in a position to judge.” No, they certainly weren’t since Lucius was no more than a Squib now. She brushed a strand of hair out of his eyes, eyebrows pressing together. “Something’s on your mind.”

“Narcissa…”

“Oh, no.” she chided, both sad and teasing, “you’ve ‘Narcissa’d me. Now I know things are serious.”

Lucius cleared his throat again, taking her hand. “I love you. You know this.”

“Of course.”

“I have always strived to be the husband you deserve, albeit I’ve failed on numerous occasions...some more recent than others... and some...some I’ve tried to run from for far too long.” He inhaled. “After the war-”

Narcissa placed a sole finger to his lips, silencing him,. “Lucius, listen to me now.” Her eyes were firm and commanded attention. A long pause sat between them. “I am aware you are a man of many mistakes. And you’ll find that I’m not a woman so easily fooled.” Her finger slid down his lips and rested against his cheek, tapping it. “There’s no need in this. If you mean to confess your sins to me,
know that I am your wife, and I know every one of them.”

Oh, he hoped she didn’t. Embarrassed, Lucius paled at her words. “Cissy…”

“This was Draco, wasn’t it?”

Lucius remained silent for a time. “Yes,” he admitted.

“Frankly, it’s a nice gesture on his part, but well late in the long run. -I knew what our marriage was the day you proposed to me.”

Her words stung him. “Narcissa, you have to know I proposed to you because I loved you.”

“And I said yes because I loved you, despite knowing your heart, also, belonged to someone else.” Her face soured, and she stared down at her lap, refusing to give his face the time of day. “Honestly, did you think I wouldn’t put two and two together? The night you didn’t return home after being released from Azkaban, I knew something happened. And when I saw Irma with child months later, it became obvious to me.” She wiped a tear from her eye before it could fall. “I’ve remained silent all this time…I thought I could do this with dignity, but…” More tears fell, and she scooted further down the bench from him.

Lucius knew he’d fractured something, and he knew this had been a long time coming. Confessing it opened a wound Narcissa had stitched together on her own without his knowledge. She’d been harboring it for years. The guilt rose up in his throat -he betrayed her, betrayed her trust, and it only now hit him like a stinging hex. Even if their marriage began as little more than arranged, the love between them had grown strong and formidable, filled with friendship, and grown in affection. It was filled with loyalty - more of a warm fire than the blazing flames he once felt for Irma.

“I’ve failed you,” he stated simply, folding his hands over her book.

Narcissa continued to cry softly, though she didn’t scrunch her face up in ‘ugly tears’ as most women did. She still remained classy, sophisticated, and the epitome of pureblood upbringing. Lucius knew there wasn’t anything he could do to fix what he’d broken.

Narcissa reached down and played with the band of gold on her wedding finger, twisting this way and that. The diamond glistened pretty in the light, but it was melancholy. “Why did you wait so long to tell me?”

Lucius swallowed, finding it difficult to breathe. “I feared I would never gain your forgiveness. It was one night, Cissy-” He watched her pull the ring off of her finger, and his heart raced. “-A mistake I will live with for the rest of my life.”

“As will I,” she reminded him, pinching the ring between her fingers. The tension was palpable. Their son had set the bar for a new order in the Malfoy legacy; divorce was no longer taboo. He couldn’t remember a time when Narcissa hadn’t worn the ring since their vows. Back then, she was an honorable pureblood girl fulfilling her role as expected. But perhaps now, she had come into her own -and, perhaps, it was without Lucius.

Fear gripped him tight.
“I’m sorry I’ve put this burden on you,” he whispered. He could imagine her chucking the ring into the fountain, smacking him across his cheek, and leaving him without another word. He could see in his mind’s eye returning to their home to find the closets bare and the bedsheets stripped. A life without magic and Narcissa sounded like Hell incarnate.

He closed his eyes, preparing for the worst.

“Do you know much about her?” she asked suddenly, pulling a handkerchief from her jacket pocket to dab at her stray tears. “Does she…sniffle, “carry any of the Malfoy traits? You all have such stunning eyes...do you know if she refuses brussel sprouts, like Draco did when he was a child? What was her first word?” Questions flooded from her mouth, and she laughed, though it was nearly bitter. “Listen to me...rambling on…”

Lucius reached into his pockets and fished out a picture, sliding it across the bench.

“Her name is Victoria,” he said, his throat tensing. Narcissa stared down at the photograph between them but didn’t take it. “It’s her first year at Hogwarts. I don’t know much about her, beyond that. She hasn’t a clue about her true lineage. I’ve asked that Draco keep that from her, for now.” An uncomfortable silence fell between them, but he tried anyway. “Narcissa, I could sit here and attempt to shower you in compliments and apologies, but it wouldn’t take away what I’ve done to you - to us.” He abandoned the picture and reached over, seizing her hand. “I love you.” He squeezed it tightly, afraid if he let her go, it would end, and she would be gone.

“And I, you.” Wiping away a few more tears, Narcissa returned to staring at her wedding ring. Then, a miraculous thing happened. She slipped the ring back onto her finger, where it always belonged. “I suppose,” she said with shaky breath, “you’ll have to spend the rest of our lives making this up to me. -I’m thinking diamonds, of course. Bracelets, earrings...and breakfast in bed. Every day. And foot rubs!” She released a quivering laugh as more tears streamed down her cheeks. She leaned over and rested her cheek on his shoulder, but not before retrieving the picture and holding it between them. “...She really is quite beautiful, Lu.”

Lucius felt as if he could fall off the bench at any moment the way he melted into it. But he refused to let her see him in such a tizzy - he was already vulnerable enough as it was, and Narcissa knew it. He curled an arm around her shoulders and pulled her as close as he could.

“I think I’d like to meet her, eventually,” he admitted, kissing Narcissa on the forehead. “When she is ready.”

“And Irma?” Narcissa asked curtly.

Even Lucius knew this was a loaded question, and he should tread carefully. “Is the past. My future,” he held her close, “is here beside me.”

With a soft laugh, Narcissa replied, “You always were a silvertongue…”

“Yes, and as I recall, you love my tongue’s many talents…”

His comment earned him a swat on the arm, but he didn’t care. For the first time in years, his
marriage finally felt complete again. Perhaps there was something to this ‘honesty’ thing after all.

“As I recall, silver isn’t only the color of your tongue,” she quipped back, tousling his hair.

That devilish woman. “Oh, come now, Cissy. Must you remind me how I’ve aged?”

“You’re right. There’s no need - all you need to do is glance by a mirror.” She kissed his cheek. “Take it in stride, Lu. I’ll stay youthful for the both of us.” And Lucius knew she would. She was just as beautiful as the day he married her.

Draco’s feet glided down the grounds of Hogwarts effortlessly, on a mission. When he arrived just outside of Professor Longbottom’s Herbology greenhouse, he ran his fingers through his hair and released a puff of winter air from his lungs. Then, he tucked his head in the door, taking in the warmth of the greenhouse in comparison to the chilly weather outside. His eyes met with Longbottom’s, who only needed to nudge his head to invite him in.

“I’m here to visit Victoria Crabbe,” he said, waving a scroll given to him by Headmistress McGonagall. “May I…?”

Longbottom nodded cheerfully. “Of course. Miss Crabbe-” before he could finish the sentence, Victoria was out of her chair and already on her way to the back of the classroom, grinning ear-to-ear. Just before the two set foot outside, Longbottom called out, “Congratulations, by the way! On the engagement!”

Draco paused, smirking. “Thanks.”

Once outside, Draco produced his wand and cast a quick heating charm on the both of them. Droplets of snow fell from the sky, landing on their heads, but the charm kept them comfortable.

“You came back!” Victoria smiled gleefully.

“I made a promise.” Draco reached inside his pockets and revealed a vial filled with silver wisps of light. “Malfoys -we keep our promises.”

The young girl stared mesmerized at the tube. “Do you?” she asked. “That’s not what my mother says.”

“Your mother has her reasons for saying that. But I’m here to prove her wrong. Listen carefully, Victoria, because I’ll only explain this once.” He told her the vial contained memories of her brother back during Draco’s school days.

“What sort of memories?”

“Eating, mostly.” He smirked again. “Headmistress McGonagall has agreed to allow you to use the school Pensieve after dinner to view them.”
Victoria’s eyes lit up, and she grasped the vial, asking with quiet reprieve, “Will you… will you stay and view them with me? Please?”

Though she didn’t know what she asked, she had given Draco his first opportunity to get to know his sister. Pleased with the idea, he agreed. “I’ll need to owl my fiancée and let her know I’ll be late tonight. But yes, I’d be happy to stay.”

“Thanks, Auror Malfoy.” Victoria turned back to class, but not before giving him a hug so tight he was sure his eyes would pop out. He patted her on the head and ushered her back to the greenhouse.

Hermione stared at the stone on the table. Harry had given her the night to say goodbye, even offering to watch Scorpius so she could do it. He would retrieve the stone in the morning, and then her chances of seeing Ron would be lost - forever. She’d received Draco’s owl stating he wouldn’t be home until late, so she knew she had no excuse not to… but all she could do was stare at the stone like it was some sort of Pandora Box ready to explode at any moment. She swallowed down two glasses of sherry before finally gathering her courage.

Her hand hovered over the stone, and then…

“Hey, ’Mione.”

Hermione whipped around, stone in hand, finding the soft gaze of Ron Weasley. He wore the same leather Auror jacket she bought him for his birthday and the shoes Harry gave him on Christmas - the same outfit she last saw him in the morning before his death. His hair was slightly tousled, giving him that ‘just woken out of bed’ look, and his eyes twinkled, even against the pale translucency of his body.

“Ron…” She nearly dropped the stone but quickly clamped her fist around it, determined to keep it from slipping. The tears had already welled up in her eyes. With trembling fingers, she reached her other hand out and brushed it against his sternum - it went right through him. Ron looked saddened but still managed his boyish smile. The one she’d always loved him for. “You’re here.”

“As best I can be, yeah.”

Hermione lined her hand up against his chest even though she couldn’t feel him. Just a small bit of cold. Ron moved his hand over hers and brushed along the top of her knuckles, leaving behind an icy sensation. “Maybe it’s because I’ve been dead a long time, but you look good,” he said, cheekily.

“I miss you,” she blurted out.

Ron smiled. “I miss you, too.”

“I…I don’t know what to say.” The tears began to trickle down her cheek. Ron moved to brush them away but realized he couldn’t. He released a frustrated sigh, to which Hermione added, “I had a whole speech prepared for what I was going to say, and now I’ve forgotten all of it.”

“That’s just like you, yeah? Always a plan. -It’s good to see you again,” he admitted, trying to lighten the mood. Of course he would. It was simply Ron. “How are you? All things considered?”
“That’s like asking Mary Todd Lincoln how the play was after her husband was murdered,” she chided. Ron all out grinned and swiped a few tears away from his own face. “Can apparitions cry?”

“Dunno,” he shrugged. “Guess so.” He followed Hermione over to the sofa, where she took a seat. “Tell me about it. All of it. I mean it, ‘Mione. I want you to tell me all about your life now.”

And so, Hermione did. There were worse requests, she surmised, to get from the dead. Ron stood near the fire and listened to her talk about his family, about the grieving process everyone went through; about how Molly burnt five nights worth of meals after his funeral. She told him about her decision to become an Auror and about her first run in’s with Draco. Though Ron didn’t seem keen on Draco, he insisted he wanted to listen to every word. “Nah, tell me. I wanna know. How’d a git like him win over the heart of my girl?” Hearing him say the words breathed new life into her. She spoke of meeting Scorpius, of teaching Draco his patronus, and of all the ways he protected her against Greg Diggle. She told him about the moments between moments, like Draco ordering pizza for their first official date and the time Draco exploded Molly’s kitchen in cranberry sauce at Christmas, and how he proposed. “In a bar,” Ron scoffed, “As if that would beat out a drive-in theater.”

When she was through and couldn’t think of any more adventures to tell him, she added, “We visit your grave once a month. Like clockwork.”

Ron smiled. “I know. I can feel it when you do.”

“I’m the only carrier of the Gray Magic now. And Harry’s left me the stone…”

“No,” he said at once.

“But why not?” she asked him, stunned. “Wouldn’t you want to?”

“Of course I would. No one wants to be dead. But it isn’t about that, is it? You know it the same as I do, in your heart. Say you bring me back, Hermione. Say you do.” Hermione entertained the thought in her head for one splitting moment before he continued, “Where do you draw the line, then? Hmm? Do you bring Fred back, too?”

“I suppose…I could…” She knew the moment she said it that it was wrong.

“Well then, I guess you’d need to bring back Harry’s parents, too. And Luna’s mum. Dean’s dad. Lupin and Tonks. Moody. Dumbledore. I mean, if you bring one loved one back, why not all of them?”

“But you weren’t supposed to die!” she shouted, frustrated. “You were supposed to be with me until we grew old and senile! We were supposed to have a life, and children, and a home…you promised me…”

“I did,” Ron nodded. “And Merlin, Hermione, if I could change it, I’d be the one to give you all of those things. More, even. But I told Malfoy, and I’m telling you. The dead stay dead. You hear me? The dead stay dead.” He reached over and attempted to hold her hand, fruitless in his endeavors.

“Now, it’s not my job anymore. It’s Malfoy’s.”

Hermione’s head shot up. “You hate Draco.”

“Yeah, I’m not gonna deny I’m not the git’s biggest fan. But he treats you like you should be treated.
Anyone who can do that is redeemable in my book.”

“I just...seeing you like this...how am I supposed to do it without you, again?”

“Hermione, I’m always with you. I never left.” He grinned. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she sniffled. “And you’re right. I know you’re right, I just... it was hard enough
saying goodbye to you the first time. And now...”

“So, don’t say goodbye,” Ron offered. “I’ve given this a lot of thought, what I’d say to you if I got
the chance to see you again. I’m no good with words, but I want you to know: I’ve never stopped
loving you, even in death. And, as long as you never stop loving me, even in life, that’s good enough
for me.”

Hermione blushed. “I wish I could hold you. Damn this stone.” She gave it some thought. “Maybe
there’s a way.” She dashed over to the sofa and gathered the throw pillows on top.

“Uh, what’re you doing?”

“Lay down with me,” Hermione said, making a pallet on the floor before snuggling the cushions on
the rug in front of the fire. Ron raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Come on. You lay down on the other
side of the pillows. It’ll feel almost the same.”

“I dunno,” he smirked. “I don’t remember being quite that soft.” He did what she asked anyway, and
they laid on the floor together in the light of the fire.

Hermione smiled warmly. “See? Almost the same.”

“Almost being the key word,” he teased. They laid together in silence for what seemed like hours,
but was probably only minutes. Simply staring. Simply smiling. “I’ve loved this. Being here, with
you. It means the world to me.”

“Me, too.”

“I’m gonna miss the Hell outta you.”

“Same.” Her eyes grew heavy, and she closed them. “I’ll never forget you, Ronald Weasley. I love
you.” And then she dropped the stone to the floor.

The world grew just a little dimmer. Hermione hugged the pillows and began to cry. She wasn’t sure
how long she laid there among the rug, crying. Eventually, a set of footsteps echoed down the hall,
and a familiar voice called from the doorway. “Hermione?”

“Draco.” She didn’t even bother to move, continuing to hold the pillows tight to her in the light of
the dying fire, the stone beside her. It didn’t take Draco long to put the pieces together and snuggle
up behind her on the floor, draping a protective arm around her. Eventually, the tears ran out, but she
continued to cry, and Hermione released the pillows to turn her body toward him. She held him
tightly, neither of them having to say a word. He let her cry until she fell asleep in his arms.
Hermione awoke in the morning to the smell of pancakes and the throbbing of a colossal headache. A tray sat beside her filled to the brim with breakfast and orange juice. Slowly, she sat up to see Draco seated on the chaise lounge, smirking.

“Hello,” he said, setting down the book his was reading. A Tale of Two Cities. There was a flash—a memory, to her first outing with Greg Diggle.

The bookstore was about as big as the Gryffindor common room, but it held an array of newest novels, wizard and muggle authors alike. Hermione felt right at home as she plucked a Dickens book from a shelf and turned to Greg. "A Tale of Two Cities. Have you ever read it?"

"Of course. I'll have you know, you and I share a few things in common, Miss Granger. I, too, was born from muggle parents." Diggle took the book from her hands and turned through the pages. "You have been the last dream of my soul. A dream, all a dream that ends in nothing. Think now and then that there is a man who would give his life to keep a life of love beside you. -Quite profound, don't you agree?"

After all this time, and she finally understood the quote to its fullest capacity.

“Hello,” she smiled back. She could already feel the tight pressure around her eyes from the puffiness they held. “Draco—”

“-I get it,” he interrupted, “really. I’m sorry...for everything. Do you want to talk about last night?”

She shook her head. “Not just yet.”

“Alright.” He nudged to the tray. Beside the orange juice was a scroll. “Read.”

“Why?”

He rolled his eyes. “Just do it.”

Hermione reached and picked up the scroll; her eyes trailed over the words, and her entire face caught fire in a flurry of blood rushing to her cheeks. “Draco...”

“Speechless? I’ll take it as a good sign, then.” Discarding his book, he crawled into bed beside her, careful to not knock over the tray of food. “All you need to do is sign the bottom.”

Staring at the paper in disbelief, she whispered, “You’ve appointed me as a guardian to Scorpius. You and Astoria…”

“Don’t give her any credit. It was all my idea.”

“And you’re ever so humble about it,” she smirked, planting a gentle kiss to his lips. “What brought this on?”

“Multiple things, the main one being you’re as much a parent to Scorpius as myself or Astoria.”
“And this has nothing to do with my silent treatment these last few days?”

“Oh, I never said that.” He reached over to the tray, produced a ready-ink quill, and pushed it into her hand. “But I’m hoping this is a start to forgiveness.”

She quickly signed the papers as Draco grinned ear-to-ear. “Thank you.”

“It’s the least I could do after putting you through all I did,” he admitted, rolling the scroll back up and placing it on the nightstand next to him.

“And how are you? After everything?” she asked, resting her head on his shoulder.

Draco laced their fingers together and was quiet for a time. “Ask me tomorrow,” he whispered. “Not today. Today is for us. For our future. - Potter’s already picked up the Resurrection Stone. It’s on the way to the Ministry, along with the Pandora Stones.”

“That’s good,” she said. “I think I understand the temptation stones like that offer much better now. They don’t need to be free for anyone to use. The pain…” She shook her head. “It’s too much.”

“Was it a pleasant conversation, at least?” Draco followed her train of thought.

“It was. Ron gave us his blessing, you know.”

He snorted a laugh. “As if we needed it.”

“Admit it - it’s nice to hear.”

“Melancholy is the word you’re looking for, I believe.”

Their eyes met.

“Melancholy,” she nodded. “Yes, I believe that’s the perfect word.”

It was in moments like these, Draco Malfoy thought to himself, preparing for Hermione’s parents to arrive, when he wished he had a case to dive into. A month had passed since the carnage at Malfoy Manor, and memories still haunted every life touched in one way or another. Life didn’t fall magically into place after Abraxas’s death. No, nothing was that simple. But it was getting better.

Astoria recovered to near full health, aside from her obvious problematic curse, to which Theodore Jameson vowed to cure. He began pouring himself into his parents’ old case documents, searching for answers. After Hermione revealed to Draco a cure was possible, at least according to the mirror world she’d experienced with Diggle, he himself began to use his talents to work with Jameson on a cure.
Ginny Weasley was once again due any day now with a child, bringing hints of nostalgia to Draco’s psyche. He recalled sitting around the Potter’s table and Hermione saying she loved him two days before Ginny Weasley gave birth to Albus Potter. Here he was, sitting at a table with Hermione again, but it wasn’t nearly as quiet or comforting.

An ‘engagement dinner between the families,’ Hermione had put it. Not only were both of their parentals to attend, but Hermione had invited Arthur and Molly Weasley as well, though, for an entirely different reason altogether. This reason caused Draco’s insides to do somersaults and tap dance on his pride.

The house rang out in magical chime, announcing the Grangers’ arrival. “Ooh!” Hermione bounded down the staircase, her hair falling in soft ringlets around her face. “They’re here! How do I look?” She spun around at the bottom of the stairs as Draco examined her simple pleated skirt, button up blouse, and heels.

“Like you’re about to attend a librarian seminar.”

“Perfect.” She grabbed his hand and yanked him down the hall and to the door before swinging it open. “Mum! Dad!”

The Grangers were all about pleasantries, offering goody bags from their travels filled with scented candles and postcards from places Draco could arrange to go to in less than half a day. Still, he smiled and pretended as if the gifts weren’t mediocre, escorting them into the dining room while magic took their bags upstairs. Lucius and Narcissa were busy at the end of the table, caught in a game of wizard’s chess, Scorpius on Lucius’s lap. It looked like Mum was beating Father something awful. Walking about the room were Arthur and Molly Weasley, talking to the painting of Draco’s grandmother, which he moved from the den to give her more light. All the portraits of Abraxas were taken down and swiftly shoved in the attic.

When the Grangers stepped through the door, Scorpius bounded off of Lucius’s lap and tore off in their direction. “Gama! Gampa! What you bring me?”

“Scorpius,” Draco scolded under his breath, “that isn’t polite.”

Ignoring the curt father, Hermione’s mother crouched down and pulled out a whistle from her pockets. “Hand carved by a carpenter in Peru.”

“Coooooooool,” Scorpius grinned, snatching the whistle and blowing high pitched noises that made Draco want to jab quill tips into his ears. Mister Granger made himself at home next to Lucius, giving him ‘pointers’ on how to play a proper game of chess. Draco could tell it took everything within his father not to make some degrading remark. Hermione and her mother took a seat at the closest side of the table, ushering Scorpius along with them. It was, then, that the future Missus Malfoy glanced over at the Weasleys and gave Draco a nod.

Now was the time.

It was easy enough to get them alone -the Weasleys agreed to step into the parlor with him to discuss something privately, but they had no idea just how private the conversation would turn.

He lined them up in front of the love seat against the wall and said, “You might want to have a seat.”

“Is something wrong, Draco dear?” Molly asked, her motherly instincts kicking in. Draco felt his
stomach tie in knots as he shook his head.

“I really think you should take a seat.” They did. He nodded, fully prepared. “There’s something I need to… need to tell you. About your son’s death.” He gulped, and his mouth grew arid. “I should tell you…”

Arthur looked to his wife, who gave a small nod of the head. There seemed to be an unspoken conversation between them before Molly said, “We know.”

“Pardon?”

“Ginny told us some time ago... about all the details of Ron’s death.”

“You involvement,” added Arthur.

Draco was floored. He stumbled back into the armchair across from the loveseat and put his head in his hands. His heart raced a mile a minute. There wasn’t a single bit of what they’d said that he was prepared for. “You know?”

“Only, we don’t blame you, dear,” Molly said with an encouraging nature, making Draco’s eyebrows shoot up in concern.

“What…? Of course you blame me. I blame me. It was my device that-”

“-Ginny also told us you had no idea of Ron’s death until after the fact,” Molly continued.

“Admittedly, it took us some time to let the news sink in,” said Arthur, wringing his hands together but holding a firm, fatherly gleam in his eyes. “But when Molly and I finally processed everything, we realized we shouldn’t blame you. Our son’s killer is dead, now. We have our penance. And we would have never known what had happened if you hadn’t been brave enough to fight against Cane.”

“I wasn’t brave,” Draco muttered.

“Of course you were,” Molly scolded, “and you’re brave now.” She stood up from the sofa, crossed the floor, and threw her arms around Draco, encompassing him in a thick hug. “I’m proud of you for coming clean to us. Merlin knows you needed to clear the air and let it out.”

“You’re not angry with me?”

“Angry? No, dear. You made a mistake. You didn’t wield the weapon that took my son. You gave him peace.” She kissed the top of his head. “You’re family now, Draco Malfoy. And family forgive each other.” Arthur nodded in agreement.

“Daddddddy?” a small voice called from the doorway. Scorpius bounded in, blowing his whistle. “Listen, Daddy! I make it go!”

“Scorpius, let them have their moment,” Hermione came around the bend, snatching the toddler up by the torso and tickling him. She glanced at the scene before her, of Molly bundling Draco into her breasts and Arthur smiling in laughter -Hermione began to laugh. “Oh, dear. Molly, you better let him go. He looks like he’s going to implode.”
Molly released Draco at once, but not before pinching both of his cheeks until they were cherry red. Scorpius freed himself of Hermione and rushed over to his father before crawling on his lap. Knowing no privacy would be given to them now, Draco beckoned Hermione to him and tugged her into his lap to sit beside Scorpius. Arthur wrapped a loving arm around Molly. Molly smiled at her ‘children’ with motherly affection. It was, then, Draco realized something important:

Family bonds weren’t tethered in blood. They were built on love, understanding, and trust.

And these bonds were stronger than any hardship that threatened to tear them apart.

“Now about your wedding colors,” Molly began. *Bollocks.*

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There will be one more update with a sneak peak into HTTYA3, and some replies to reviews. Please leave one?

~A.
"Draco Malfoy!"

It was in moments like these, Draco thought to himself, stepping through the floo having just gotten off of work, when he wished he could hop back through the green flames and volunteer to work overtime. "I didn't do it, whatever it is," he muttered under his breath, slinging his work bag off his shoulder, filled to the brim with future Wizengamot trials he was supposed to testify in later this week. He nearly tripped over one of Scorpius' toy trains in the process, catching himself at the last moment and fumbling forward to grab the edge of the leather arm chair by the fireplace.

Draco was exhausted. Working sixty hour weeks at the Ministry so he could take two weeks off for his wedding was running him ragged. His stag party was tomorrow night, thank Merlin, and he couldn't wait for some time away from the hustle and bustle of Auror duties. Just one more day of work, and he could kick off his boots, trade them in for some comfy dragonhide dress shoes, and drink the night away. Not to mention, he could come home and shag Hermione senseless. Speaking of the witch…

"Draco!"

Shit. That didn't sound like the voice of a happy bride-to-be. He straightened his posture and hopped over a few more of Scorpius' toys before arriving in the foyer of Malfoy Manor. A year and a half ago, this entire section was in shambles after his run in with Abraxas and the Sacred Twenty-Eight. But thanks to magic, they were able to make repairs little by little. Now, the entrance hall was hardly recognizable. They'd managed to open the floor plan and give natural lighting in the form of stained glass windows; the assortment of hundreds upon hundreds of flower arrangements, though, was not typical.

"Who vomited a gift shop in our foyer?" he asked, leaning against the doorframe. Hermione sat on her knees on the floor, her hair tousled and bushier than normal (even for her) and a stack of papers three feet deep in her lap. Her eyes snapped up to his the moment she heard his voice, and she gave an auspicious smirk before ripping a paper from the middle of the stack and waving it around wildly.

"I've found it!"

"You certainly have," Draco nodded. "What have you found?"

"A copy of the order form you sent off four months ago to the florists. I told the delivery elves they'd made a mistake, but they only deal in their jobs, you see, and unless there's paperwork to back up my statements-"

Draco glanced around the room. "Are these our wedding flowers?"

"Yes!" Hermione shouted with aggravated excitement. "And now I can prove to them they're six days early." Her eyes scanned over the parchment in her hand. "...Or...perhaps not." She jerked her head up to meet his stare. "Draco, what's this?"
"What's what?"

"You've written a two here on the date line. It's supposed to be a seven."

Draco squinted his eyes. "Give me that." He waved his wand and floated the paper to him, careful not to get too close to his furious bride-to-be. As his eyes scanned the paper, his stomach dropped. "Well, I had every intention of writing a seven…"

"Why did I send a man to do a woman's job?"

"That's a bit sexist, don't you think?" he chided, dropping his smirk when he read Hermione's withering glare. "It's fine, Hermione. We can just put them in a stasis spell-"

"-For six days? And where are we to put them in the meantime?"

Draco rolled his eyes, finally gathering enough courage to step forward and offer out a hand to her. "This is a mansion, love. There's plenty of room for a cornucopias amount of anything - including…" He pulled her upright, scattering her stack of papers all around the floor. She looked as if she was about to protest before he purred in her ear, "a ridiculous amount of hate-sex."

"I would have to hate you first," she whispered back, her face cheek-to-cheek with his. Her arms curled around his neck, and she settled her weight against him.

"We could pretend." His hands slithered around her waist, drawing her even closer. "I could call you filthy," he nipped her earlobe, "and you could call me foul. We could make a night of it, and you could scream my name over and over and-"

From down the hall, the sound of the floo lit to life.

"Damn it," Draco growled. "I swear, if it's Potter, I'm going to get him a badge that says 'cock block prefect' and permanently spell it to his clothes."

Make sure to subscribe to my penname so you know when the first chapter is posted!
With love,
A.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!