

Uncoffined

by Lady of Clunn

When all is lost, we are willing to do whatever it takes to survive.

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Chapter 1 of 13

When all is lost, we are willing to do whatever it takes to survive.

A/N: My eternal gratitude to nastygrl, who is a brilliant beta - all remaining mistakes are mine and mine alone. Thank you for the breathtaking banner, draconis23 and for giving feedback and keeping my English on this continent.



Uncoffined has won second place at the dramione_awards on LJ in the category best WIP (WIP in 2009).



Uncoffined

Regret it, we will.

The bodies of the dead left behind from the final battle fell limply into the gigantic hole the Death Eaters had blasted before the proud but blackened towers of Hogwarts. There was no practical need for this mass grave; they could have simply cast stasis charms on the corpses until a family member identified and collected the remains.

No, this was a display of power. It was showing the few, terrified onlookers what was in store for those who dared to rise up. They would then in turn carry the message to the communities and villages.

Hermione could hear the muffled sobs and anguished cries from the edge of the pit. Behind her, Arthur Weasley had wrapped one arm around his wife's waist and arms; his other hand covered her mouth. It had been a risk to return from their hideout in the Forbidden Forest so soon, but patrolling Death Eaters, hunger and the need to see their loved ones one last time had driven them out to the edge of the dark woods.

They had found their survival kit undisturbed by others. They did not know how many other cells had survived, as none knew about the other. You could not tell what you did not know. When they had used the healing potions, resized their shrunken clean clothes and vanished the blood soaked and torn battle gear, the remaining potions and clothes for at least 15 others were returned to their hiding place.

Arthur and George manipulated the time pieces on their wrists, and instantly, their hair darkened from the bright red of their family to an indiscriminate shade of brown. Their features changed as well; not much, just enough to make sure they were not easily recognised, not too much to maintain permanently by the charmed jewellery.

Molly helped her daughter to put on the choker necklace before Ginny turned and helped her mother. Hermione hesitated a moment; seeing the Weasleys devoid of the vibrant colour of their hair was strange and frightening. Finally, she shook the feeling off while struggling to close her own choker. The lock of the necklace was strong; charmed to be opened only by the wearer. It was kept close to the neck so it was in constant contact with the skin.

Hermione surveyed her hands, the skin tone of her arms and the locks that were hanging down over her shoulders and breasts. Her hair had not changed much as far as she could see, maybe it had darkened a bit, but it was otherwise just as curly and long as it had been for a long time now.

"Did it work?" She asked, her voice shaky.

Molly stepped forward and caressed her cheek.

"You don't look like yourself, love." She drew Hermione into her arms and kissed her hair. "I know it's frightening, but you are Jeanne now, and I am Mum; you have to remember."

Having shed their past and identities, they had crept closer to the edge of the forest under a Disillusionment charm and watched the pit being filled. Along with the final battle at Hogwarts, the Death Eaters had attacked nearly every wizarding settlement that had not already pledged allegiance to their Lord. Villages were inhabitable, razed to the ground and brimming with dark magic. The human catastrophe also meant hope for the survivors of the battle. They just had to seep into the treks of refugees. There was no better way to hide than in plain sight.

Another body, one with bright red hair, joined the pile of tangled limbs. Molly sobbed into her husband's hand.

Was it Ron? Hermione wondered. Or Bill, or Charlie? Fred?

All of them were in there somewhere. Uncoffined.

Despite the outward appearance of general disorganisation and lack of hierarchy in Voldemort's ranks, the new regime took charge in a frighteningly swift and effective manner.

Key positions were quickly covered by high-ranking Death Eaters; Muggle-born and halfblood laws were put into effect immediately. The refugees were regarded suspiciously, since they had lost their homes fighting against the new government. Or simply not jumping fast enough to accept their new liege.

An area between Diagon and Knockturn Alley had been cleared and enlarged, then declared the re-settlement area for all refugees.

The cramped houses along the windy streets now served as lodging houses, providing one room per family and, if they were lucky, a communal bathroom and kitchen. For the not-so-lucky had to use the public hearths, street water pumps and public outhouses.

The Warren, as it was called now, was little more than a ghetto, a breeding ground for disease, crime and prostitution.

Employment was sparse, and to legally work, Ministry papers were needed. Muggle-borns were not allowed to enter into salaried employment. Halfbloods could obtain the necessary papers, but many struggled to pay the fees and bribes in order to receive the precious, life-saving documents.

It had been nearly three months; three months of fighting against the constant threat of discovery, starvation and infection.

One day, Ginny's injury-weakened body succumbed to the cold dampness of the walls, the poisonous mildew growing in the corners and the lack of nutrition. Her once petite, but strong frame now jutted bones, dying little by little, day by day.

One day, George did not return from his search for food. They waited a long time. When it was evident that he would not be coming back, Molly grew very quiet. She merely went through the motions of daily life, if one could still call it a life.

One day, she sat with her back against the wall in the corner that was their "dining area".

"I will lie down for a little while."

Molly had shuffled over to the lumpy mattress on the floor that she shared with her husband and crept under the thin blanket. From then on, she only got up when it was absolutely necessary.

Arthur had been out all day, standing in line at the occupational office of the Ministry, hoping to receive one of the day jobs clearing destroyed areas. It was when he came home, worn out and greyer than ever, that Hermione could not take it anymore and fled, oblivious to the frightened shout of her adoptive father.

Roaming the Warren streets at dusk or even after nightfall was dangerous at best.

The red lipstick was perfectly painted on her perfectly formed lips, and thin translucent scraps of fabric were strategically draped over the beautiful witch's body.

She had been brought over by the hostess and had immediately straddled him, rubbing her pert breasts against him.

The guest of honour stared at the khol rimmed eyes, the sparkling blusher on her cheekbones and her long, long, red fingernails, raking over his robes.

Like claws.

He looked around. They'd had a horrible week of flushing out members of the resistance that were still hiding in forests or trying to survive the fallout of dark magic in the former wizarding dwellings. Those were the hardest to forget. Insane with the sheer force of darkness, they were hardly recognisable as humans.

His men were taking full advantage of the distractions offered at the revel. Blaise Zabini was draped over a low chaise longue, a girl between his legs while he feasted on the bare breasts of another.

Theodore Nott and Marcus Flint were sharing a pretty blonde witch.

Today he had had to kill a young woman, one about his age. He did not remember her from Hogwarts, but with house rivalry being what it had been, she might well have been one of his classmates. He had found her in the corner of a ruined house, clutching a teacup that was missing half the handle. Upon seeing him, she had snarled like an animal in a trap and leapt at him.

When he closed his eyes he could see hers, those blue eyes that no longer recognised a fellow human being.

She had fallen at his curse. Death relaxed her features, and he could see that she had been pretty. A nice girl in a nice little village, with a nice family that was no more.

Hands worked on his belt, and he looked into the eyes of the dancing girl on her knees before him.

Blue eyes.

Without thinking he backhanded her sharply.

"Who allowed you such liberties, wench?"

The girl was sprawled on the floor, a hand covering her cheek, her eyes startled only for a mere second before she scrambled away into the crowd.

Draco Malfoy stood abruptly and stalked from the room. In the corridor, he waved Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe away from their own girls.

"Greg, Vince, I'll be in my quarters here, over the weekend. Bring me a distraction." He rubbed his face with a weary hand. "Bring me... something different. Something not so shrill and bright. It hurts my soul tonight."

"And no blue eyes," he added as an afterthought.

His friends looked at him without true comprehension, but nodded. If the High Reeve wanted something, the High Reeve got it.

So pretty.

She had not seen such pretty colours since... She had to think hard; since before this life.

Red and yellow. Green and purple. Orange.

Colours of the entire spectrum lay in piles in front of the green grocer's store. He knew very well just how precious his merchandise was. Two hired guns, or would that be wands?, stood next to the exuberant crates filled with tasty ingredients for meals none of them had enjoyed since the new reign had begun.

The two burly men directed their attention to a young boy who was inching suspiciously close. Uncrossing their arms, they reached for their wands and proceeded in shooining him away.

Undetected by the two and most of the crowd, a small girl had crept up to the stand from the other side and had started stuffing vegetables and fruit into her pockets.

Hermione stared.

Nobody paid her any heed.

There were only two paces between her and not being hungry, not being sick.

Before she even knew that she had made a decision, a red bell pepper was in her hand. The small girl nodded her head curtly then turned to run. The quick motion drew the attention of the hired help. They took in the running girl and Hermione standing with a bright vegetable in her hand.

She spun around and ran into the opposite direction.

Footsteps behind her.

There were too many people on the streets, and she was not fast enough. She could not get around them quickly; she was dodging left and right and turning corners without seeing where she was going.

And always, the heavy footsteps were behind her.

Turning a corner into a narrow alleyway, salvation stood in an archway, not twenty paces away from her.

Unenviable

Disclaimer: I do not own anything associated with Harry Potter; I do not earn money from writing this story.

A/N: Eternal thanks to my beta, nastygrl, who was utterly swamped this week and still found time for this chapter.

Unenviable

Pressing her shoulder into the wall of the crumbling building, Hermione clutched the small vegetable close and hurriedly grasped a handful of her robes to raise the hem of her robes at one side. Like all the other girls around her, she was now showing one leg nearly to her knee. She hoped that nobody would notice that she did not wear the usual white stockings held up by frippery garters.

Men ran by looking around searchingly, and Hermione turned her face and let her hair fall to the front, effectively shielding her face.

"Need any business, sirs?"

The girls around her were pushing out their chests and twirling their magically enhanced ringlets around their fingers.

"Any business?"

Glancing through her curls that were tousled from the chase, she saw two huge Death Eaters approaching the group.

She tried to melt into the shadows. Apparating was not entirely impossible within the Warren, but the risk of splinching was made insanely high by a sheer net of magic dampening spells.

"Out of the way, strumpets."

One of the Death Eaters roughly shoved a brightly painted girl to the side, while the other grabbed chins and turned them to the light of the single gas lamp dimly illuminating this corner of the street.

Clearly, they were searching for somebody specific and were not just out for some after-terrorising-relaxation.

Willing to embrace the possibility of not reassembling after vanishing, Hermione let the skirt of her robes fall and inched her hand towards her wand when a huge, strong hand slid into the curtain of her hair, closed to a fist near her scalp and drew her head back.

"I think we found exactly what we were looking for."

This was it then. No death in battle, defending the world against darkness, no quiet slumbering into peace after a long and fulfilled life. No, she would meet her end at the hands of some lowly dark henchmen for stealing a piece of veg.

The sheer madness of it all would have been hilarious had it not been for the two wizards in signature black robes, each gripping an arm and dragging her to the Apparition point outside the Warren gates, Apparating her to an unfamiliar part of town.

After a few minutes of silent walking, they arrived at a dark, looming building. The windows were darkened by sturdy shutters with a few slim stripes of light around the edges betraying that there were actually inhabitants inside.

Although she had never seen it before, she instantly knew that she had been brought to Blackhearth, the policing headquarters of all of southern England.

When the heavy double doors opened, Hermione was assaulted by bright light and the loud noise of a large feast or party.

While she was marched through one hall after the other, scantily clad women would stumble in her way with Death Eaters touching them openly and unashamedly in public.

At one point they had to stop for a few moments for her captors to briefly talk with another Death Eater.

Hermione had time to look down a gallery onto the ongoing festivities.

Was this a dark revel? Or just a revel? Or simply an average evening in this place?

She felt reminded of the old monumental films about Roman times. Dancing girls performed in the midst of dozens of low tables; soft couches and pillows were available to couples and groups talking, eating, coupling.

She half expected to see Voldemort himself, lounging on a dais, a ruby or sapphire-cut looking glass in front of his insane red eyes, like Nero.

Their journey recommenced, and soon, they were standing in front of a tall wooden door.

A Death Eater held her by the shoulders while the other let his hands glide over her body. He took his time and was very thorough, finding her wand in the special sheath in her sleeve and taking the bell pepper from her that she was still holding.

She tried to get away when he slid his hands under her robes, up her legs and even over her most private parts. His touch was clinical, but that did nothing to lessen her anxiety.

The Death Eater knocked on a tall wooden door and entered shortly thereafter.

"We have found you something," he announced while the other one kept his steely grip on her upper arms and pushed her through the door.

Malfoy.

She was dead. And it would be a slow death, of that she was sure.

The Death Eater who had entered the room first, placed her wand in a small wooden chest. For a moment, he held up the bright red bell pepper.

"We searched her; this was all she had on her."

Malfoy drew up his eyebrows questioningly for a second, then shrugged it off.

The room was warmed by a fire and comfortably furnished with gleaming furniture and thick carpets over stone floors.

The blond hoisted himself from his overstuffed seat and came to stand close to her. One of his hands came up and lifted her chin; with the other he held her rioting curls out of her face. Her occlumentic barriers trembling but still firmly in place, she was determined not to give anything away if she could somehow prevent it. His eyes looked

directly into hers, and for several seconds she thought her knees might give way.

The girl looked nothing like he had expected; she was his age or possibly a bit younger, although he did not remember her from Hogwarts. But then, she could have been home-schooled or have attended one of the other magical schools on the continent. There was no make up on her face. She was wearing simple robes adorned by the mandatory, bright red trimming of halfblooded witches and wizards around the hems of the skirt and the long sleeves. She looked like something he had not seen in a long time.

She looked decent.

He nearly laughed at the irony.

"You have done well. Leave us."

When the door had closed with a low thudding sound, Malfoy sat back down, his long legs stretched out before him.

Hermione stood and waited. *Would he draw it out? Make her suffer for hours? Days? Longer? He had always enjoyed tormenting her in school.*

"Very demure." She looked up at him with wide eyes. "Is that your specialty?"

The girl had not sauntered up to him to rub herself all over him and arouse his interest. Intriguing.

He stood back up and advanced on her, taking his time.

Oh gods, please make me strong. Please let me die well.

Draco circled her slowly before he finally stopped to stand at her side. Hermione could not suppress a fearful shiver when she felt his hands on her waist and hot breath against her neck.

"Take off your dress. I want to see more."

Would it be worth trying to fight? There were so many of them. Even if she managed to get past Malfoy and maybe out of the door, she would never make it out of the building, and then, her fate would be even worse than what it promised now.

She tugged at the laces of her boned bodice. The robes she wore were faded and worn. Though she hardly had the opportunity to wash them properly, even perfectly executed cleaning spells left some wear and tear behind. With the magic-dampening wards of the Warren, their few pieces of clothing had soon become thin and acquired a washed out look.

Before she slid the neckline off her shoulders and down her arms, she hesitated for a few seconds. Baring herself in front of Malfoy made the bile rise to her throat, and her instincts told her to turn and run.

The robes fell to pool around her feet, and the thin greyish white chemise followed. The witches' robes that everybody was required to wear made it unnecessary to wear a bra, so she stood in her white cotton panties, her arms crossed over her stomach because she did not dare to cover her breasts, her head bowed in shame.

Suddenly he was so close to her, his fingers trailing lightly over her exposed skin of her shoulders, down to her breasts and then rubbing his rough palm over her nipples in a circular motion before cupping them firmly. To her utmost embarrassment, she could feel her nipples grow hard against his hands.

"You are really very good at what you do, aren't you?"

Surprised, her head shot up.

She looked at him with confused, frightened eyes.

"Or are you truly afraid of me?"

What kind of game was he playing? What did he want to hear?

"I ... You are a powerful man."

"I am, indeed," he said softly and started kissing her jaw, her neck, her shoulders, all the while gently walking her backwards until she felt his bed against the back of her legs.

He pushed her down, making it clear that he wanted her to lie down. She complied hesitantly and pressed her legs together tightly.

While he admired how her dark hair spilled over his crisp, white pillows, he unclasped his robes and disposed of his shoes, shirt and trousers quickly.

Curling his fingers around the stiff hollows of her knees, he lifted them up so she had to raise her legs and pushed them apart after a moment of resistance.

He knelt between her knees. His cock could not have been any harder. Straining to find his release in her, he reached between her thighs and found her dry.

His brow furrowed. Did she not use a potion or spell to keep herself ready? Or maybe her usual clients did not like her to be too slick?

Well, now *he* was her client. And although he could have felt offended at her lack of arousal by him, he decided that it did not matter, he did not know her usual business.

Taking a small vial of oil out of a drawer in the bedside cabinet, he opened it and poured some into his palm. After smoothing it over his erection, he carefully applied the remaining oil to her pussy, letting his fingertips roam over her sensitive flesh.

She jumped a little at the first contact and felt tears of humiliation start to form in her eyes. When he was satisfied with his work, he slid his arms under her knees, opening her wide, effectively immobilising her.

She could feel his cock between her thighs, and the horror of what was going to happen washed over her.

"Guide me in."

She glanced up with a stricken look. Trembling like a virgin, she moved her hand between their bodies, and he felt her small hand around him, positioning him.

For a moment she thought she would lose it and start struggling violently.

"Oh gods!"

Malfoy pushed into her slowly. Hermione could not help but clench her muscles. The man above her creased his brow in puzzlement. Grounding himself more strongly, he nuzzled the spot right behind her ear.

"Open up," he said softly, an instant before he pressed down on her with force. Her body suddenly gave way, and he was enveloped in tight, hot flesh.

Only several seconds later he registered her anguished cry and her hands pushing against him.

This was all wrong.

But her muscles were holding him, clutching at him. A foggy haze clouded his vision of the distressed girl beneath him. He could not stop, even if he had wanted to.

With small movements he started pushing his hips into her. The tight grip of her cunt was driving him mad. He felt as if he was back in Hogwarts, taking a girl for the first time, unable to rein in his excitement and desire. Soon, all too soon he felt the familiar sensation of exquisite pleasure in his abdomen.

He was compelled to move faster, deeper, completely unaware of the rigid state of the female beneath him.

Giving a final violent thrust, he held her down and himself deeply inside her while ecstasy took him over and granted that moment of pure bliss that he had craved.

A few seconds later, he slid out of her and left the bed to walk over to the small table with assorted liquors and crystal glasses of various shapes and sizes. He poured himself a generous drink and swallowed the amber liquid in one gulp.

The girl had turned to her side and drawn up her knees to her chest. He could hear her sobbing softly and could see her shoulders shaking.

The fear, pain and a jumble of other emotions were too strong for her. She lay on her side, waiting for the sound of the door opening to admit the next wizard. Or for the two Death Eaters to take her away to the festivities. Or maybe he would start the process of ending her life now?

This clearly only had been the beginning and she feared what was to come.

Leaning back against the bar table, he looked down on his naked body. His cock and thighs were smeared with blood, as were hers. The crimson stains on the white linen sheets were unmistakable.

Something was not quite right, but he could not grasp what it was. She had come with Crabbe and Goyle without fighting; she had undressed without the slightest protest and had not resisted him until it had already been too late. She had not even pleaded with him to be gentle.

There had been only this enticing shyness, the reluctance to open her legs for him and then the pained cry when he had pushed into her all the way.

There was only one explanation.

"Why did you not negotiate?"

She stilled, unsure of what he was referring to, exactly.

"You could have asked for a lot of Galleons. You didn't tell Cutbush, did you? He would have put you on auction, as usual."

Cutbush? The Warren's panderer? Auction?

Then it hit her like a sledge hammer.

He had not recognised her.

She had not been brought before the High Reeve of South East England for theft.

She had been brought to him as his whore.

Her thoughts were swirling, and she dearly hoped none of all her frantic thinking would show on her much too open face.

"I... didn't want that."

He smiled at her.

"I imagine not."

With this new turn of events, she dared to move her legs over the edge of the bed and then closed the distance to her crumpled dress on the floor.

"Although I could leave it at the usual fare, I will triple the sum. I do appreciate an unspoiled state."

Hermione felt sick. Breathing slowly through her nose, she stepped into her robes and pulled them up around her.

Somehow she managed to pull her bodice laces tight and make a haphazard knot with hands that would not stop shaking and fingers that would not bend at her will. Malfoy had been watching her struggle against the simple garment and extended his hand, a small leather pouch dangling from it.

After a moment of hesitation, Hermione reached for it, but he drew it away, out of her reach.

"Why did you sell yourself?"

Think. Thinkthinkthink.

"I... We live in the Warren. My sister is sick. Potions are watered down and mostly useless. The only apothecary that sells decent quality is expensive. Very expensive."

If you are afraid to be found lying, tell the truth.

He nodded slowly and offered the pouch again to her.

She closed her fingers around it.

The leather was buttery soft and heavy in her hand.

"Thank you."

She felt lightheaded.

A corner of his mouth curled and he smiled a bit, grey eyes warm and soft. It was a disconcerting and frightening sight to see her childhood nemesis smiling down at her.

With a gentle hand on her lower back, he guided her towards the door where he placed his hand on the small wooden chest for a few seconds. The wards around it glowed silver before he opened the lid and extracted her wand.

Malfoy tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Come back here next Wednesday. I'll have someone waiting for you at the Apparition point at 7 o'clock in the evening." He brushed the back of his fingers over her cheek. "I'll be generous."

Hermione nodded, vowing to herself that she would be as far away as humanly possible from the Apparition point at the designated time.

Looking at her wand and the dreaded red vegetable that he had placed in her hands in wonderment, she could not believe she was actually going to exit the High Reeve's mansion.

When the door to Malfoy's quarters was opened, Crabbe and Goyle pushed their bodies away from the walls they had been leaning against.

"Escort her back to the Apparition point outside the Warren."

Malfoy took her hand and kissed her vulnerable pulse.

"I'll see you next week, then."

She nodded again. When Crabbe and Goyle guided her through the maze of corridors, she could still feel the warmth of Malfoy's touch on the small of her back.

Her two Death Eater body guards walked her to the Apparition point, and seconds later she was standing before the familiar gates of the Warren.

Crabbe and Goyle kept by her side up to the gates. The guards scrambled to attention and were eager to let her pass without any further search or questioning about her coming back to the Warren after curfew.

Later she would not be able to recall how she had managed to walk down the street calmly. She was sure she felt their eyes burning into her back. Surely, her back appeared too stiff, her steps not measured enough to be inconspicuous.

She forced her legs to walk past the first alleyway branching off from the main street, the second and third alleyway.

At the fourth corner, she finally turned and disappeared from their view. She braced her hand against the grimy wall and vomited violently. After a few minutes she could finally control her breathing. Closing her eyes, she put her forehead to the cold wall, her body limp with emotional and physical exhaustion.

She was alive.

She was alive.

Unaccounted

Chapter 3 of 13

Hermione returns to the Warren.

A/N: A huge thanks to my beta, nastygrl, who found time for this chapter in her busy schedule

Unaccounted

She did not turn towards the familiar streets that promised relative safety for anyone bearing the dreaded markings of the Warren dwellers. Directing her steps away from the narrow, claustrophobic streets of the place she had come to call home during the past months, Hermione ventured into the grey area of the wizarding world just between Knockturn and Diagon Alley. Here, the more and more segregated worlds of Purebloods and acceptable Halfbloods and those who were less fortunate, still interacted and intertwined.

The only apothecary serving Purebloods and Warren folk alike was appropriately named Ombre & Dusk.

Setting off a tinkling and out-of-tune alert, making a voice, rough with age, call out.

"That will be an extra 13% charge for late night service!"

Daylight robbery.

"That will be fine, sir."

The apothecary emerged from behind the shelves that were stacked with dusty ingredient jars, bags and crates. Some of the twisted-looking ingredients were only serviceable in potions, ones she would have eagerly studied not such a long time ago, but no longer. She had seen their effects first hand on the battle field.

With a determined inward shrug, Hermione threw off the suffocating memories. The now was what had to be taken care of. She could lick her wounds later, in safety.

An old, grey nightcap, reminiscent of the illustrations in her grandmother's age old children's books, sat atop the shopkeeper's narrow head; yellowish, sickly eyes studied her suspiciously. Customers bearing a heavy coin purse did not wear threadbare robes with Halfblood markings.

Hermione set her jaw.

"I need a Pneumonis Clarensis Potion, an Immunis Potion and ..."

She took a deep breath.

"... a Morning After Potion."

The gnarled hands stilled.

"That is a non-Ministry approved potion."

The population had been severely decimated. Contraception had been among the first things to be outlawed under the new regime, regardless of how desperate life had become.

She held his gaze for several seconds, willing her eyes to stay steady and calm while her heart was thumping wildly in her chest.

"How much?"

For the second time today or had it been yesterday already? she feared that the law would be called in. A rush of relief washed through her when he did nothing to ward the door or use the alerting device, with which every shop had been outfitted.

"20 galleons."

Hermione knew that the cost of the ingredients amounted to a maximum of 10 sickles.

"Agreed."

"For the last potion only. Plus the other two and the late night charge."

Careful now. She pressed her lips together and nodded before she pulled on the strings of the soft leather pouch and extracted the coin purse from where she had hidden it between her breasts in her stomach.

The old man's eyes gleamed greedily as he watched her counting out the cut-throat price he demanded for the simple brews. If only she could procure the ingredients, if only she could manage to brew in the low-quality cauldron they used for cooking their meals, if only she could make sure nobody would notice...

Leery eyes stared at the place where her breasts were pushed up by the stiff and tightly-laced material of her robes. Muggle clothing had quickly joined the fate of all forms of contraception and was now obsolete.

"Next time when you need potions," he licked his thin lips, "I might be willing to come to a different agreement to make them more affordable for you."

Was it written all over her face? Was it obvious to everyone in the streets? Would it be obvious to the people that were her family now?

"I will remember that."

... and ask Arthur to buy our potions from now on.

Stepping out of the shop and rounding the corner, she quickly uncapped the smallest vial and sniffed to check the potion before downing the viscous liquid quickly.

Better be safe.

The coin purse was considerably lighter now, but its contents would still pay for two weeks worth of food. Two weeks in which efforts could be made to save for false work papers. Work papers meant paid employment, and employment meant the possibility of gaining access to one of the few surviving wizarding villages, now highly expensive and extremely selective in whom they admitted into their midst.

It could also mean fresh air and sunshine that were not blocked out by the crammed buildings along the alleys and free use of magic.

"Her ... Jeanne!"

Molly pressed her against her bosom and held her tight. Molly's voice was a choked sob.

"I thought you, too, would not return."

Hermione let her hold her and calm down.

"I brought some things."

Molly let go of her and watched her lay out her treasures on a relatively clean length of linen.

First, she lay down the bright red bell pepper. The rare delicacy brought forth gasps from both Molly and Arthur. Molly finally felt on familiar terrain and bustled over to the other side of the room to collect her cooking knife and started slicing thin stripes. She handed a few strips to Hermione and Arthur, and kept one for herself. With the rest, she began cooking a vegetable broth in their dented cauldron. Fortunately, her cooking charms were so strong that even the magic dampening spells could not disturb them much.

When the cauldron was bubbling, Hermione put the first vial down.

"Immune system supporting potion, two drops per day in hot water."

Molly pressed her hand to her mouth, her eyes swimming with tears and gratitude. She knew that prices in shops skyrocketed as soon as one of them entered. Potions tended to be especially affected, as people were desperate for much-needed healing and had no choice but to pay any amount.

The last vial was placed on the white fabric.

"Pneumonis Clarensis potion."

Now both Molly and Arthur were on her, hugging and kissing her fiercely.

"How? ... How?"

When they saw her troubled face and her efforts to search for words, Arthur put a gentle finger on her lips.

"No. Don't tell us, if you can't. We thank you. There are no words to express our gratitude."

Hermione nodded, thankful.

"There is more."

She handed over the purse.

"This will pay for food. It will give you time for more important things."

The older couple looked at each other with unbelieving and troubled looks.

Had she stolen the money from a powerful wizard who would come looking for her?

They kept casting her wary glances even as it was her turn to support Ginny's back while she was going through the long and painful process of expelling the clogging mucus from her infected lungs.

She had not come.

Another goblet joined the fate of its twin in hitting the wall and falling down to the floor with a dissonant clanking noise.

When he had asked her to come back, she had nodded.

Draco Malfoy looked around and selected a precious crystal decanter for execution. The shattering of glass finally brought the desired calming effect to his wound up nerves.

Had he not paid her enough?

Maybe he had scared her after all, and she had decided to stay away from the trade?

No.

Once caught up in Cutbush's web, there was no escaping for the girls. The contracts were specific and merciless.

Had something happened to her?

The punters could be brutal. Had Cutbush sent her to somebody who had hurt her?

A powerful feeling of possessiveness overcame him.

She was *his* little innocent harlot.

His.

He purposefully strode to his door, flung it open and bellowed into the deserted hall.

"Goyle!"

The large Death Eater poked his head out of a door further down the corridor.

"Yes, Draco?"

"Come in here, bailiff."

Gregory Goyle complied silently. This was not his friend Draco; this was his superior, the High Reeve.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"The girl that you brought to me last week."

"Yes?"

"Where did you find her?"

Goyle scrunched up his face in puzzlement.

"We found her in a group of hookers. Was hiding a bit, or so it seemed, against the wall. Didn't look like the others. Didn't try to come onto us, either."

"WHERE?" The voice of the High Reeve was very calm.

"Batty Street," Goyle hastened to supply.

"You're dismissed."

Five minutes later saw the High Reeve of South England in full Death Eater regalia, striding out of Blackhearth in the direction of the Apparition point.

The guards of the Warren gates did not recognise their first in command as he passed through with his mask firmly in place.

Walking along the narrow streets, he did not heed the nervous glances people were casting his way. Sometimes he would stop and look closely at the small groups of girls and women standing alongside the rows of houses. Every now and then, one would dare to smile, hoping for a rich client to fulfil her quota for the night.

During the past week, he had caught his thoughts wandering back to the brown-haired girl more often than he wanted to admit or had been appropriate.

It was just her lack of experience, he told himself. Otherwise he would have simply partaken in the services offered, paid and dismissed.

If she even was that inexperienced. There was more than one way to skin a cat. She did not have to lie under a man to sell her charms.

Infuriated by his endless thoughts of her? He all but tore into the large group of women assembled at the corner of Batty Street, all of them showing their left leg up to the delicate hollow of the knee.

Forcing himself to slow down and look carefully, he went through the rows and little subgroups.

She was not there.

He did not know whether he should be happy or worried about her absence.

Was she at home? Was she ... with a client?

He did not like the thought.

Was she hurt or in trouble?

He liked that thought even less.

"You."

The girl he had addressed looked delighted and fearful all at once. The robes of this Death Eater were decidedly expensive. That made him a dangerous and rich man. He reeked of power. He was the kind of man that could afford a steady mistress. Or two.

"Any business, sir?"

She smiled a toothy smile that tried to hide that she had already lost some of her back teeth. He could barely suppress his revulsion. Would his girl look the same in a few months or years time? How long did the girls last out on the street?

"Have you seen a brown-haired girl? Curls, brown eyes, new to the trade?"

She shook her head and then proceeded to lift her skirt higher and lean forward to give him a better view of her ample cleavage.

"But whatever she does, I am willing to do as well. For a little premium if it's anything... too unusual."

His eyes were cold behind his shiny mask.

"The girl. Do you remember?"

Now she looked appropriately scared.

"There was a new girl like that here. About a week ago. She did not honour the code and just stood with us. Had the two Dea... bailiffs not taken her away right after she put herself up against the wall as if she had already earned that place... Well, she never came back anyhow."

Draco Malfoy looked at her for a little longer.

"Do you know her name, or where she lives?"

She shook her head mutely.

Without another word he pressed a few galleons into her hand, turned on his heel and hurried back to the Apparition point, witches and wizards jumping out of his way.

"Goyle!" He barked for the second time today.

"Bring me Cutbush."

With measured movements he summoned his Pensieve. There was work to do.

"How is the business going?"

Francis Cutbush contemplated the question of the High Reeve and the possible answers and their implications and consequences. So far, he had been left alone. Death Eaters frequented his girls, and he supplied the entertainment to feasts, private parties and the occasional revel. In return, the masked wizards had not interfered with his doings.

"I cannot complain, High Reeve."

Draco Malfoy kept his back to his visitor, not exactly a polite gesture that made it clear that either the High Reeve deemed the panderer inept at causing him harm or that the shady man was simply outnumbered in Blackhearth. Probably both.

"Would you like to keep it that way?"

Cutbush was a sensible businessman who valued his monopoly in the unexpectedly expanded underworld of the wizarding world.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

People in stations of power hardly ever met with the likes of the panderer. They had people for that purpose to do their bidding. If one of them was willing to meet face to face, it was usually to arrange rather extreme pleasures of the flesh. It would be a pity to lose one of his prettiest girls, but it would be even more of a pity if he would lose all of the girls. Should the High Reeve be into necrophilia or blood sports or be the reincarnation of that insane wizard the Muggles used to call The Ripper, it mattered not. Francis Cutbush would keep him satisfied.

"You have a new girl. Long brown curls, no make up. Worn robes. She started last week."

He threw a Pensieve shot of the girl at Cutbush. Coming near, let alone touching the man, was out of question.

The panderer picked up the slightly fuzzy photograph and looked closely.

What the bloody fuck!

He had no idea who that girl was.

This was a disconcerting bit of information. Was somebody trying to infringe on his business? Why did he not know about it?

No girl walked the street without either going to auction or being tried out by himself. This girl was not one of his flock.

"I want to buy her contract. All the copies. In return, I will let you carry on. For now."

Cutbush inclined his head.

"I will be honoured to give the girl into such renowned hands."

Malfoy threw a coin purse at the man, who caught it easily.

"She will have no more customers starting now. I expect her here no later than tomorrow at midday."

The panderer secured the coin purse in a secret pocket spelled against theft and bowed out. Leaving Blackhearth he calculated how many men he could rouse at short notice.

He had a girl to find and a whore to make.

Unacceptable

Chapter 4 of 13

Draco has an interesting proposition for Hermione.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything associated with Harry Potter; I do not earn money by writing this story.

A/N: A big thank you to nastygrl and Semptra for the beta-work, the input and constant encouragement.

Unacceptable.

Bloody hell.

Was this girl never alone?

The other one was not bad. Delicate bones, large eyes. Pity that they were brown and not blue or green. She should charm her hair as well. A more intense colour would make her look much less washed out.

Yes.

That mousy brown was all wrong on her. Maybe he should approach her discreetly after this business was taken care of. With a few Glamour charms...

The two girls had parted ways, and Cutbush was instantly alert. It was 11 o'clock already. At 8 this morning, he had given out even fuzzier duplicates of the girl's Pensieve shot. He had started to become worried when, forty-two minutes later, none of his men had reported back to him. At forty-six minutes, his 'assistant' had owled him the girl's whereabouts. He had spent the next two hours carefully watching the two girls, following them through narrow alleys, crowded, narrow streets full of dilapidated stalls and into dingy basement shops, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Observing his target, he wondered what attracted a man like Draco Malfoy to a girl that was pretty enough, but no great beauty. Her status as a Warren-dweller did not promise gain of wealth or influence through an alliance either. Or had she or her family angered the High Reeve?

It was none of his concern.

If he had to deliver some girl to the High Reeve in order for the Death Eaters to turn a blind eye, so be it.

Cutbush gave the signal to move in. When the girl was level with a small alley, two of his men moved in front of her to block the view, and Cutbush knew that his most trusted henchmen had hit her in the back with a *stupefy*. The passersby in the busy High Street of the Warren were either oblivious of the unconscious girl being carried away or chose to ignore it.

Wise choice.

Cutbush moved past the two men guarding the entry of the alleyway. Comparing one last time the image Malfoy had given him to the girl on the filthy ground, he folded the glossy parchment and slipped it into his robes.

Crouching down, he poured a bright yellow liquid on a rag and pressed it to her nose and mouth. Her eyes were both frightened and enraged.

"I know you are scared. It is better for all of us if you sleep a bit. When you wake up, you will feel like a whole new person."

He held the cloth until the panic in her eyes dimmed and her eyelids fluttered shut.

The orb did not give the clearest picture, but it did alert him to movement the moment the sleeping girl stirred. He had not had the heart to leave her in her soiled and torn robes, but had the house-elves dress her in a soft, pale blue nightgown. The hem reached her ankles had long sleeves and allowed only the tiniest hint of cleavage to show. He did not want to frighten her.

Draco Malfoy leaned back in his desk chair and observed the sluggish movements of the waking girl. He had already suspected that she had been drugged. No spell would last as long and have such heavy after effects. He had checked her for dark magic the instant Cutbush had delivered the lifeless girl to his office at Blackhearth.

He had been prepared for a business discussion with her, a meeting in which he would offer her an income and protection. But Cutbush had levitated the girl into his rooms, her robes torn and dirty, her hair full of sand and dead leaves.

His heart had plummeted. She had not come voluntarily. What had the panderer done to her?

With barely suppressed rage, he had listened to the ludicrous explanations of the pimp that she had not been willing to even consider leaving her family and that he was sure, at that point the revolting man had bowed, that the High Reeve had much better means to convince her than a simple panderer.

Malfoy had sent him on his way as quickly as possible and had Apparated to the Manor with the girl in his arms.

He left her in the care of his house-elves. He needed time to plan.

Now, several hours later, she had finally woken. Instantly, her hands had flown to the cheap choker necklace around her neck, relief evident when she could feel it was still in place.

Bracing her hands against walls and furniture, she made her way to the window. The ward made it impossible for her to even touch the glass. After the first sting, she stood and seemed to ponder. A few moments later, she aligned her palm with the windowpanes and concentrated. The wards shimmered blue.

The orb distorted the image at the edges like a warped mirror or lens, but it was undeniable. Wandless magic. Even though it was not a complicated spell, she was much more powerful than he had given her credit for. Good to know.

Time to send Nippy to her.

Her brain seemed to be wrapped in cotton wool. Coherent thought wasn't possible. She had some strange, unclear memories that pushed to the forefront of her mind whenever she tried to concentrate.

Her signing a contract with some greasy looking man; he had reminded her of Peter Pettigrew, even though he bore little resemblance physically. Standing in a long line of girls leaning against grimy walls. Men. Touching her, above her, sweat dripping from their red faces onto her, stale breath hitting her face in ragged puffs...

She shook her head violently. Those were not her memories. It must have been a sloppily cast memory charm.

Nevertheless, she just knew that some of those false memories would haunt her for a long time.

Getting up from the bed took considerable effort, and for a moment she allowed herself to wonder who had put the nightgown on her.

After she had found her balance, she kept one hand on her choker necklace and steadied herself with the other, using chairs, the small vanity and the honey-coloured wall panelling as leverage.

Her prison, if this was indeed one, was of the comfortable and opulent kind. The furniture matched the panelling and was clearly made for this very room. Sky blue and silver-patterned silk covered the seats of chairs, the chaise longue and framed the windows. Hermione felt reminded of a luxurious B&B she had stayed in for a night while travelling the country.

Taking into consideration the way she had been brought here and the nature of the memories that had been implanted, the probability of being held in a brothel was high.

Again, memories flooded her mind and surprised her with their ferocity. Desperately trying to rid herself of the images and the feeling of being pushed up against a cold and uneven brick wall in a dark corner of a Warren street, her skirts hiked up... Her hands were swatting and beating the air in front of her. Nobody was there. It was all in her head.

How dare they invade her like that! Hermione nearly regretted not having returned to see Malfoy. He could have been a powerful ally, someone to turn to if in need of help. But the risk had been too high. How long would it have taken him to see through the choker's glamour? How many meetings until he would have asked questions she would have been unable to answer?

Would she have been in the High Reeve's favour, would those men have had the nerve to kidnap her?

Hermione suppressed a shudder at the thought that she might not have escaped the fate of a whore when she had slipped through the fingers of the Death Eaters unrecognised. Forcing herself to focus on gathering information about her location, she crept toward the window on unsteady feet.

It seemed to take a long time to cross the few metres between the bed and the window.

The scene outside did not tell her anything. A landscaped, decidedly English garden, gradually flowing into the more and more untamed woods and hills beyond the park. South of England. Perhaps.

*Were those **white** peacocks?*

She tried to touch the glass and recoiled in shock. A stinging sensation shot up her hand and arm up to the elbow. When the pain had receded somewhat, she placed her hand near the window, careful not to touch it.

Revelio Incantatem, she thought with all the concentration she could muster.

The window glowed light blue.

Wards keyed to blood. There was no way she could break through something as old and powerful as that. Just for the sake of being thorough, she would try the door next, although she harboured no illusions as to its state of lock.

The low pop of Apparition left her reaching for her wand in her sleeve, her body remembering the motion although there was no sheath and no wand to give protection.

A small house-elf looked at her, ears rotating back and forth as if straining to pick up far away sounds.

"I is Nippy." The small creature bowed deeply. "I has drawn Miss a bath."

Hermione bent down slightly.

"Nice to meet you, Nippy. I am ... Jeanne. Nippy, where am I?"

The elf pulled on her ears.

"I is not to tell miss. Master wills be telling miss tonight at dinner Nippy is to make miss comfortable and help miss get ready. There is robes in the wardrobe."

The tiny creature bounced excitedly on the balls of its feet.

Hermione had not actually expected the elf to reveal anything. Anxious to see what kind of dinner arrangements were planned in this strange captivity, she opened the wardrobe doors.

A single robe of swirling, jewel-tone greens hung in the wardrobe. It was beautiful, and to her great relief, it was neither low cut, nor too short or see-through.

Misjudging her silence, the elf stepped closer.

"Miss is not liking robes? There is plenties to choose from!"

Nippy snapped her fingers, and the wardrobe turned into a swirling rainbow of robes after robes swishing by.

Hermione stepped back in horror. Cold fear spreading through her body at the sight.

"Nippy. How many are there?"

She stepped back further, bringing distance between herself and the spelled wardrobe.

"One hundred and thirty seven," the elf proclaimed proudly.

A hand went to her throat, making sure her choker was secure and in place.

"How long am I supposed to stay here?"

The stupid elf has scared her!

He could see her tremble when the elf helped her into the bathroom and shut the door behind them.

Cut off from visual contact, he turned away from the orb that had its twin sitting on a shelf in the guest room and started his own preparations for what he felt could be one of the more important evenings of his life.

One polished, creamy marble step at a time, Hermione descended from the first floor landing into the entrance hall.

The building was truly grand with countless doors leading away from spacious corridors and exquisite paintings adorning the spaces in between. It fitted the image of an ancient seat of a noble family much more than the top notch brothel she had been dreading to discover. Goblin tapestries covered the walls to the left and right of the staircase, recounting fables of magical folk and creatures of long ago in intricate images. A unicorn raised its head from nuzzling the cheek of a young girl in flowing white robes to look at her.

One step at a time, Hermione told herself she was strong enough for whatever might await her behind the tall, double doors half way opened to let warm, flickering light spill into the hall.

One smooth, slippery step at a time, Hermione tried to imagine what she would do if, against all odds after being housed rather comfortably, her worst nightmare came true in the form of Voldemort, standing in front of that invitingly warm fire she heard crackling.

Nippy paused in front of the doors and gestured for Hermione to enter. Head held high, Hermione summoned her courage and pushed the doors fully open.

A man was standing in front of the large, open fire. With his back turned and the mantle higher than the tall man's head, the light engulfed him completely and let him appear a dark outline against the flames.

At the sound of the opening door, he turned and stepped closer, white blond hair and a familiar face coming into view.

In a strange way, it was only a slight surprise when the man waiting for her in the dining room turned out to be Malfoy. On some level, it was even a bit of relief. She should have known better than to think that avoiding their agreed meeting would be sufficient to escape him. In school he had always obtained what he wanted. He was a Malfoy after all.

His dark blue dress robes looked impeccable, and with a bit of surprised amusement, she registered that Draco Malfoy could wear something that was not green, black or silver in colour.

This scenario was not what she had expected. Prepared for flight or fight, she decided to wait and see. Let him come forward, let him set the stage. She had escaped once before by playing the role he had expected her to play; she could do it again. Without a word, she took in her surroundings and waited for him to make the first move.

The room had obviously been built to represent the Malfoy family's prosperity and impress guests, who were so fortunate as to attend a function or meal at the manor. Vaulted ceilings, hundreds of years old, spanned the room, intensifying every sound and making it echo ever so slightly.

"Thank you for joining me," he smiled, made an inviting gesture and came to meet her half way. She only inclined her head and watched in silence as he gently took her hand and kissed the back. "Would you tell me your name?"

"I... Jeanne. My name is Jeanne."

He smiled.

"Would you like some Champagne, Jeanne?"

Never letting go of her hand as if he was afraid that she might bolt at any moment, he led her towards the fireplace where a dark green bottle and Champagne flutes were waiting. Pouring two glasses, he handed her one and took one for himself.

"Please."

He drank and noticed that she held the glass, looking wearily at it. Extracting it from her fingers, he took a sip and handed it back to her.

"It is not drugged." Without her ever noticing what he was doing, he had somehow walked her over to the ridiculously long, polished dining table and pulled out a chair for her. The entire situation felt increasingly surreal. Draco Malfoy was treating her like a woman he was wooing.

She had nearly balked when Nippy had started removing body hair, scared by the implications of what the evening might bring.

"I don't know what Cutbush did to you to bring you to me, but please believe me; I did not intend this to happen. All I wanted was to meet and talk to you. I apologise. Please let me invite you to supper. It is the least I can do."

After a moment's hesitation, she slid between the chair and the table and let him push the chair in while she sat down. Food appeared as soon as he was seated.

Hermione forced herself to eat a few spoonfuls of the rich fragrant soup, but set down her spoon very soon.

"High Reeve?"

"Yes?" He did not like her using his title but was unsure what he should offer her by means of address. Mr. Malfoy or, the gods forbid, Lord Malfoy was too distant, but he did not think that she would be comfortable with calling him Draco.

"Why am I here?"

Her voice was so small, yet her chin was held high, and she looked directly into his eyes, meeting his gaze unflinchingly, something very few people dared to do nowadays. Draco Malfoy also set down his spoon. He had hoped to have more time to make her feel comfortable in his presence.

"I would like to offer you a business proposition."

"Business? What kind of business would you be interested in dealing with me?"

As if to gain time and collect his thoughts, he dabbed the corners of his mouth with his damask napkin and laid it on the table, next to his plate.

"These are difficult times. I am in a position of power, which makes me a person of interest for many different people. People who are lusting after wealth or power or both. They... tire me." He covered her hand with his. Such a small, cold hand. "This house has been empty for years now, and I lack a companion when I am here." He curled his fingers around her hand and squeezed it lightly. "You would not have to go back to the streets."

The streets?

Oh, yes. The streets.

"I am willing to pay you twice as much as you would earn working for Cutbush in return for companionship and ... physical pleasure. I just have one additional request."

"And what would that be?" Her voice sounded breathless upon the enormity of his proposition.

"I want to kiss your mouth."

She could only blink. That was his additional request? She had expected some deeply disturbing practice she had never even heard of. But kissing?

"I realise that you would usually never allow this, but it would mean a great deal to me."

As their soup grew cold, untouched, it vanished and was replaced by a beautiful selection of pheasant and vegetables. Things she had not been able to afford for months that felt like years.

"High Reeve?" He looked at her expectantly. "Do I truly have a choice?"

His heart dropped. *No*, he wanted to scream. *Stay here; don't go back to that dangerous place. Just see how easy it was for Cutbush to hurt you.*

"Of course, you do."

"If I said to you now that I wish to return to my family, would you let me?"

He struggled to rein in his rioting emotions. Was she rejecting him?

"Then I would escort you and make sure you would reach home safely."*Please don't say it!*"But I request that you be my guest for tonight and sleep over my proposition. Tell me your decision at breakfast tomorrow." He saw the fear and trepidation in her eyes. "I assure you that nothing untoward will happen." *Not as long as we do not have an agreement.*

That night, when Nippy helped her out of the delicate robes and into a comfortable nightgown, Hermione could not help but wonder.

Draco Malfoy was a lonely man.

And he had just offered her the well-paid, vacant position of his girlfriend.

Unbethink

Chapter 5 of 13

Hermione has to make a decision.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything associated with Harry Potter; I do not earn money by writing this story.

A/N: A huge thank you to nastygrl and dynonugget for all the beta work, encouragement, feedback and kind words.

Unbethink

The gentle light from the narrow opening of the door when he slipped into the guest room and illuminated her dark, long hair, a stark contrast to the light coloured bedding and making the sheets appear white in the dusk of the room. For long minutes he stood listening to her soft, even breaths.

When he was sure that she was sleeping soundly, he silently moved towards the bed and crouched down beside her. He brushed a stray curl from her face, and as he did so, her relaxed features seemed painfully familiar, like a forgotten dream that would not come back to mind, no matter how hard he tried to remember.

Somehow, within a few, short days, this girl had become the very centre of his thoughts. After that first fateful meeting, when the doors had closed behind her and he knew she was being escorted through the halls of Blackhearth and back to the Warren, he had wanted to fling the door open and bring her back right then. Bring her back and never let her go, because he inexplicably knew that, were she to walk away never to return, he would lose so much more than just a bit of pleasant company or a witch to warm his bed.

She had been humanity amidst the circus of delusions that life had become.

She was too thin. Not in the way of a petite woman, but thin in a malnourished, weakened way.

It would be so easy to push down the duvet and slide the smooth fabric of her nightgown up her thighs. She would not put up much resistance. She lacked the strength to.

"They don't give you enough to eat out there, do they?" He brushed the back of his fingers over her cheek. Inside his head, an insistent voice reminded him that with 'they', he really meant 'we'. "Stay with me, please. I promise I will take care of you."

Instead of touching the shoulder that had been revealed by the downy cover, he touched a finger feather-like to the back of her left hand. It was tiny, with long, delicate fingers that now lay open and relaxed against the pillow. It was so close to her face that he could feel her warm breath caressing his hand steadily. Her right hand was tucked underneath the eiderdown pillow, cradling it closer to her.

A sudden feeling of nostalgia and homesickness filled him at the sight of the girl sleeping in his home. So trusting.

Contrary to common belief, his parents had never been cruel to him. Certainly, in public, there had been the secure and steadfast walls of power, wealth and superiority of the Malfoy family which he had learned to erect around him like a fortress at an early age. But when the acquaintances and business contacts left, when the doors of the manor were closed to the outside world and it was only the three of them, he had seen Lucius and Narcissa as no one else ever had.

There had been quiet evenings in front of the fire, reading and lively discussions in the dining room that somehow had seemed far less imposing, far less vast and less... hollow than now.

When he was maybe five or six years old, every day his mother would sit and read to him and then he, in turn, would pick a book and read to her. She would sit on the wide sofa in the family drawing room, her weight resting on her hand behind him so she could look over his shoulder. His feet had hardly peeked over the edge of the upholstered seat, so small had he been, his legs so short. There would always be a difficult word and he would hesitate and look up into the smiling face of his mother, who would then encourage him:

"Go on, Draco, sound it out."

And he would try to put the letters of the infinite seeming word together:

"La, ee, na, da, ..." until finally, finally he could read the name of his favourite dragon.

"Lindwurm!" he had shouted in triumph, and she had dropped a kiss onto his shoulder and exclaimed how well he had done.

On warm summer afternoons, his father would tirelessly fly next to him, hovering two or three feet over the ground, one hand on the broom, the other outstretched behind his son's back, not touching him, but never straying too far, should he ever slip. They had flown wobbly, excited circles around and around the lawn adjacent to his mother's rose garden until Lucius had been satisfied with Draco's ability to control his miniature broom. He had stepped off his Nimbus Silver and to the side, watching his son zoom around the space confidently, waving every time Draco would fly past.

He had found his father dead after one of the minor battles, named such because nothing of historical significance had occurred during these altercations between Light and Dark. His eyes had been large and surprised, as if he had not thought anything could ever happen to him. Draco had tried to close the blue, unseeing eyes, but the lids had slipped open again and again until, in grieving desperation, he had dug out two sickles from his robe pockets and gently laid them on top of the closed lids.

"For the passage", he had whispered and left to tell his mother the news, that he was the new head of the Malfoy family, barely 20 years old.

A year later, a barely lucid Dark Lord bestowed the honour of a suicide mission on Draco after decimating the ranks of experienced Death Eaters in a fit of volatile temper without any apparent reason. His mother had stepped in front of him, a snarl on her face, protecting her child. Lord Voldemort had barely looked her way, but wordlessly waved his wand in a lazy fashion in her direction, and she had slowly and noiselessly sunk to the ground. Draco remembered how he had stood and known that he was not allowed to fall to his knees or even look down at her.

"Are you loyal to your Lord, young Malfoy?"

The Malfoy mask that he had inherited from his parents firmly in place, he gathered his robes with an elegant, practised gesture, stepped over his dead mother's body and knelt at the Dark Lord's feet. Kissing the hem of his robes, he had sealed his fate, choosing life over death.

"Undoubtedly, my Lord."

He had chosen life back then, but with that choice, he had also lost it to the darkness.

Draco knew that the girl in the blue guest room could not give him back his family. He knew that, by law, anything beyond an affair with a half-blood would be severely punished. There would never be a future with this girl. Not even for the High Reeve.

But maybe, maybe, he could buy himself an illusion of it.

Without touching her further, he quietly straightened and left the room, making sure the door shut with an almost inaudible click.

Hermione's eyes shot open, and she allowed the carefully suppressed tremble that his presence had caused to run through her body. With great care she relaxed her hand around the small tweezers she had found in the bathroom earlier. Too small and ordinary, neither Draco Malfoy nor the house elves had thought of removing them from the room. Small enough to fit easily between the curled fingers of her fist, she had tucked her weapon under the pillow, ready to either release it inconspicuously or draw it over an attacker's face.

It had been in his power to do with her as he saw fit. Warren-dwellers frequently disappeared, the law made not even a semblance of investigating should someone report a missing person to them. And then, since he **was** the law, who was there to question him? The situation was so volatile. She had to leave while she still could.

Nippy brought her breakfast in the morning and insisted on dressing her in one of the day robes that were not much different from her own. Only the fabric felt infinitely smooth to her skin, and there was a soft, pleasant rustle of silk when she moved. With a sigh of regret, she unlaced the bodice and let the silk fall around her feet in a light, a voluminous cloud in tones of burnished gold. Her own robes had been laundered and mended where needed, the simple cloth finally free of stains and layers of grime that her weak *Scourgify* could not remove.

The red ribbons around the sleeves and the hem of the skirt sat brightly against the darker cloth of the robe. Hermione drew a finger over the markings. It was good to be reminded where one belonged.

Malfoy had not shown himself all morning, and she started to become nervous. He had promised her to let her go... back. She could not bring herself to think of the Warren as home. Attracting his attention probably meant attracting the attention of other Death Eaters. Discovery was imminent; she was sure of it.

With determined steps, Hermione crossed the room for the door. The doorknob turned without effort and admitted her into the hall. She heard a faint sound of voices and followed it through the staircases and corridors. The voices grew clearer, and when she thought that she must be quite near to the persons speaking, a door opened a few meters ahead of her. Hermione pressed her body into an alcove and held her breath.

"I will get you the lists and testimonies from that hamlet near Canterbury by the day after tomorrow, Draco." There was a sound of movement, probably the two men shaking hands.

"See you then, Theo."

The door closed, and footsteps came closer to where she was hiding. A tall man wearing black Death Eater robes with several scrolls of parchment tucked under his left arm came into view. Just as he passed her, he turned his head and looked directly at her. He never slowed or missed a step, but in the moment that he was looking at her, he assessed her body head to toe, and an ugly smile lingered over his features. Then he was gone.

It was in that instant that Hermione made her decision. An insane and dangerous decision, but for her it was the least, and possibly only, thing she could do. With a deep breath she approached the door she suspected Draco Malfoy to be behind, and knocked.

"Enter."

The door swung open under her hands, and he looked up from his papers that were strewn over the large, polished desk. A look of apprehension ghosted over his face, and his anxious eyes flickered over her threadbare robe before he smiled a reassuring smile.

"Did you have a good night? Have you come to a decision?"

Hermione nodded.

"Yes, I have." She met his eyes boldly and tried a small smile. "I would like to discuss the terms of this arrangement."

Hours later Hermione stared at Jeanne's reflection in the mirror. The periwinkle robes Nippy had put her in were just as beautiful, elegant and expensive as yesterday's. Hermione tucked at the straps, worried that the colour might remind him of another dress from a long time ago, when she had caught him staring at her open mouthed as she walked into the Great Hall on the arm of Viktor Krum. Back then she had tossed her head back and smiled in triumph. All night she had felt his eyes on her.

Over and over she silently thought of the agreement they had reached. She knew she was stalling, but could not help it.

Draco and she had spent more than two hours discussing what was expected of her.

There would be the possibility of sending letters and money to an OP box an owl post box that would be accessible to the holder of a password that was hers to set up and pass on to whomever she would like to benefit from it, without ever giving revealing a name or address to anyone.

She would be free to roam the Manor at her leisure, but some of the doors would be closed to her when he was not in the house.

She had to admit defeat when it came to her wand. She would not have it while she was with him. Inside the Manor she was safe, and a wand could mean that she might accidentally trigger some dark magic that lay within the building. Draco and the house elves would provide for her needs.

When she went out, she would be accompanied by either Draco or a bailiff assigned by him, so she did not need her wand for protection, he reasoned.

There was no stipulated end to the contract, but either party could end the arrangement without further notice. The contract would end by definition the day Draco Malfoy would marry. Marry. Not court or affianced. The possibility of a new negotiation and contract to follow this one was stated without any shame. A given.

He obviously expected whichever pureblood witch would become the next Lady Malfoy to overlook the fact that her fiancé lived in close quarters with his mistress. Hermione thought about whether she would end the contract should he start courting somebody seriously or should he announce his betrothal. Or would she be the other woman? She could not find an answer.

He would pay her a hefty amount of Galleons on a weekly basis. Knowing that she wanted to send money home, weekly payments would make life considerably easier for her family. She had had no idea how much money to ask for, so she was relieved to see the amount already written on parchment, the number much higher than she would have ever dared to demand. Her heart had leapt at the thought of a softer mattress for Arthur and Molly, who had given their thin, straw-filled pad to Ginny to double up her own, adequate nourishment and maybe even some knitting wool. Simple things, yet... She had to blink rapidly to prevent her eyes that felt so full all of a sudden from overflowing.

In return, she would keep him company when he was in the house. She would take her meals with him, converse and spend her time with him in whichever way he deemed fit. She would share his bed when he summoned her, and he would be allowed to kiss her mouth. He had been very insistent about that, and she had not seen why she should deny him this request. She would be doing much more than just letting him kiss her. A business arrangement. It was nothing more.

Nevertheless, her hand shook when she touched the soft swan feather quill to the parchment and signed with a simple *Jeanne*.

Trembling as she was, it could have been read as *Jean* as well.

An imposing eagle owl had taken a short note to the Weasleys, assuring them of her safety and informing them that she had found work. Hermione cringed at the word while writing the missive she also explained how they could access the OP Box and that she would be sending some money in a few days. The letter was indeed painfully short and to the point, but she did not dare to add a personal word or hint at what was happening to her.

Later in the day, her hair was shiny and arranged on top of her head in an artful coiffure. Nippy had renewed yesterday's denuding charms on her legs and had gone on to remove all of her body hair. The little elf had ignored Hermione's embarrassed protests and had dutifully manicured and pedicured, combed and arranged her hair and applied makeup.

The person in the mirror looked less familiar than ever. She wished she could remove the makeup, let her hair fall down her back and wipe off the perfume that Nippy had sprayed on her.

She finally uncorked the small vial in her hand and tipped back the deep red, illegal potion Nippy had discreetly left on her dressing table.

It was time to keep up her side of the bargain.

Unactable

Chapter 6 of 13

Hermione fulfils her side of the bargain.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything associated with Harry Potter; I do not earn money by writing this story.

A/N: Again, a huge thank you to nastygrl and dynonugget for the beta, the feedback, the support and for showing me where those commas go.

Unactable

A smaller table had been set up on the balcony adjacent to his bedroom with candles floating above it, the park beyond it beautiful in the moonlight.

Candles also cast their warm light on the earthen and bronze tones of fabrics and polished wood of the Master suite. Instead of aloof and impersonal, the rooms felt homely and grounded.

He had been waiting for her. The soft grey trousers and light pullover looked comfortable and less severe than any robe she had ever seen him in. It reminded her of how young he actually was, how young they both were, despite his position of power and responsibility and the life they had been living on two different sides of a war. She felt very much like the barely-out-of-school girl that she was supposed to be.

With warm, firm hands around hers, he pulled her out of the door to the balcony.

"Would you like to eat first?"

Hermione flinched under his warm hands on her shoulder blades. 'First' implied that something would follow after dinner, and she was not quite sure as to whether she would be able to keep her roiling stomach in check.

Head on, Gryffindor, she thought. *Where is your legendary courage?*

She shook her head no, not trusting her voice.

Taking her face into his hands he leaned closer. When his breath was hot on her lips and cheeks, he hesitated.

"I have imagined this moment since I first saw you. I want to taste you."

She closed her eyes, telling herself that it would be alright, that she would be able to handle the situation and come out alive and possibly even unscathed.

With his being so adamant about kissing her lips, she felt trepidation as to what to expect. Would he plunder her mouth mercilessly? She had kissed Ron before, and it had always been urgent, rushed and uncomfortable. Privacy was scarce in the Burrow as well as at Grimmauld Place. Order members, Molly Weasley, or, if they dared to leave the security of these houses, Death Eaters, were wont to surprise them in their dark corners where they sought refuge from the insanity that had become the wizarding world.

Now she wished that they had not cared about protocol or appearances or too many people in crowded dorm-like rooms where they huddled together night after night. She wished that they would have seized the moment for themselves. She wished that they had not waited for a later that had never come.

Draco's lips were soft and gentle on hers, placing tiny kisses on her mouth, her nose, her eyes before pressing against her closed lips more insistently.

Emotions rose up in her chest, constricting her throat and threatening to choke her. All the suppressed pain and grief seemed to wash over and overwhelm her.

She had known that Ron and she were not suited for the long term. But they could have given each other comfort in those times of distress, those times that now appeared tame in comparison to how they had hardly ever left the battle fields later on.

She could have given *him* comfort instead of this Death Eater that was now holding her face, able to snap her neck at any moment.

And then Ron had been gone.

Forever.

With a sob that she hoped sounded like a gasp, she opened her mouth and invited Draco in. Her hands tangled in his hair. She pushed the sorrow away to a hidden place inside of her, pushed away the memories of chess games at night and quiet companionship in the Gryffindor common room, pushed away the memories of Ron's familiar warm smell and the feel of his soft Weasley pullover under her hands, away, away until she could only feel those soft, warm lips on her.

Her hands developed a life of their own, tugging so hard on his long hair that it must have hurt him.

The vigour with which she returned his kiss surprised him, and he nearly lost himself in the kiss before he remembered that he had planned on savouring this experience.

The flowy robe fell easily at his touch, forgotten on the floor. Exploring fingertips roamed over her arms, her back, her hips until firm hands pressed into the small of her back.

He slowly walked her backwards until she suddenly felt the cool, crisp sheets of Egyptian cotton at her legs, and it was only natural to scoot up onto the wide bed.

Soon his clothes had joined her robes on the floor, and he slid in between the sheets beside her.

He kissed her again, lips and tongue distracting her from his hands trailing over her clavicle, her breasts, where his fingertips idly circled a nipple that hardened at the surprise of the attention. Four fingertips barely touching her slid down her sides, making her jerk when her nerve endings reacted to him. He smiled against her mouth and hooked one foot around her leg, pulling it towards him while his hand pushed the other leg raised at the knee to fall to the side.

Draco moved down, and her toes curled in nervous anticipation of what might come next.

Instead of spreading her open, he gathered her flesh firmly between his fingers, sending a delicious stab of sweetness through her body. He brought his head to her sensitive skin and sucked it into his mouth with a vehemence that bordered on sharp. Every now and then, his tongue would slide between her lips, and her hips bucked into him.

"Easy."

She could feel the curling of his lips against her thigh and then he moved back up, still holding her pulsing flesh tightly.

"Tell me." Kisses along her shoulder. "What do you think about when you touch yourself?"

Hermione was very still. After a few moments he detected the change in her and looked up, a question in his eyes.

"I don't."

"You don't think?" It might be possible, he supposed.

"Touch myself."

At Hogwarts, when the other girls in the dorm had been giggling about their first attempts at snogging behind the tapestry of Aethelraed the armless, Hermione had been researching and studying. Helping Harry, helping Ron, helping the Order had filled her days since her first year. More than once she had cried of exhaustion over yet another tome working late at night in the library.

Later, there had been more research, fighting, hunting Horcruxes, cross referencing, yet again research and then only fighting.

Order Headquarters had to serve as shelter, sick bay, training ground and prison. Accommodation was sparse, but she had seen how some of the girls had stopped to care about the presence of people on the mattresses on their left and right. Raised knees, spread wide, had tented the thin woollen blankets, rhythmic movement beneath.

Couples had savoured the last nights together, every one of them a gift. None of them spared a thought about the other inhabitants of the communal dormitory, silencing charms shielding them from the conversations, wheezing breaths and coughs that would remind them of the harsh reality.

Of course Hermione had seen how people around her were shedding their inhibitions. Of course she had longed for Ron to be near. But there were his parents in the very same room. His brothers.

They had always promised each other to make it out of the war and then, then it would be special between them. Meaningful.

Draco placed a soft kiss on her lips, bringing her back to the present.

"That is clearly something that we will have to change."

He gently traced her open sex with his index finger, outlining it at a leisurely pace, without any hurry.

All the while his eyes never left her face. She stared up at him rather uncomfortably, enduring his slow exploration that now concentrated on the sensitive skin around the small bundle of nerves that was now slowly swelling.

He appeared to be very confident and determined in his ministrations, and admittedly, she did not have much experience of her own, her experimentations far in the past, but from what she had read, this did not seem to be the most promising...

Oh gods.

He smirked as he watched her eyes grow large and her mouth form a surprised 'o'.

She felt so heavy between her legs. All she could do was to splay her legs wider and bite her lip as she stared mesmerised into his gray eyes.

His finger moved unbelievably slowly.

Back. Forth.

Back. Forth.

Over to the other side.

Back. Forth.

Taking his time. Never giving her the friction she craved.

So full, so heavy.

Back and forth.

Her eyes pleaded with him; she wanted to squirm but was afraid to miss any of the contact with his hand.

Back and forth. So slowly.

The pressure decreased even further, becoming feather light.

Hermione whimpered in protest, and he let his fingertip slide one last time alongside her clit, never touching it, and she went rigid, a strong pulse coursing through her body, every wave long and deep with ecstasy.

His expression was unreadable when her vision came into focus again. Her breathing was laboured, and her lips and cheeks tinged a dark rose colour.

He leaned down and brushed his lips gently against hers.

"And this is what you were missing out on."

Hermione could feel heat rushing into her cheeks; even her ears felt hot.

Draco swallowed hard. Seeing her climax at his hand had been a powerful sight, and now she simply looked irresistible in her embarrassment.

More blood rushed to his cock, reminding him of all the things he had planned for her.

Stroking her hair away from her forehead, he pressed his mouth to her cheekbone and spoke against her skin.

"I have to have you."

He locked his hands beneath her arms and with a bit of help from her, pushing herself up with her legs, he leaned her against several pillows propped up in front of the headboard.

As he had done the first time, he knelt between her spread legs, her thighs resting on his. He did not waste any time and entered her with a sharp thrust. Rising up on his knees, he tilted her hips up and leaned onto her thighs to hold her open and gain leverage.

She did not know what to do with her hands and ended up gripping the edge of the head of the bed behind her while he was moving her against it, sliding over a spot inside her that stoked the glimmer of arousal left over from her earlier climax. Her muscles in her abdomen were tight with want.

He fought to keep his rhythm steady, penetrating her deeply. She looked so beautiful beneath him, surprised with every new sensation, her reactions unguarded and true. It was nearly unbearable how tight she felt around him, nearly rigid with arousal.

When he saw her closing her eyes and biting her lip in concentration, focussing on the tension inside her, he brought his hand to their joined bodies. This time he touched her clit directly and firmly, stroking her with his thumb much faster than his thrusts that repeatedly touched her womb. Her eyes flew open, and she clamped down around him hard. He kept pushing into her hot sex, kept stroking her until she pleaded with him to stop, too sensitive to endure the contact anymore.

The knowledge that he had driven her to her limits made him tumble over the edge, spilling his seed; he pressed his face into the crook of her neck, feeling her rapidly fluttering pulse against him.

They rested, leaning on each other at the head of the bed for a long time before he slid out and lay down next to her. Reaching out, he pulled her down as well, a flick with his wand covering both of them with the heavy, bronze coloured duvet.

"Should I go now?"

Draco did not open his eyes.

Women did not come to the manor, to this room.

Women did not stay the night.

But this woman now belonged to his household.

He draped her over his chest, her head on his shoulder.

"No. Stay."

She simply remained silent. Usually, women would now try to flatter him about his size or prowess in the hope to increase the value of her morning gift.

As if anyone but a wife was worth a morning gift.

Jeanne had rested against him, her slow, content and sated breaths a greater boost to his ego than any false compliment.

There was a nagging thought that would not leave him once it had wormed itself inside his mind.

"Were there many?"

Hermione was assaulted by unbidden images of the Memory Charm and stiffened while she thought she could feel rancid breath, saturated with alcohol, washing over her face, the smell of unwashed bodies so strong that it was nearly impossible not to believe the images. Those men had not touched her. Yet, it was hard to accept, even for her.

"No." Slowly her lurching stomach calmed. "I did not have to go back. You were very generous."

He drew her even closer, tightening his arms around her. She could barely hear the words he whispered into her hair.

"I am glad. I am so glad."

It made her feel strangely warm and content that he had asked this question now and not before the contract had been signed.

Drifting off to sleep, she nearly missed his next question.

"Why did you have that vegetable with you that night?"

Drowsy with sleep, the warmth worked like Veritaserum on Hermione.

"I stole it."

Draco moved his head a little to the side in order to be able to look down at her face; her eyes were closed, lips already slightly parted and features relaxed.

"Why would you do that?"

She snuggled deeper into him.

"I was so hungry," she mumbled nearly unintelligibly.

Now it was his turn to stiffen. His arms tightly around her, he listened to her breaths, eyes wide in the darkness; he stared out the French doors, not even seeing the candles still floating above the small table and forgotten dishes on delicate Chinese porcelain.

He could not give her the traditional jewels, even though he cared little about them. These were reserved for the future Lady Malfoy, and the old magic infused in them would reject anyone who did not already wear the family ring.

He would think of something.

He would give her her morning gift.

Unsettled

Chapter 7 of 13

The calm before the storm.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything associated with Harry Potter; I do not make any money by writing this story.

A/N: Thank you so much, nastygrl and dynonugget, for the beta work, the suggestions, comments and encouragement!

Unsettled

She woke to rumpled satin sheets and bright sunlight streaming through the French doors onto the off-golden bed covers. As if she had been embracing the person who had lain next to her, her arm was extended to the other side of the bed, relaxed on the soft surface.

In broad daylight, every crease, every stain in the once pristine sheets was painfully visible. A reminder of what she had done, how she had let him take over.

With a groan she placed her arm to cover her eyes.

She should have been more careful.

How could he make her forget so easily?

Resolved to concentrate and keep her wits about her, Hermione gathered the voluminous duvet around her as best she could, looking a bit like a golden version of the Queen of the Night from Mozart's *Magic Flute* with her stage-covering, gigantic dress. Clutching the edge of the cover around her upper body, she shuffled towards the middle of the room, undecided on how to proceed.

He had let her sleep in his bed.

The robes she had worn last evening and that had been discarded somewhere on the floor were nowhere in sight. The elves were very efficient.

Which left her in his room.

Alone.

Naked.

Hermione inhaled deeply and slowly released her breath as she looked around. Although the room looked cosy and inviting, it did not have much furniture. The room was sparsely populated with a single armchair in front of the window, a bed and two bedside cabinets on either side of the headboard.

In a house as large as the manor, rooms did not need to serve more than one purpose. This was the Master's bedroom, and it was only used as such.

Dragging a trail of silken duvet behind her, Hermione made her way to the first of two mahogany doors. It opened at her touch, revealing a spacious bathroom with gleaming twin sinks and creamy marble walls and floors.

Hermione closed the door and padded towards the other. Maybe she could borrow one of Draco's shirts so she would not have to sweep the hallway with his coverlet.

The sting the wardrobe door delivered to her fingertips as soon as she touched the surface explained why he had left her alone in his personal suite.

Sucking on her tormented finger, Hermione contemplated looking for a large towel or a bathrobe she could use in the bathroom when with a considerate, muffled crack of elf apparition, Nippy appeared.

"Oh! Miss is awakes!"

Nippy disappeared with a much louder sound only to reappear almost instantly, holding a flat box covered in black velvet and a small, folded piece of vellum.

It proclaimed 'Jeanne' in a bold script.

A sinking feeling taking over her chest, Hermione reached for the message, hoping he had not decided that last night had not been satisfactory and would dismiss her before her time.

Jeanne, it read,

I had hoped to spend the day or at the very least the morning with you; alas, I have been called away on business.

Please do accept this token of my esteem.

I think it would go beautifully with your necklace and maybe, one day, you will wear the full set for me?

Draco

Draco.

The name echoed in her mind and left an achy, guilty, yet bittersweet feeling behind.

Not D. M., not Draco Malfoy or any of his titles. Hermione felt her cheeks heat as she recalled that she had called out his given name last night and his delighted reaction to it.

Nippy extended the box to her, and she flipped open the ornate silver clasps. The inside of the box was padded and lined with ivory silk, supporting a pair of emerald drop earrings together with the matching slim bracelet and pendant necklace. It was rather simple in design and would not look out of place even when worn during the day.

The colour matched her choker almost exactly.

As she looked at the precious jewellery, the guilt settled deep in her heart.

"I don't think so, Theo."

This was exasperating.

Draco had been woken by searing pain in his left arm long before dawn. The Dark Lord had sent him on an erratic series of errands and raids, one more ridiculous than the other.

Hours after his early audience with his Master, he had finally found the time to write a short message to the girl in his bed. It had taken all of his willpower to move her arm away from its position on his chest, her hand resting above his heart.

How he would have preferred slipping back under the cover and shut out the world instead of sitting in his office with his friends, listening to Theodore Nott whinge about the High Reeve's lack of compassion towards his friend's quandary.

"Why not, Draco? Re-instating *Jus Primae Noctis* would certainly be an incentive for the liege lords to build more wizarding dwellings on their lands."

The High Reeve narrowed his eyes.

"Just the way you have done, Theo? I am not ignorant. I know very well that you have founded three new wizarding villages in the direct vicinity of Nott Manor. As have one or two of your ... friends." Draco had kept a close eye on the newly founded villages. Theo was not the charitable kind. "The only thing *Jus Primae Noctis* would accomplish is that paedophiles would run rampant. I will not re-instate that archaic law just so you and your friends can legally rape any girl living on your premises as soon as she starts bleeding."

"I am **not** a paedophile! The girls in my bed are of age. At least that's what they say! And if the families I take in are grateful, what am I to do?" Nott replied in a petulant

voice.

"Just be careful, Theo. I am watching you. I better not hear about girls being harmed in your liege."

"So," Theodore Nott asked casually, directing the attention away from him, one leg draped over the armrest of his thickly upholstered chair. "Who is the mystery woman that keeps you away from us?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Nott," Draco spat.

"Oh, come on, Draco! I saw her the other day, when I came to collect the maps of the inhabitable areas. I first thought she was a servant, dressed as she was. But since you have been avoiding us for anything other than business of late..."

Theodore Nott let the end of the sentence dangle openly in the quiet room. All eyes were on Draco, who was not inclined to elaborate on the subject.

Vincent swallowed what he had been chewing. "So, you actually found your Warren-girl?"

Eyebrows shot up and the Death Eaters sat up straighter to regard Draco curiously.

"A Warren girl?" Theo laughed. "I thought you had a more exclusive taste. You could have any girl, from any good family."

"My private life is not open to discussion." When Blaise Zabini made to open his mouth, Draco looked at him pointedly and said with conviction, "NOT open for discussion."

"Will you at least still allow us into your home?"

Eyes narrowed, Draco looked sharply at his friend.

Blaise held up his hands in surrender.

"It is your turn to host next month."

Draco rubbed his hand over his face.

"Has another six months passed already? Very well, then. Next month. Now fuck off everyone, I want to go home."

He closed his eyes, pressing thumb and fingers against his brows.

He never saw the smirk exchanged by Blaise and Theo.

Days and weeks trickled away in a slow, viscous stream, like thick, sweet syrup.

The manor was grand, with high ceilings, wide halls and spacious suites. Reception rooms, both public and private were ample.

Hermione felt suffocated.

The library was extensive and she thoroughly enjoyed her time there. Lost in ancient tomes of magic and history, she felt transported back to Hogwarts when it was still standing and she had felt safe in its thick walls.

Although she was able to leave the building, the wards were drawn tightly around the neatly tended gardens. The silence surrounding the manor was haunting. No bird, no rustling of fallen leaves, no distant sound of church bells or a Muggle road distracted from the fact that she was alone. In some of the more desperate and insane moments, she asked herself how far she would make it until she would reach the invisible barrier of the snow globe that had become her residence. Maybe she was enclosed in a tiny structure on Draco's desk, for him to observe at his leisure.

Without the regular distractions of Ron and Harry dragging her outside, going on and on about Quidditch, or Crookshanks demanding to be petted or brushed or entertained with the newest magical mouse toy for Kneazles, she suddenly felt the weight of being truly alone. How often had she wished for solitude, to be free of interruptions so she could lose herself in her books? Now that she had all the time she could have ever wanted, it enveloped her with heavy, swanlike wings and would not let her escape.

The House Elves chased her out of the kitchen whenever she sought their company, and even Nippy remained deeply suspicious when she tried to instigate a conversation.

The portraits looked at her, her robes and the thick history volume pressed to her chest. Determined, she approached one of the older Malfoy family members, by the look of him from the Elizabethan era, hoping for a historical discussion, lecture or whatever he would be willing to share with her. The noble wizard loftily enquired about her station in the household, and when Hermione stuttered that she was a friend of Draco's, that she kept him company, the wizard turned around wordlessly and left to another frame, leaving her to stare at his empty chair, a mink-lined cloak draped over its high back.

The words 'mistress', 'bondmaid', 'serf', 'thrall' spread like wildfire from frame to frame, floor to floor, wing to wing. They followed her along the corridors, hissed and whispered should she dare to enter one of the reception rooms.

Soon, she kept to her rooms or sat in the library in silence. When the stillness of the space became too much she would imagine herself in better days, escaping to a time that was long lost.

Draco came home sometimes once a week, sometimes every night. There were nights when he silently slipped into her bed and buried his face in her hair. Although he was always careful to *Scourgify* himself, she could still smell the smoke lingering in his hair and clinging to his skin.

On other days he would wordlessly shove her up against the wall, gathering her skirts. Knickers were pushed aside, his belt opened and she was jerked against silken wall coverings or polished wainscoting or ancient gobelin tapestries by his urgent thrusts.

Surely, his moans and grunts were just that.

Surely, the wetness she could feel on the skin of her throat and in the crook of her neck was sweat.

Surely.

She did not hear him entering the library. Quill in hand, she stared into nothingness. Just as he wanted to make his presence known, she suddenly spoke up.

"I can't go out for Quidditch with you."

Draco stopped in his tracks. Had she known he was here all along? Why had she not looked at him?

"It's a whole new world now. Sometimes I am glad you never got to see it. It's ... different. If I'd tell you where I am and why, you'd think I'd gone barmy."

There was a faint splat as a tear hit the parchment before her on the table.

"Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing..."

Slowly, careful not to make a noise, he backed out of the library, the tiny sound of tears on parchment more and more frequent.

A few hours later he found her curled up on a window seat, her face as close to the glass as the wards would allow her. He extended a pale hand.

"Come."

She startled out of her musing by his uncharacteristically early presence. He pulled her down the stairs and towards the large double doors of the entry hall. At a wave of his hand, the thick wings opened and she could feel the warmth of a late autumn sun on her face and gentle breezes rustle her robes.

The falcon gingerly stepped onto the thick leather glove, the sharp beak framed by a decorated mask. Draco stroked the feathered back with light touches.

"The noblest sport."

A wide smile appeared on her face. Her unguarded joy made his heart leap. She sat perched on a sturdy fence, the wind whipping her hair and skirts around her. In moments like this he thought he could remember her from before, as if she had been part of his life for much longer than a few short weeks. He raised his eyebrows in question.

"You just reminded me so very much of my father."

He smiled to encourage her to go on. She had never before confided any personal details in him.

"He loved to play cricket. He would dress up in his immaculate white uniform and tap his cricket bat against the ground, his stance absolutely perfect and then he would look at me and say:

'A most noble sport. A gentleman's sport.'"

"Your father liked to play Muggle sports?"

Her smile faded and the carefree moment slipped away like water through his fingers, no matter how much he tried to hold it. She worried her lip.

"He didn't ... I didn't mean to ... "

Again she was afraid of him, afraid of the High Reeve. How he hated the alarm in her voice, thinking he would turn against her and her loved ones. Determined he stepped closer, still carrying the heavy bird on his angled arm.

"I did not mean to trap you with my question." He smiled one of his rare smiles. "I used to sneak out of the manor down to the Muggle village when I was little. Every weekend I would watch the men and boys dress up in white and play a game for hours and hours. Their easy companionship made me feel how isolated many Pureblood families live." With a single finger, he stroked the masked head of the falcon. "Sometimes I would fantasize that they would find me in my hiding place in the shrubs and invite me to join them. It all stopped when my father found out. That was a year before I started Hogwarts."

With this admission he had given her a powerful tool for blackmail, should she choose to use it. He had trusted her with an innocent anecdote of his childhood that could cost him his career. Or much more.

Hermione smiled.

"Are you going to let him fly?"

Draco's face lit up and she thought she could see the little boy who had been hiding in the bushes at the edge of the cricket pitch, staring longingly at the fun that he was not allowed to have. He stepped back and removed the mask from the falcon's head. Bending at the knee, he gathered momentum and flung the bird into the air. The bird of prey soared into the sky with a high pitched cry. Draco watched her follow the bird's slow circle above them with unadulterated joy.

"He will never hunt for me; will never bring the prey to me, as a dog would. He just follows his instincts. His entire being demands of him to hunt. I will never truly tame him. I can only treat him well and hope that he will stay with me."

He stepped closer, whispering to her.

"I hope you know that you are not my pet. I have been negligent. The wards have been modified. You are free to explore the grounds at your leisure. Just please inform Nippy when you go outside, the grounds are extensive."

He kissed her temple and Hermione felt a sharp twinge of anguish at his kindness. She had noticed that she had been looking forward to the evenings and occasional days in Draco's presence. Trying to tamp it down, she firmly told herself that she was experiencing a variation of Stockholm Syndrome, as could be expected with Draco as her only human contact.

Nevertheless she leaned into him as they both watched the falcon soar down towards the ground.

The manor was completely still as she wandered through the corridors toward the library.

Draco had not come home for two days and the small collection of books in her room was no longer enough to distract her from her inability to sleep in the dark and silent mansion.

Without any light Hermione moved through the halls past countless doors until she was near the tall doors of the two storey library.

All of a sudden he was there. There, right in front of her. The sharp crack of apparition echoed in the empty hall.

A *Sweeper!* was all she could think. In her mind she was transported back to the Warren. Sweepers were known to appear without warning or apparent reason. They would come to the most overcrowded dwellings and sweep them clean of the ailing and frightened inhabitants. Clean for the next wave of refugees to take up residence.

Hermione screamed.

She could not stop.

The Death Eater recoiled and took a step backwards. She did not have her wand, she was all alone. Her throat hurt from the screams that she could not end.

The silvery mask was yanked away from the Death Eater's face and the hood pushed back. Blond hair spilled over his forehead. She did not see it, did not see the grey eyes or the familiar face. All she could feel was the horror of the situation that she thought herself in. Her legs would not turn to run; her eyes were open but did not register what was in front of her. Her hands were locked into fists and pressed to her chest all the while her voice was beginning to leave her under the strain it was put in.

Struck with shock and panic Draco stood, not knowing what to do. He had seen wizards slap witches to snap them out of hysterics, had done so himself on occasion. He did not want to slap her. Lost for a better thing to do, he grasped her firmly around the shoulders and drew her tightly to him, ignoring her desperate fighting. The words that he spoke into her hair were sense- and meaningless but he did not stop to reassure her that she was alright, that he would not hurt her, that it was only him, as if this would be a likely consolation to anyone.

He had not been fortunate enough to go home after the meeting with his friends, but had been called away. He had not thought to remove his mask.

He kept holding her to him in an unwavering embrace until she finally slumped against him and her cries turned to quiet sobs.

What a world we have built.

Unappreciated

Chapter 8 of 13

Draco and Hermione have to face the outside world.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything associated with Harry Potter; I do not earn money by writing this story.

A/N: A huge Thank you to dynonugget, who beta-ed this chapter during Christmas preparations!! *hugs*

Unappreciated

Dedicated to my late grandmother, who was the girl in the soup queue during WWI.

"Why don't you take off your choker?"

Hermione froze with her hand in the air, half-way to the antique silver-backed hair brush lying on top of her polished vanity.

Her heart pounded in her chest, pumping her blood with such force that she was sure it made her entire body tremble.

No.

Please.

With painstaking slowness, Hermione turned around to face him. Instead of looming over her, wand drawn, Draco was reclining on her ... on the chaise longue in the room she was currently occupying. One ankle was resting on the knee of the other leg, and his chin was held up by his fist, the elbow planted firmly on the curved, high side end of the piece of furniture.

He looked relaxed and at home, although a little frown stole into his expression upon noting her reaction.

Jeanne looked utterly scared as she turned to face him. He could have sworn that she had even stopped breathing, and he was just about to close the distance to her and ask whether she was alright when she released a shuddering breath and covered her choker with her hand.

"It's very important to me. My mother gave it to me; I promised to never take it off."

Draco cocked his head and stood.

"Let me see."

He was so close that she could feel his warm breath on her clavicle.

Don't look too closely. Don't touch it, please don't ... Oh no.

His finger slid over the cheap velvet band. There was a tingle of magic on his fingertip. Probably a conservation charm; the fabric would not have looked as pristine as it did with her never parting from it.

A tremor passed through her body, and he smirked at her delightful reaction to his touch.

Did she bathe with the choker around her neck? There was something undeniably erotic about her naked form with the dark green collar its only adornment.

He tilted her chin slightly to the side and kissed the spot between jaw bone and ear.

"I suddenly feel much less inclined to go out." He tucked a curl behind her ear. "Yet I must. And I know that you have been looking forward to going to Diagon Alley."

Hermione smiled and nodded. Although the Manor was far from being small and cramped and she could indeed go outside, she had started feeling the effects of cabin fever.

When Draco had proposed that she accompany him to Diagon Alley, she had jumped at the opportunity. She was eager to feel that she was not the only person left in this world, eager to smell the mix of scents that was the shopping district, eager to hear the noise of idle chatter, of hawkers praising their goods, eager to see the colours of the shop windows, the passer-bys, eager to just ... see.

Draco picked up the Emerald earrings from her vanity and carefully slid the hooks through her pierced ear lobes. Then he fastened the bracelet around her wrist and

looked at the necklace with a pensive expression.

Sliding the pendant from the chain, he quickly pointed his wand at her neck, and to her shock he incanted a short spell directly on her choker.

Hermione thought she would keel over and sprawl out on the soft carpet.

Had he damaged it? Was it still working?

But when she looked in panic into the mirror above her vanity, it was still Jeanne looking back at her. The beautiful Emerald pendant attached to the necklace she never took off.

With a trembling finger she outlined the small diamonds surrounding the green stone in the middle. She would be wearing his gift at all times. And now for all to see.

Draco steadied her with an arm around her waist when the impact of Side-Along Apparition made her head swim. She shook out the fluted sleeves of her robe in annoyance over her clumsiness. She wanted to use magic again. Soon. She hated feeling incapable.

Draco draped her arm over his and started walking, effectively forcing her to keep up with him. Passer-bys immediately started staring. The red ribbon around the hems of the sleeves and the skirt were new, bright red velvet. A far cry from the washed out cotton ones that were sewn to her own robes and to the ones of most half-bloods on the streets.

Nippy had tried to persuade her to wear crimson robes that would have made the ribbons practically disappear from sight without violating the law. She had outright refused, thinking that wearing such a bold colour from head to toe would have drawn too much attention.

Now she realised that the stark contrast between her chocolate brown robes that were obviously of a very high quality and the expensive scarlet trimming was just as much of an eye catcher, if not more so.

Draco had briskly walked to the small pawnbroker's office and disappeared with the owner through a passage that was concealed by well worn curtains.

Hermione was left with a bailiff in the public area of the business. The patrons were all wizards and witches wearing marked robes. Many of them clutched small parcels or objects wrapped in pieces of cloth, cradling them protectively against their bodies.

They gave her a wide berth. There was distrust in their eyes, in their hunched shoulders and the way they huddled in the corner furthest away from her.

Her fine robes and jewellery made her an outcast in this world, as the red ribbon made her an outcast in Draco's.

"How about Fortescue's?" Or Madam Malkin's? Flourish and Blotts?"

Hermione looked around and finally cast her eyes down.

"As you wish," she said, but her voice lacked enthusiasm.

Draco frowned and she felt guilty for being such bad company. He had taken her to several shops she would have taken hours to explore before... before.

Now she did not have eyes for the pretty silver earrings with semi-precious stones, the self-inking quills that changed the colour of the ink at command or the newly released books, although there were very few nowadays. The remaining authors and publishers were trying to keep up appearances, but censorship cut deep.

"Come on," he smiled. "One scoop at Fortescue's. I don't even know your favourite ice cream flavour."

"Passion fruit sherbet," she mumbled and suddenly felt the need to blush when she saw Draco's amused half smile.

They walked along Diagon Alley slowly and Hermione could not help but notice that the situation had worsened in the weeks that she had spent in Wiltshire. The rift between half-bloods and pure-bloods, between Warren and everywhere else had become even more palpable.

A long line of children had formed at the far end of Diagon Alley. One shopkeeper stood in front of his business selling fine fabrics. His arms crossed in front of his chest, face frozen in a discontented scowl, he looked down on the line of ragged little wizards and witches, most of them marked red.

The queue ended in front of a long table with three steaming cauldrons on top of the charred wooden surface. Two witches stood behind each cauldron, one handing a piece of bread to the child whose turn it was, the other ladling a portion of clear soup with herbs and thin soup noodles into the extended metal bowl that the child would hold out to her.

The children would then go off to find a quiet corner to safely eat the precious contents of their bowls. Most of them chose a place that had a wall to lean on. Whether it was for comfort or to make sure that they could not be attacked from behind and robbed of their meal, Hermione could not tell.

The witches tending to the queue were pure-bloods; the robes underneath their stained aprons were witness to that. Some wealthy witches seemed to finally have seen the need to be charitable and set up a soup kitchen in an empty shop in the less-desirable part of Diagon Alley, the one close to the Warren gates.

Hermione let her gaze rest on the small forms holding on to the cheap metal bowls that were passed out to them in the queue. She slowed her step and felt the urgent need to reach out to them.

What was she doing here, in fine robes, clean and not in the least bit hungry? Was it truly justifiable that she was so far from the misery everybody else was being subjected to?

A piercing scream made Draco whip around, draw his wand and shove her behind him.

A portly wizard in ill-fitting block warden robes strode out of a small side street; his olive robes a bit askew as if he had just been in a scuffle, dragging a girl of about twelve behind him.

The girl clawed at his hand holding her wrist in an iron grip; she tried to dig her heels into the ground but the man was too strong for her.

The man was sweating and his face was covered in angry red blotches from the exertion. His eyes lit up when he recognised the High Reeve only a few metres away from him at the other side of the street. He hauled the small witch with brown pig tails the last steps and flung her to the ground at Draco's feet.

"High Reeve," he panted. "This little perpetrator stole food! She dared to claim a second portion from the most honourable and good hearted charity witches! I saw her cleaning her bowl with her apron and stand in the queue a second time!"

The block warden made sure to speak loud enough for his voice to carry far, drawing more and more spectators to witness his moment of triumph. He had brought a criminal before the High Reeve. Maybe now his application to join the Death Eaters would be looked upon more favourably.

"No! Please! I am sorry! I promise I won't do it again!" the little witch wailed, desperately looking around for a way to escape her fate.

With despairing courage she lifted her tear stained face to Draco and Hermione.

"He... he said he would not tell anyone, if I... if I... I could not do it! I am sorry, so sorry!" The crowd around them had started muttering and Hermione was shocked to realise that the comments were not in favour of the girl, calling her loose and a thief. Little hands wrung a dirty apron with bony fingers. "Please! I was so hungry!"

The words stabbed Draco in the chest and left a wound, bleeding guilt and despair into him, like infected blood.

Hermione could no longer control her urge to stand in between Draco and the girl and lay a trembling hand on his shoulder.

"Sir, please, she is just a little..."

"Not now, Jeanne," Draco cut her off.

"But, sir..."

"Enough." The word was not loud, but nevertheless made her step back, scolded.

Draco crouched down in front of the girl, bringing his head to about the same level as hers, as she was still on her knees.

"What is your name?"

"Louise," she replied with big round eyes.

"Louise, do you live in the Warren?" he eyed the washed-out ribbons along the hem of her frayed skirt.

She nodded.

"Do you know the way home?"

She nodded again, reluctantly as if she could not decide whether it would be too dangerous to reveal her family's home to him.

"Do you promise not to do this again?"

The girl nodded, this time with vigorous movements, her pig tails dancing on her shoulders.

"Next time, just go to the charity witches and ask whether something is left over."

Draco straightened and with a curt movement of his hand, he waved to the bailiff, who had accompanied them on their outing and had waited with Hermione while Draco was conducting business at the pawnbroker's office.

"Make sure she gets home safely."

The bailiff looked surprised but knew better than to voice it. He took the girl by the shoulder and directed her through the slowly dispersing assemblage.

People started walking away in all directions, resuming what they had been doing before being drawn to the spectacle.

Draco eyed the baffled block warden with cold eyes.

"That would be all, block warden."

He did not know the name of the man, nor did he care. The man flushed in embarrassment and spluttered, trying to cover his disgraceful exit.

A young couple walked past. For a moment, the woman's eyes met Hermione's and locked. She kept walking but her eyes stayed on Hermione as if straining to figure out what had caught her interest. Then she grabbed the arm of the man beside her and pointed to Hermione, whispering urgent words into his ear.

She let her eyes take in the expensive robes, the jewellery, and the markings only to jump back to Hermione's throat.

The cold blue eyes flicked back and forth between Draco and Hermione, who stood inexplicably frozen during the woman's perusal of her person.

Her head was thrown back and then she spit at her, the saliva flying the short distance between them and landing in Hermione's face, getting into her eye and running down her cheek to fall on her robes.

"Whore! You are no longer one of us!"

Draco was on her in an instant, wand drawn, pinning her down with one hand at her throat.

There was a dark gray velvet choker around the woman's neck.

Hermione fell to her knees beside the two, holding onto Draco's arm that was holding his wand pointed at the woman's temple, but unable to move the weapon away from the defiant face.

"Draco, please, no!" She turned to the woman on the ground and looked her in the eyes, trying to convey a message. "They don't *understand*."

The snow globe she was living in showed cracks and threatened to disintegrate.

Unanticipated

Chapter 9 of 13

Draco's friends know a weakness when they see it.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything associated with Harry Potter; I do not earn money by writing this story.

A/N: A huge thanks to nastygrl and dynonugget for the beta work, feedback and hand-holding. And to Semptra, who I think can do magic with words!

Unanticipated

Deep yellow roses were extended to her to compare the length of the stem to the height of the heavy crystal vase Hermione was holding. She had to crouch down so she was level with Nippy.

The house-elf had started consulting her on decisions regarding the household that had to be made on a day-to-day basis. Playing Lady Malfoy felt strange and held the danger of becoming used to it, but it gave Hermione something to do during the many days she spent alone at the Manor.

She and Nippy had gone to the greenhouses for the roses, as Draco had mentioned that he would have visitors coming to the Manor soon. She found the entrance hall to be so cold and uninviting that she had wanted to place a bouquet of flowers on a small table beneath a tall mirror in a gilded frame.

At the sudden sound of Apparition, Hermione straightened and turned around. A Death Eater was standing in the lobby.

"Draco?"

Five more sharp cracks echoed in the hall, and for a few seconds Hermione looked at the assembled Death Eaters without comprehension, and the Death Eaters looked at her in return.

She let the vase in her hands drop to the floor, where it shattered into a myriad of pieces, the tiny shards of glass glistening like a diamond-encrusted carpet.

"Nippy, get Master!" she screamed at the house-elf and turned.

Yanking up her robes, she ran a few steps, and when she had passed the immediate vicinity of the broken vase, she shook off her low-heeled slippers and took off at a fast run in bare feet. Only moments later she could hear them behind her, just around the corner. She ran past several doors that were closed to her when Draco was not in the Manor. Finally, she reached the library, and the door gave way under the pressure of her hands, and she stumbled through.

On the verge of hysteria, she looked for a place to hide. Finding none, she curled up into a tight ball behind a settee, hugging her knees to her chest.

When she heard the quiet noise of the door opening, she closed her eyes, willing them away, telling herself like a child that they would not see her when she could not see them.

Footsteps halted at first, then crossed the vast room, shortly stopping at the desk, before nearing the small group of comfortable sofas and armchairs.

"What do we have here?"

She lifted her tear-stained face to her death.

Something had gone wrong. They had found her out, had found the Weasleys out, had found the entire resistance out.

Had he sent them? Had he sent them so he never had to see her in his house again?

The Death Eater in front of her took hold of her arm roughly and pulled her into a standing position. A gloved hand neared her neckline. To touch? To rip?

"You are early, *friend*."

The tip of Draco Malfoy's wand was suddenly pressed deeply into Theodore Nott's side of the throat.

"Would you be so kind as to unhand my woman, Nott?"

And then Theo screamed.

It had taken Hermione the better part of an hour to convince Draco to let her attend supper with his closest friends. Citing the argument that she did not want to appear frightened or even intimidated by them, she had insisted. Only when she had assured him that they feared him too much to do anything inimical had he conceded.

Hermione sat mutely through soup and fish and meat courses, keeping her face a careful, disinterested blank slate and her back straight as a rod. Inside, she was giddy with nerves due to the little details her former classmates would drop carelessly in her presence. A woman, little more than a servant in their eyes, did not pose a threat to them.

The resistance had obviously been dealing heavy blows to the regime, but she had been deprived of any significant news for so long that it was hard to follow the events. She tried to repeat the important information over and over again in her mind so it would be easier to write down later in the privacy of her bedroom. If she had a wand, she could have extracted the memory and send it, but that would be fatal if the memory were to fall into the wrong hands. No, she would have to rely on Arthur Weasley's ability to read between the lines of her letters.

By the time the pudding arrived, one of the guests directed the conversation to her.

"You are very quiet. I apologize. We should have realized that our topic of conversation must not be very appealing to a woman."

Marcus Flint had not changed much since his last year in Hogwarts.

"I did not realise that my opinion was of interest."

"The opinion of a beautiful woman is always of interest." Flint pressed his hand against his chest and bowed slightly.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. She had the distinct feeling she was being mocked, but could not fault his manners.

"So, you are a Knockturn Alley whore?"

Her heart clenched, but she looked at Theodore Nott levelly for long moments during which he started shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"The whores of Knockturn Alley don't accept Warren girls. Knockturn Alley whores are all purebloods."

For several seconds, one could have heard a pin drop.

Then Hermione smiled sweetly and popped another spoonful of chocolate-sponge pudding into her mouth.

Blaise Zabini leaned back and laughed.

"Touché, Nott. That's what you get for terrifying a smart woman."

Although the atmosphere had been much lighter after the little incident, Hermione was thankful to be able to make her excuses when the men wanted to retire to the billiard parlour.

The parlour had been the Malfoy men's sanctuary for centuries, ever since a Lady Malfoy from France had brought the first billiard table as part of her dowry in the late fourteen hundreds. The very same table still stood at the far end of the parlour, which had been expanded repeatedly to accommodate several more tables.

Draco had been excited when, for the first time, his father had allowed him to join him and his friends after dinner in the large room. Its panelled walls, deep green curtains and thick carpets gave the parlour a comfortable feel. There were several taxidermised animals adorning the walls, one of them an ancient crumple-horned snorkack. It used to amuse him to hear about the Lovegood's quest to find the extinct creature; now it gave him a strange feeling to think that maybe the Lovegoods were extinct themselves.

"Where did you find her? She is so different from the women we usually meet."

Blaise Zabini took a deep draught from his tumbler.

"Watch it, Blaise. You just said it. *I* found her."

"She's pretty. But she's no Daphne Greengrass," Marcus Flint supplied, pressing a glass of amber liquid into Draco's hand.

Draco scoffed and took a drink of his Firewhisky.

"Daphne Greengrass would not be able to find her own head without the help of her house-elf."

"Undermining pureblood values, Draco?"

"I don't think being stupid is a pureblood value, Nott."

Goyle, Nott, Crabbe and Flint were soon busy playing a wizarding version of snooker, the soft clicking of balls hitting against each other drifting through the room. Blaise Zabini sat down on the sofa next to Draco.

"I am quite taken with your little companion."

Draco arched an eyebrow. He felt a little disoriented, much more so than he should have after only some wine at supper and a single Firewhisky afterward.

"It's been a long time since we have shared a witch," Blaise said, hoping Draco was drunk enough not to kill him for the suggestion.

And not too drunk to find the idea appealing.

Already in the light and strangely colourless place between waking and slumber, she felt arms go around her shoulders, lifting her up, and then a hard body slipping behind her, cradling her.

"Draco," she mumbled softly, unwilling to open her eyes and leave the serene place that would lead her to rest and peace.

The covers were drawn away, but she did not feel cold. A warming charm must have been cast. Hands on her ankles, caressing her legs, her calves, pushing lightly, drawing her knees apart. Hands on her breasts...

Hermione's eyes shot open.

Horried she looked at the dark head of Blaise Zabini, kneeling at the foot of her bed, his hands holding her thighs apart.

In panic, she tried to close her legs and started to struggle, but he was too strong, kept her open easily.

"Ssh. Don't fight. Be still."

It was Draco's voice in her ear, Firewhisky on his breath ghosting over her cheek, and she could not believe how betrayed she felt.

By him.

By her own body.

Her traitorous body that was arching up when Zabini's tongue took the first swipe. He knew exactly how to combine the firm strokes of the tip of his tongue with hard sucking on her most sensitive spot.

And hot breath in her ear.

"Let him."

Draco's mouth sucked gently on her neck.

"Let him."

His hands never left her breasts, teasing the tips into hard points.

"Look at him."

She opened her eyes and looked at the man feasting between her legs. His eyes closed, breathing her scent deeply.

"Look at what you do to him. He could not think about anything else since he first laid eyes on you. You have enchanted him."

The faint smell of Firewhisky wafted over her face when he spoke.

He pinched her nipples, and the sweet pain shot directly to where Zabini could multiply it tenfold.

"He is a master at this."

More hot breath.

"Give yourself over."

A lick along her throat.

"Submit."

At this, the sweet tension coiled into a tight spring, and with the next movement of his tongue, she bucked into his face and the spring let go.

They moved quickly. One moment she felt Zabini's mouth on her, prolonging her ecstasy, the next moment she felt a hard cock pushing into her, through the continuing spasms of her muscles.

Draco was on top of her, inside of her, moving, moving. She would not have thought it possible, but she could already feel the next orgasm building.

"Time to reciprocate," he whispered before he moved his upper body away from her, leaving her a bit bereft of physical contact.

The next moment, Blaise Zabini had straddled her upper body, his knees to the left and right of her torso.

He eased her wild hair away from her forehead and let his fingers caress her lips.

"Open."

She could not see what was going on beyond Zabini's strong thighs and abdomen. Draco knew exactly which angle to use for his slow, agonizing thrusts, his fingers all the while stroking at her, stroking...

She no longer cared.

Closing her eyes, she let him in, moved her tongue over the sensitive underside of the head and further down. He was gentle. Never demanding entrance too far; although her head was pinned under his body, and he had every possibility of forcing his way beyond what was comfortable for her.

When she felt Draco's movements become more erratic, his stroking more desperate, she took a deep breath through her nose and willed her body to focus and stay calm. With Zabini's next push, she grabbed his hips from behind and pulled him in deep.

He gave a surprised shout when the tightness of her throat encased him. No longer in control over his actions, he pressed deeper and started rocking against her throat with tiny movements until he shuddered and held still, and she could feel the pulsing of his seed spilling inside her.

Draco gave a last hard thrust, and the combined climax of the two men that she had brought on took her with them over the edge.

Later, when she felt the warm body of Blaise Zabini against her back and Draco's hands encasing her own in front of her, she felt drowsy and exhausted. Slipping into sleep at last, she heard Draco's voice softly.

"You are incredible."

Waking to an empty bed would have been a luxury just a few months ago. Now it felt too big, cold and lonely.

He had shared her.

He had lent her to one of his friends.

He had reminded her of what she really was.

"Girl!"

Zabini's voice stopped her in her tracks. Reluctantly, she made her way through the plush salon out to the cold marble glory of the entrance hall.

The black-robed wizards stood in a loose group, shiny silver masks dangling from their hands.

Hermione inwardly cringed at the sight of their knowing smirks. Keeping her face devoid of emotion, she stood and waited.

His mouth curling at the corners, Blaise stepped forward and traced the outline of her face with the tip of his finger. Hermione allowed him to do as he pleased but did not encourage him in any way. He lifted her hand. Kissing the palm, he placed a pair of beautiful diamond earrings on it.

"For services exceptionally well rendered."

The other men sniggered and leered. Draco stood in a stiff stance, glaring at his friends. Hermione looked at the sparkling pieces of jewellery in her hand. They were probably worth more money than she had ever seen at one time in her entire life. They would pay for papers or food for the family and potions for Ginny and ...

Hermione closed her fingers over the earrings. Turning to Draco, she took his hand and let the trinkets drop into it. Without another word she started for the stairs.

Zabini sounded genuinely surprised and slightly offended, shouting after her.

"Pet! Don't you like them?"

She turned around and looked straight into his eyes.

"Don't you know? The pimp always has to get his share first."

She had already turned her back on them and started to climb the stairs when he called out to her again.

"It wasn't meant this way!"

She faced them once more, smiling sadly.

"Blaise Zabini, you don't even know my name."

With that she disappeared into a hall, head held high.

"Are you going to let that slide?" Theodore broke the silence.

Draco looked in the direction in which she had vanished.

"It's time for you to leave." His heart was heavy.

He spent the least amount of time possible seeing his friends off, directed his steps to his rooms but did not find her. He tried the library next. Where was she?

She was not in the kitchen, chatting with Nippy, who had finally warmed to the concept of holding an actual conversation with a witch. He could not find her in her favourite spot for reading, overlooking the gardens. As he traced her presence throughout the house, visiting the places she was to be found most often, he realized that she truly had become part of his life. His home felt like home because of her, and now that he could not find her, the empty feeling inside of him quickly mixed with panic.

Finally he pushed open the doors to the rooms he had given her for her own use. The relief he felt upon seeing her staring out of the window was replaced by dread.

She was wearing her worn burgundy robes, expertly mended and laundered by his house-elves; they had not been disposed of, but put away for later use.

Although she must have heard him enter, she did not turn around or acknowledge his presence in any way. She was hugging herself as if she were cold.

"I wish to leave."

Unatonable

Chapter 10 of 13

The Resistance takes action with far-reaching consequences for both Draco and Hermione.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything associated with Harry Potter; I do not earn money by writing this story.

A/N: A huge thanks to nastygrl and dynonugget for the beta work, feedback and hand-holding. And to the ever patient Sempra!

Unatonable

"Please!" In an instant he was next to her at the window. "I am sorry!"

The declaration was made with such despair and conviction that she nearly caved, there and then.

"Don't do this, Draco. I need to leave. You promised."

He hung his head. His instincts told him to raise the wards and keep her here, but deep down he knew that this would only drive her away permanently and turn her into his prisoner.

And he could already feel the magic of the contract at work.

"Will you not reconsider? I will do anything!"

Her heart clenched at his desolate voice. Not trusting her own traitorous voice, she shook her head no. He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers.

"You know that you mean so much more to me than just a body that I pay to be willing?"

She pressed her lips together and looked away. With a sigh Draco took in the rest of the room. The few items that had made the room look lived-in, that had made it Jeanne's room, were gone, probably stowed away in the small bundle resting on the bed on top of the silvery shimmering throw. His present, the emerald bracelet and earrings, lay abandoned on the bedside table. He scooped the bracelet up and fastened it around her wrist before placing the earrings in her soft hand.

"These are yours; please keep them. Will you not take any of your robes?"

Again she shook her head.

"Where I am going, I have no use for them."

She was rejecting him and everything that reminded her of him. A feeling of utter defeat took him over.

"I will Floo with you to Blackhearth and take you to the Warren gates."

During the entire journey, first through the manor to his study, then from Blackhearth to the Warren, not a word was spoken. Hermione remained silent because she was afraid she would give in and beg him to take her back. Draco, because he wanted to say so much, but could not find the words.

He drew her close and held her tight for several moments before he Apparated them to the Warren gates. His embrace grew even tighter, and he was now not above begging her, speaking into her hair.

"Don't leave me. Come back with me. I am so sorry. Please, please forgive me."

He did not care that people waiting to pass through the gates, the guards and shoppers on their way to Diagon Alley, were staring at the spectacle that the High Reeve and his mistress were creating.

Very gently she pried his hands and arms from her form and stepped back, silent tears streaming down her face. She shook her head when he reached for her to wipe her tears from her cheeks and stepped away even further, into the parting crowd, through the Warren gates.

Away from him.

Out of his life.

He had lost her.

Hermione could feel his eyes on her; her heart was breaking. When he had told her that she was more to him than a paid body to take refuge in, she had nearly given in. He also had become much more to her than a source of income and information, so much more than someone who paid her to be willing.

She had seen Draco Malfoy as everyone else had seen him. But in the bundle that was pressed to her chest, a piece of parchment lay hidden, burning a hole into the scarf she had wrapped around it, resting next to the small book with wizarding poems that Draco had gifted her and the soft leather pouch with her last payment.

Draco had insisted on paying her much more than the agreed sum. He had closed her hands around the pouch and looked into her eyes. Without voicing it, he had told her that she had given him much more than she had been obligated to give.

The parchment in her bundle contained a map of England, hastily drawn after retiring from the dining room, marking every planned raid and every weakness they had been so foolish to mention in her presence.

Just as she had done months before after the night that had changed her life in so many ways, she knocked on the door of the room that she had occupied what felt like an eternity ago.

Arthur Weasley carefully opened the door and stood frozen at her sight.

"I have to meet the others."

The quill rested upside down on the stack of parchment, the pinfeather broken from pressure, ink bleeding over scrolls and books, but Draco did not see it.

Skirmishes flared up all over the country in places that had been peaceful only hours before. Men had to be repositioned and withdrawn from their assigned posts, increasing already vulnerable spots.

There were not enough Death Eaters to control the entire country.

Most of the hastily engaged local block wardens were simply incompetent, eager to please and cover their deficiencies by denouncing anyone and everyone for looking the wrong way.

The country was slipping, and Voldemort was too far gone in his delusions of grandeur to notice or care.

She had left.

People were dying in the streets. Riots and turmoil seemed to unleash primal, egoistic instincts in the people who were living in the ever crowded villages and wizarding districts of the bigger towns.

Like animals in a coming thunderstorm, the population could smell the end, quivering in fearful anticipation, ready to flee or strike in whichever direction necessary.

She had left him.

Witches and wizards still turned away in fear, changed to the other side of the street, when a Death Eater crossed their path. Underneath it all hid a silent obstreperousness, simmering.

Underneath their cloaks, hidden from sight, they balled their fists, screaming words of hatred in their minds that they did not dare voice even in the faintest of whispers.

Left him.

She was out there, somewhere. Crossing the street to evade his kind. Sending hateful glances out of the corner of her eyes.

In this world. All alone.

Insanity.

Hermione huddled forgotten in the corner of the safe house, observing the group of agitated members of the resistance. She listened to their argument, their reasoning, and wondered if she had known one of them in her other life. The glamour bands around their wrists or necks made them unrecognisable to her.

Squinting, she tried to see through the magic, to make out familiar features. Had any of her friends survived? Did she know the pretty blonde, who was pushing wizarding chess figures back and forth on the now enlarged map Hermione had brought to them?

The plan was insane.

People would die.

Now that her efforts finally bore fruit, she remained mute.

Hermione tried to push the constricting ball of remorse away that had formed in her chest and was expanding the longer the core of the resistance discussed their future actions.

She should be planning with them, should be participating and fine tuning the strategy. She closed her eyes and leaned back into the crumbling lime plastered bays of the rotting, timber-framed walls.

They had accepted her reluctantly, had accepted her information but remained wary when she refused to elaborate or convey any details as to how she had come by her information.

The woman who had seen her in Diagon Alley had recognised and nearly strangled her on the spot with white-hot magic flying out of her wand. Arthur had been able to convince them to let her speak, but most of the resistance members regarded her warily.

It was made clear that she was to remain in the safe house until her information had been verified and had not led anyone into a trap.

She longed to go home.

And she was not thinking of the semi-detached house of her parents or her dorm at Hogwarts or the dilapidated room in the Warren.

Later they would say a Diagon Alley witch had been shoved by a Warren-dweller. Some claimed it had been a pureblood witch shopping in Knockturn Alley.

Hermione heard the cries, the crashes. It was too early!

They had barely released her, finally, after weeks of confinement to the safe house.

She was not in position. She was not even inside, and rapidly, the shops and doors along the streets closed with resounding thuds.

Anybody still outside had to fend for themselves.

Panicked witches and wizards were washed down the narrow High Street of the Warren in a wave of a shouting and pushing mob.

Glass shattered; people were screaming in fear of being pushed to the ground and trampled by the stampede. She turned to bring as much distance between her and the sheer force of that crashing surge. Hawker's stalls crumpled and unfortunate beings that had fallen were swallowed; they had no chance to escape the crowd that spilled into the main street. From there, they even pushed into the small alleyways branching out left and right.

A foot stepped on the hem of her robe, bringing her to a sudden halt and jerking her backwards.

Another, closer to her, pulling her down using her robe, forcing her to her knees.

Another, against her back, pushing her over and to the pebbled surface of the street.

Feet all around her, crushing her hand, connecting with her face, pain shooting through her cheekbone.

And then being lifted out of the pile of tumbling, pushing bodies. She was pressed against a hard chest, felt arms around her and the sickening turn of Side-Along-Apparition.

Hermione held on for dear life, hoping against hope that they were still in one piece when they arrived at their final destination. She could feel the magical power fighting against the dampening spell net, ripping through it mercilessly.

They fell to the ground, felled by the imbalanced act of magic. There was a soft Persian silk carpet under her hands.

"Draco!"

Blaise had avoided Draco meticulously since it had become apparent that the Warren-girl had left the Manor and was not coming back. He had seen the change in his friend, had seen him withdraw and hide behind his numerous masks as a Malfoy, Death Eater and High Reeve.

He had never seen his friend so sad.

"Draco, do you hear me at all?"

"I hear you, Blaise. I hear you. But I don't know what to say or do. I know we are spread too thin. Whenever we try to reinforce in one place, a skirmish springs up at the other end of the country. I cannot multiply Death Eaters. Can you?"

"I am sorry, Draco."

"It is not your fault."

"No. I am sorry that I suggested sharing her. I knew you were drunk. I was out of line."

Rubbing his stubbly face, Draco pressed the balls of his hands to his eyes.

"I was not obligated to follow your proposition. It was I who was out of line." He looked at his friend sombrely. "I should have realised that she was not like the girls in Slytherin who had enjoyed our combined efforts. I made a mistake. And now she is gone."

"I am sorry."

Draco didn't realise just how truthful Blaise was being. He deeply regretted ever listening to Theo.

Blaise was one of the few people Draco allowed to see him in pain. The outside world was showing cracks and crumbling in places, no matter how much he tried to patch things up, to ease the effect of a world out of control on the populous.

Without her as his anchor, his sanity was showing the same cracks. Maybe soon he would stay in the quiet cocoon that sometimes enveloped him.

Soon.

The door sprang open and banged against the stone wall next to the door frame.

Draco was already standing when the Death Eater guard finally caught his breath.

"High Reeve, the Warren!"

Before he could say more, Draco had already Summoned his wand and barked an order to Blaise to gather any available men and follow him. Not waiting for an answer, he vanished on the spot to reappear near the gates.

She was in there, somewhere.

The noise was deafening. He could hear glass exploding. Magic wafted back and forth in the maze that was the Warren, the net of dampening spells pushing it down and making it more and more volatile.

Should the cramped ghetto catch on fire, there was nothing to prevent a fire storm and the demise of hundreds, maybe thousands, of witches, wizards and children.

His wand in hand, he spelled his way through the crowd, mercilessly shoving and pushing anybody and anything out of his way.

Was she at home, in relative safety? Where was 'home'?

The crowd pushed at him from all sides, but he ploughed on, not caring what happened around him.

And then he saw it. Curly brown hair and a burgundy robe. One second she was making a desperate effort to flee from the enraged mob, the next she went under with a

pained cry.

He sent Stunners as fast as his magic would allow him. He only had moments before it was too late for her. Grabbing her already ripped robe, he yanked her to her feet and against him.

Risking and saving both of their lives, he Apparated them.

Home.

Unexpected

Chapter 11 of 13

Another magical entity finds it necessary to meddle with Draco and Hermione.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything associated with Harry Potter; I do not earn money by writing this story.

A/N: My utmost thanks to dynonugget and nastygrl for the super fast beta work and all the encouragement. And of course to Sempra, who is so wonderful with the English language!

Unexpected

The precious carpet in his study dampened their fall, and for a few seconds, they only looked at each other, still in shock over what had happened.

Then her hands were in his hair pulling him down. Teeth clicking, biting, they took from the other what they could. Draco pushed her skirts up around her waist. The urgency of their movements did not allow the luxury of disrobing. A sharp tug on her neckline widened the diagonal tear that was already splitting her bodice, baring her for him.

Draco sat back on his haunches, looking down on her sprawled out on the study floor, her cheeks tinged pink, chest heaving, curly hair wild around her head. An image flashed through his mind so quickly that he could not grasp and hold on to it to examine it any further, but in that moment, his instincts told him that she was his witch, his female; she had been meant for him since the day she was born. He would reclaim her.

And he would be damned if he would ever let her go.

Towering over her, knees between her thighs, he pulled up his black Death Eater robes and opened his belt.

His cock sprang free, and for a few moments he just knelt there, looking at her with heated eyes.

Their eyes locked, and her arms rose above her head, crossing at the wrists. Her eyes closed, and she tipped her head back against the soft silk of the carpet.

One hand encircled her wrists tightly while the other reached between their bodies, opening her roughly for him.

The pain of his first thrust was exquisite. Hermione made a keening sound that only served to encourage him to take her harder. Her hips were resting on his thighs, tilting them up. The angle made it easy for her to draw her legs toward her chest, opening her core wider for him, to draw him in and keep him close.

Locking her legs around him, she drew her nails over his back, willing him to go faster, to be harsher. When he came, he grasped the back of her thighs and leaned his weight on her legs, folding her in half.

She could feel his warm breath on her neck. Since Apparating from the Warren to Malfoy Manor, only minutes had passed.

"I have to go back," he said against her neck.

She nodded. He had to. And he might not come back.

Draco pushed himself up on his elbows and then to his knees. He retrieved both their wands from where they had fallen on the floor and stood, straightening his robes. After sheathing his wand, he held hers in his hand as if uncertain of what to do.

He finally placed it in the drawer of his desk, where her wand had been kept previously.

"I will not let you go this time."

Hermione watched in silence as he warded the desk. He took her hand and guided her out of the study and along the halls into the foyer.

For a long minute that was too short for them, he held her.

"Wait for me. I will be back." Draco kissed her eyes. "If not, the elves will know what to do."

He had to pry her hands away from his arms in order to step back from her to Apparate.

She stayed silent because there was nothing left to say. The words he had whispered into her ear just before he left echoed in her mind long into the night.

"I think I love you, too," she said into the empty room. "And I hope you will not hate me."

He did not return that night. After hours of waiting, Hermione went to 'her' rooms to shower and change out of the torn robes. The blue guest room had been untouched, awaiting her return. All one hundred and thirty-seven robes were safely stored in the wardrobe, and the silver-backed mirror with matching comb and brush waited for her on the dressing table.

A dark purple and black bruise marred her face where a boot had connected with her cheekbone. Horrified, Nippy had offered salves and potions to heal her, but Hermione had declined. The very real sting of physical pain made the pain in her heart more bearable.

His study was not accessible to her, so she went to the small private drawing room where Draco had read to her or had watched her read for many hours, an arm curled around her, his hand tracing her side or stomach or the bones in her hand.

She curled up on the wide sofa in front of the fireplace, wrapped in a soft blanket that smelled of him and stared into the flames until sleep took her in the end.

She did not know any longer which side she hoped would win.

She did not know.

And it frightened her.

He did not return the next day or the day after that. The manor was silent, waiting with her. Even the portraits that had been eager to voice their discontent with her unworthy presence had fallen into muteness, regarding her with unveiled interest as she aimlessly wandered from salon to salon, heart heavy.

The woven unicorn sensed her distress and followed her from tapestry to tapestry. It made an effort to stay visible to her even when trotting through a magical forest and tried to make her smile by jumping over a bubbling spring of silvery thread like a playful filly.

All over the British Isle, the resistance was causing panic and mayhem, ripping holes into the finely-spun net of Death Eaters. She neither knew the entire strategy, nor places or timings. Useful as this game of double blind was, she feared that someone might have miscalculated sweet Merlin, for all she knew it could have been Lavender Brown doing the calculations on which this uprising was based.

Hermione buried her head in her hands. She prayed that this was not the final flailing of a body doomed to rot and decay. Could a decimated society like theirs even sustain several days of fighting without extinguishing themselves?

Or was it already over? Was she the only one left in her magic castle, cut off from a reality that might be too harsh to endure?

On the third day, she stood in the library before the portrait of the wizard who had once so rudely rejected her.

"Sir?"

The venerable Lord Malfoy arched a white blond brow.

"May I ask you a question, sir?"

He nodded curtly, not speaking, but not turning his back on her, either. Hermione took a fortifying breath.

"What will happen if ... if the current Lord Malfoy dies?"

The wizard looked stricken but composed himself quickly.

"The manor will shut down until the rightful heir comes to claim it."

She had not noticed any change in the building, but what exactly did shutting down mean? Literally closing the shutters in front of the many windows, shutting out the light and elements? Or would this be more of a magical concealment? Was she to wait like sleeping beauty for the one and only person to be able to break through the wards to deliver her from her prison?

"What ... what if there is no heir?"

The portrait no longer tried to hide his concern and shifted nervously.

"Draco has not returned to the manor for several days."

"Yes," she confirmed, although he had not spoken in a questioning tone.

"He left in a state of great distress."

"Yes."

"He is alive. The manor wards have not change."

"Thank you."

Hermione turned to leave, hoping that Draco was hiding or had been captured and was being treated well. The possibility that the resistance had lost and he was too busy torturing her friends to come home was inconceivable. The possibility that her friends could be the ones torturing him flashed before her eyes as a horrific, but not entirely impossible, scenario.

"Miss?" Hermione turned back to face the portrait. "There will always be an heir. The Malfoys do not die out. The family magic and the manor make sure of it."

Hermione furrowed her brow at the cryptic statement but nodded nonetheless before she left the library.

She turned and leaned heavily against the door of Draco's study. She always felt close to him here. Her hand traced the polished door handle. How many Heads of the Malfoy family had touched this piece of metal, had sat behind the large desk and contemplated business, family matters and probably the Dark Arts, if she wanted to be truthful with herself.

The door handle gave way under the slight pressure of her hand, and the door swung open. In an instant her heart dropped, thinking Draco must have died for the wards to admit her. But the wards would have shut down, not opened up, would they not?

Hermione took a few careful steps into the room. These were blood wards. How could the one at the door simply melt away?

The Elizabethan Lord Malfoy who had talked to her in the library only minutes ago now took up the frame of a fearful-looking witch in stiff Victorian robes.

"As I said, there will always be a Malfoy heir, Miss; the family magic will ensure it."

Blood wards.

"Even though we tend to emphasise the purity of our lineage, I assure you that there are more important issues. The family understands that and has done so in the past. Repeatedly."

Hermione felt light-headed.

The blood wards melted away at her touch.

There will always be a Malfoy heir.

Survival of the family before purity.

Her hand went to her stomach.

"Draco must be in mortal peril for the wards to allow the mother of the heir access."

It was too much.

She blinked away the tears and stumbled to the desk. The drawer gave way without the slightest resistance.

She had to go.

The truth would come out, and he would hate her. Hate her so much.

Hate them.

She did not know how to forgive herself, then how could he?

Her wand was in her hand when she heard the sound of Apparition in the room.

Draco stood, robes torn and smeared with blood, skin marred and streaked with dirt. The very light blond of his hair was dark and caked from a cut just above his left ear.

He looked at her, startled, taking in her distraught appearance, the tears on her face and the wand in her hand.

"Jeanne?"

"I am sorry," she said. "So sorry." Her voice broke, and she disappeared before his very eyes, out of his study and once more out of his life.

Draco was unable to move and stared numbly at his desk, where Jeanne had stood mere seconds ago.

There was no time to perform the necessary Apparition tracking spells. The resistance was only minutes behind him, and without her, he did not want to run.

A solitary crack announced the arrival of a wizard outside the gates, and the wards shivered as they were attacked.

The repeated cracking as more and more members of the resistance appeared told him it was time for a decision.

The wards would hold as long as he lived, and some of his ancestors had indeed closed themselves off from the world until governments had changed, generations had passed and any digression on the part of a Malfoy had been conveniently forgotten. The Malfoy family had risen from the ashes like a phoenix more than once.

Draco directed his steps to the main entrance door and opened it resolutely. He lowered the wards, and a few of the wizards at the border to his property lost their footing upon the unexpected loss of resistance.

The former High Reeve of South East England stood in his battle-worn robes before them. Regal, as if greeting his guests for the annual charity ball. His arm made a sweeping gesture towards the inside of the house.

"Gentlemen," he said, voice steady, inviting the resistance into his childhood home.

Unflinching

Chapter 12 of 13

Draco has to face the music.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything associated with Harry Potter; I do not earn money by writing this story.

A/N: I am sorry that I missed an update weekend, I had to re-write large parts of this and RL kicked in and a thousand other things. Bear hugs and thank yous to dynonugget and nastygrl, who are patient and gentle and wonderful betas.

Unflinching

Water was running down the rough walls, seeping into the back of his striped prisoner's uniform. In the back of his mind he knew he would regret reclining against the rough wall. It would make sleeping on the damp, lumpy straw mattress more uncomfortable than ever, the thin blanket not fit to keep warm in the droughty cell.

All of this came to his mind, but he refused to acknowledge the presence of the more reasonable and cautious part of his brain.

All of the strength and sanity he had left was focussed on the parchment in his hands. His solicitor had been sending him weekly updates on his case, usually short missives recounting owls he had sent and lists of items removed from Malfoy Manor by the Ministry.

Regis Bonmot was a good solicitor. The newly appointed Wizengamot had made sure that every single prisoner awaiting trial had been assigned a competent defence lawyer. Many had been hired from France, Ireland, the Scandinavian countries and Germany; many of Britain's lawyers had either vanished during Voldemort's reign or were waiting for their own trials.

Draco had expected another list of priceless family heirlooms that had been seized by the Ministry to be locked away indefinitely. Instead, the list consisted of names. Names of witnesses to be heard at his trial.

He ran his index finger down the parchment.

Gregory and Vincent. Blaise. Maybe character witnesses? What good would come from one Death Eater attesting for the other that he had done a good job?

And who in the blazes is Benita Fenwick?

Then his breath hitched.

Hermione Jean Granger.

She was alive? Voldemort had been searching for her relentlessly. Every single Death Eater had had a picture of her.

Why was she to be heard?

Would she take revenge for his foolish and immature behaviour in their school days?

His godfather would have spoken for him.

He remembered the day he watched the bodies of the fallen being lowered into the gigantic pit at the Hogwarts ruins. He had kept his mask in place, thankful for the cover that shielded his emotions from prying eyes.

Some of the bodies had still been pliant, limp in the hands of the Death Eaters. Others were stiff; rigor mortis had locked their limbs in grotesque distortions, witness to the pain and horror of their deaths.

He remembered the flash of hope when Potter finally faced the Dark Lord, the urge to run to his godfather who was shielding Potter's back...robes billowing violently around him and his mask discarded, announcing his true allegiance to friend and foe.

Severus had fallen first, taking the brunt of the killing curses fired at them.

None of his fellow Death Eaters had wanted to touch the traitor's body, so it had been left to Draco to lower Severus' worn body into the mass grave.

Severus' face had been peaceful, the deep lines between his brows and connecting the corners of his mouth to his nose were gone; in death, he looked his age of barely forty.

Too young to die, both by Muggle and wizarding standards; so many...too young to die.

The mask hid his tears. Body after body was laid down, quickly hiding his godfather from view. The enormity of the loss of life had threatened to strangle him. So many times, hands had been extended to him, and time and again, he had rejected the offer.

Hermione Jean Granger.

Jean ?

Impossible.

In the time after Jeanne had ended their agreement, he had tried searching for her, not physically but in the form of records about her, desperate to find any kind of information, anything that would bring her closer to him.

And even if he did not want to admit it, the longer she had been gone, the longer he searched without result, the more he had wanted to let his men loose in the Warren and drag her back.

There had been no 'Jeanne's in Hogwarts in recent years. Not a single one.

Not one in the Durmstrang records, not that he had expected to find her there.

Too many girls went by the name of Jeanne in Beauxbatons, but none were unaccounted for and none were in Britain.

Jeanne.

Jean?

She had been so familiar at times; her smile when he read to her, her dark, curly hair that he loved so much.

Jean, not Jeanne. The same name, the same root. Close enough to be valid for signing a magical contract.

Had she used him? Had she whored herself to him in order to spy? Had she traded her body for information and money?

Potter's friend.

Weasley's girl.

Draco started laughing, loud and painful in his ears. The laughing did not alleviate the absurdity and the betrayal. The laughing made it worse, rising inside of him and choking his throat until the laugh broke into a desperate scream.

Draco balled up the parchment and threw it against the wall opposite of the cot.

It bounced back and landed on the straw-filled sack that was his bed.

Had he financed the resistance with the money he had paid her? The very people who had arrested him and were currently ransacking his home?

Had it been all a lie?

His name on her lips when he was buried deep inside her? Her accepting welcome when he came home from a mission that made his insides freeze and his soul cry out?

The balls of his fists pressed into his eyes. The ache in his chest grew and threatened to overwhelm him, break his heart and crush him, there, in his little cell.

He would not be able to bear her mocking him.

The dirty uniform had been exchanged for a new one, and he had been allowed to shower and comb his now long hair.

Looking into a mirror for the first time in months, he backed away in shock he had turned into his father.

They had washed away the moulding, rotting smell of Azkaban, making him look presentable and well-cared for; but the chains around his wrists and ankles were as heavy as ever, clanking and dragging behind him with every step, pulling him forward with their weight and making him look hunched-over.

The high-rising benches of the Wizengamot were fully occupied. The press and the public filled the halls.

Not a single sound was heard as he shuffled from the small door behind which he had been waiting to the heavy chair in the centre of the arena-like auditorium. The chains binding him in place tightened, and the back and forth of the trial began.

He had not been asked a single question so far, and although he sat in this place now clean and with a solicitor at his side, he had no illusions about the outcome of the trial.

Motions and counter-motions and the questions of the Wizengamot melded together to a constant rising and falling sea of voices in the background.

Draco waited only for one fateful sentence.

"Witness Hermione Jean Granger."

He lowered his gaze and concentrated on the elaborate emblem on the front side of the judges' dais.

"Honourable Judge Narrow, I am Marie-Françoise Dutitre, Miss Granger's legal representative."

Draco's head snapped up.

"Miss Granger requests to be excused from personally testifying due to medical reasons. With your permission, I would like to submit this medical report from her personal Healer."

"Permitted."

The short witch in pearls and monochromic robes made her way to the judges' table, her heels clicking against the stone floor.

Medical reasons? Was she ill?

Judge Narrow scanned the parchment and instructed the Apparitor to log the report in the official archive of the trials documents.

Madame Dutitre opened her shiny black leather briefcase and pulled out a small device holding six tiny nearly opaque bottles swirling with a silvery substance.

"Miss Granger requests to testify via Pensieve. I herewith petition to submit these memories, retrieved in my own presence as well as the Honourable Notaries Laurin Hunningworth and Wieland Zwergenhort. I submit the undersigned and sealed accounts of their testimony".

The judges withdrew for several minutes to discuss whether or not to admit the memories.

The Wizengamot was growing restless; the noise level rose as speculations flew. Madame Dutitre exchanged a short but meaningful glance with her colleague Regis.

An Apparitor in purple robes levitated a special Pensieve projector through the side door and placed it on a table next to Draco with a muffled thump.

The memories were poured inside and stirred with his wand by Judge Narrow himself.

Draco forced his eyes to remain open. If he had to live his ultimate humiliation, he wanted to go through it with his head held high.

Fog rose from the pensieve and slowly cleared from the middle to the outside of the cloud-like form.

A dark robed figure broke out of the ranks of Death Eaters standing in the grounds of Hogwarts. The masked man picked up a broken figure from the ground. The man struggled to lift the body, coming to his feet with difficulty and then cradled the head with the long dark hair against his shoulder. The rows of Death Eaters parted before him as he directed his steps through their midst.

Adjusting the weight in his arms, the figure's hood slipped and white blond hair glowed against the dark backdrop of black robes. The dead man was tenderly lowered into the pit. The blond folded dead hands around a wand and closed the empty eyes. Around him, the other Death Eaters picked up their work, hauling, levitating, dragging the dead into the grave.

A series of shorter memories followed... at the manor, newly returned after a horrific raid of several wizarding families who had refused to leave their houses in the contaminated areas. He saw himself sliding down the wall in the entry hall, vomiting violently as soon as the door closed behind him.

The memory ended, but he remembered that he had crawled under Jeanne's covers that night, believing her to be asleep. He had breathed in her scent of spicy oranges, fresh and warm at the same time. She had turned around to face him, wrapping her arms and a leg around him.

Next, his memory self and his friends at the dining table, Jeanne suspiciously not visible, discussing strategies for raising standards of living in the habitable settlements to lower the risk of epidemics.

Then, in quick succession, Blaise and he in his study, trying to figure out how to ensure education for the children, as most primary schools and Hogwarts had been destroyed.

And Draco in his study, fighting with Theodore Nott, voice loud, demanding that he amend the procedure for his sweeper teams.

Draco, pulling Jeanne out of the raging crowd, risking his life by Apparating from inside the Warren.

In the silence that followed, he sat frozen.

Where had she been during most of these memories?

"Draco Malfoy, is it true that you supplied the witness with shelter and nourishment in order to protect her from the fate she would have otherwise endured?"

His solicitor's voice was directed at him, but Draco was unable to free himself from the stream of questions and feelings that assaulted his shocked mind. He had to ask Bonmot to repeat his question.

Was it the truth? Essentially, yes.

"That is true."

Hope stirred.

The crowd murmured like a distant thunder until the judge pounded his hammer onto the surface of his desk to restore order.

"Is it true that you also supplied her with money and the means to direct it to certain members of the resistance?"

Draco blinked slowly. Yes. He should have paid her more!

"It is true."

This time the murmur escalated into disbelieving shouts, members of the Wizengamot had risen from their seats, shaking their wands in their fists.

Judge Narrow pounded his hammer relentlessly, but he had to amplify the loudness of the pounding with a quick spell to make the Wizengamot take notice.

He admitted a question of a portly looking balding wizard in green and purple robes.

"If you supported the resistance all along, why did you not fight on the side of the light in the final battle?"

Draco turned to the wizard without haste. He raised his chin and mentally slipped the Malfoy mask in place.

"Why, you ask? Why did I not rush forward to Potter's aide and announce myself a turncoat to all and sundry? Why?" He would have stood, would the chains binding him to the chair have permitted it. "Why did I not fight at his side while the entire *Order of the Phoenix* took a step back as soon as they saw their saviour confronting the Dark Lord?"

His words dripped with contempt.

"You, all of you just ... stood.

And gawped.

Asking me why I did not change allegiances in that very moment is a moot point. Would I have done so, I would have joined my godfather in the pit. I can only say that we all are lucky that the resistance had the mind to overwhelm the Dark Lord in numbers this time instead of sending a hungry, exhausted and worn out boy to fight a fight that could only be won in unity."

Draco let his eyes roam the raised benches of the Wizengamot that now had considerably fewer members than the last time he had seen them assembled. That must have been years ago.

"You put the world on his shoulders and left him to carry the weight. And now you ask why I did not forsake my family and friends to die beside him?"

The 'you disgust me' was never voiced but rang as loudly as if he had screamed it.

He still sat motionless and very straight when the judges retired for discussion and returned with their verdict.

He did not hear the verdict, for a woman sprang from her place on the witness' bench, a pretty girl with strawberry blonde hair. She was a member of the Resistance and had attested to his general cruelty, specifically to an attack to her personally in Diagon Alley. He did not remember her but had realised that she must have altered her appearance to hide, just like... Hermione.

Benita Fenwick screamed profanities at him while she attempted to climb over the wooden balustrade in front of the bench.

She was held back by several Apparitors, while others quickly released his chains and led him out of the courtroom.

Her screaming voice rang in his ears. 'The likes of him have murdered my father!' she screamed while she struggled against the men's hold on her.

Only when he was back in his cell, he realised that he had not been kissed.

In only two years he would be able to return to his home.

To whom?

For what?

Most of the time he sat on his cot, waiting, watching time pass in the form of an ever present shadow of bars in front of his window, slowly making its daily journey over the wall.

Sometimes the walls seemed to move in on him. He thought he could feel the ever recurring noises of Azkaban with his entire body. Clanking noises of opening and closing doors, metal bowls with gruel pushed into the cells, rattling on the ground. The sounds filling him until his skin felt tight and close to bursting, he would pull out the three pieces parchments from under his small pillow.

The parchments were worn at the edges, shiny where his fingers had traced the words on it again and again.

It was a letter he had received by personal delivery by Madame Dutitre several months after his trial.

There had been other letters, one long parchment he found two days after he had appeared before the Wizengamot. It had been from her but Azkaban's postal system included a strict department of censorship and little was left besides her name and his. Yet, he coveted the few disjointed words that were left in between the magical burn holes the censors had left after incinerating disallowed words.

The parchment in his hands was whole.

Julius William Granger

Born 1st of August 2002 at 3:15 in the morning at St. Mungo's hospital for magical maladies.

Mother: Hermione Jean Granger

Father: Undisclosed

Behind it, he hid a photograph of a tiny newborn baby, eyes closed, a nearly invisible fuzz of translucent blond hair crowning his head.

At first it appeared to be a Muggle photograph, the baby was so still. Then suddenly, the tiny mouth twitched and started moving in a sucking motion.

Draco smiled and touched his fingertip to the perfect little nose.

"Dreaming of nursing," he whispered.

The third parchment was instilling both fear and hope in him.

Draco,

Before you, Jeanne did not exist,

But now she will be part of me forever.

Hermione

There was a splatter of ink in the space above her name. As if she had wanted to add something, quill poised over the parchment until the ink had fallen.

Unmasked

Chapter 13 of 13

Some ends are merely a beginning.

Disclaimer: I do not own anything associated with Harry Potter; I do not earn money by writing this story.

A/N: Thank you, nastygrl and dynonugget for all the fantastic beta work on this story I was so glad to have you with me on this ride! I will miss this story!

Unmasked

The throng of paparazzi made for a cold and unpleasant reception to the outside world.

They had returned the battle-worn robes Draco had been wearing when he had been arrested. Although they had been cleaned and haphazardly mended, they were unmistakably the High Reeve's Death Eater robes. Whipping around his emaciated frame by the gusting sea breeze, he must have looked a fright.

And so he did on the front page of the *Daily Prophet* the next day.

A living, walking scarecrow with his Death Eater mask and his few belongings hidden in a small cardboard box tucked away under his arm, he was a haggard thing that looked as if he'd been risen from the dead.

As soon as he stepped foot outside of the main gate of Azkaban, flashes blinded him as the photographers competed for the most horrible picture of the fallen nobleman.

He had ignored them, hadn't even bothered to give a 'no comment', but shouldered his way through the crowd. He clasped his wand he had received only minutes before like a lifeline, his knuckles white with the strain, ready to defend himself should need be.

The high wrought-iron gates to Malfoy Manor were closed.

Somehow he had envisioned and feared that the Ministry might have succeeded with bringing down the wards in their entirety. In his nightmares, he stood before open and rusting gates that led to barren grounds, covered in brownish remains of what had been a lush lawn for centuries.

He always woke with a start. And although these were not his worst nightmares, his failure to the Malfoy line felt like a blanket of lead weighing him down.

For a second, when he touched the over-sized handle, he was afraid the manor would reject him. That one second it took the manor to react to his presence and have the gates swing open silently felt too long, and he shivered in relief when it did.

For this reason he had not dared to Apparate directly into the lobby. His magic was giddy upon being used again, and he did not want to think of what could happen if he had tried to Apparate into an unwilling house.

The deep green of the lawn and the bright colours of the flowers along the terraces seemed too bright and cheerful to his eyes, now used to little more than shades of grey. With careful deliberation, he kept his eyes on the gravel path underneath his feet that made crunching noises with his every step he took.

Since he was of age, he had scarcely taken this path before; as the other members of the family, he had preferred to Apparate directly into the desired part of the house.

The manor welcomed its lost son by opening its main entrance as soon as he had reached the foot of the few, low stone stairs leading up to it.

Inside, the silence was deafening.

It lasted for less than a minute. He had not even had the chance to set down his cardboard box when Nippy and several other elves appeared with loud, echoing cracks and immediately clung to his legs, wailing pitifully.

Panicked and at a loss as to how to comfort distraught house-elves, he held still and settled for bending down and petting their little backs every now and then.

"Welcome home, Draco. Where is he?"

Distracted from the sobbing heap of house-elves at his feet, Draco looked up into a painting that usually was a still life of a lavishly decorated table and armchair with what looked like a brocade throw draped over its backrest. Now the Elizabethan Lord Malfoy stood next to the table, leaning on his hand on top of the wooden surface.

"Thank you, Varian. How have things been in the past two years?"

"As to be expected in circumstances as they were," Varian dismissed. "Where is he, Draco?"

"Where is who?"

"Your son, Draco!" Varian thundered. And then much softer: "We are all eager to welcome him into the family."

Draco's face set into a frown.

"How do you know about Julius?"

He did not like this information to be out before he knew that it would not harm his son to be ... well, his son.

"How do I know about him?" Varian Malfoy scoffed and folded his arms in front of his chest. "I watched him being conceived on the study floor!"

Draco felt heat rush into his cheeks. The memory of their frantic coupling after he had Apparated them out of the Warren was hazy at best. It had felt so good and right, and when the manor magically nudged him along, he had all too eagerly complied.

"Have you written to her, Draco? Will you request she come here? Over the last two years, I have tried to find the portraits of Lucius and Narcissa, but it is complicated. There was talk of the paintings, but they might still be unfinished and thus they cannot wake, maybe we can find them and then they can see their grandson ..."

"Varian," Draco interrupted his great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather gently. "I do not know whether she will be willing to return to the manor, even for a visit."

This muted the portrait into a worried silence.

"I will investigate the details surrounding mother and father's portraits; it would be nice to have them here."

He sighed and looked down on his tattered robes.

"But for now I will take a bath, burn these robes and then... I think I have a letter to write."

Hermione stared at the parchment in her hands.

For two years, she had not received a reply to her letters.

For two years, she had been afraid that he was rejecting her them because of her blood.

Now he was free, and she had a letter in her hands.

He had received her letters sporadically, but always so badly mutilated by the censors that hardly anything of it had been left.

He had tried to write to her as well, whenever he had managed to get his hands on some parchment, but apparently, his letters had never made it to her.

Her heart clenched. He had not rejected her; he had tried to contact her.

There was hope for Julius, then. Month after month had passed without news and without permission to visit the father of her child.

Her status as war heroine was a shaky and controversial one.

Some said that she was a heroine because she had fought at Harry Potter's side from childhood, but many pointed out that nobody knew where she had been after Harry Potter had fallen.

And that she obviously had not done very much to help fight the Dark Lord.

She had refused the many interview requests of the *Daily Prophet*. She could not possibly tell them the truth.

The Wizengamot judges were the only people besides Draco and herself who knew about her life during the Reign of Darkness and were sworn to secrecy by pacts that her solicitor had negotiated for her before Draco's trial.

She had been afraid of the day he was released from Azkaban. It was very possible that he was bitter and angry toward her, blaming her for his imprisonment, not to mention that she had lied to him continuously.

It had broken her heart to imagine that he might look down in disgust on their little boy.

The portrait of Lord Malfoy may have said that the family understood that there are more important things than blood purity, but that did not mean that Draco understood.

Now his letter gave her hope to at least be on speaking terms with the father of her child.

Only, so much time had passed and they both had been through very different experiences during the last years.

What if they remained strangers from now on?

With shaking fingers she penned a note agreeing to meet him in a location not too far from her tiny seaside cottage.

She did not run to him.

But she was there, standing at a safe distance from the agreed meeting point, a blond child, their child, leaning against her leg, thumb in mouth. Her hand rested lightly on the white blond curls.

There was no smile on her face.

But she was there, with an open face, her own face, and it made all the difference.

When he had finally reached her, he ached to touch her hair, to wrap his arms around her, to kiss her own lips for the first time and explore how they felt against his.

But he remained at a comfortable distance, not invading her personal space.

Careful not to scare her off, he smiled.

"Hermione."

"Draco."

He looked at the little boy with longing.

"May I?"

"Only if he wants to."

He nodded that he had understood and crouched down to be closer to the little boy's line of vision.

"Hello, Julius. That is a very nice dragon you have there. I had a very similar one when I was little."

Nearly invisible translucent eyebrows were raised and the snowy white stuffed animal was clutched tightly to the little chest.

"Dagon," said Julius around his thumb.

Draco smiled.

"Yes, I like them, too. Especially the Scandinavian Silverscales and the Lindwurm."

"Dagon!"

Julius presented the white and silver stuffed animal for a few seconds before securing it against his chest again.

"He is beautiful."

Julius smiled against his mother's leg.

Draco stood.

"May I come inside or would you like to go to a neutral place? There is a nice seaside restaurant nearby."

She looked down at her son and back at his father's face. There were lines around his eyes now that she did not remember seeing before. She considered for a few moments.

And then she smiled the tiniest of smiles. It was little more than the raising of the corners of her mouth.

"Do come in, please."

And it was a beginning.

Hermione stood with Julius on her arm in front of the largest painting the manor had to offer. It was a very wide landscape, epic even, telling the story of Merlin, but now the huge canvas swarmed with Malfoys of all ages. Wizards and witches were pushing to the front row, a short witch in bright purple robes repeatedly jumped in order to be able to see over the shoulder of the wizard in front of her.

Some were sitting cross-legged at the very edge of the heavy frame or kneeled to be closer, wiggling their fingers and cooing softly. Or less softly, as everybody tried to gain Julius' attention.

Julius beamed, showing tiny teeth at the blond crowd only to hide his face in his mother's shoulder acting shy, but Hermione could feel his little grin against the skin of her neck. When Julius could no longer stand the suspense, he peeked back at his assembled ancestors and squealed as the cooing and exclamations rose as he had intended. With a mischievous smirk he hid his face again, causing the Malfoys to break into a disappointed, collective 'oooooh...' then they entertained him with a delighted 'aaaaaaah' and more cooing noises when he smiled at the painting again.

Julius was delighted at how easy it was to make them do what he wanted.

Finally, he moved in for the kill.

He held out his stuffed white dragon to them.

"Dagon!" he exclaimed before holding it to his chest again. He smirked. It worked every time.

Many of the witches and wizards found themselves wiping at dry tears of paint rolling down their cheeks.

He was a Malfoy.

With relief he realised that she was not against his spending time with Julius.

And with relief, she noted that he was interested to spend time with his son. And with her.

They had spent several days together visiting Brighton, Aberdeen and a seemingly random place in Wales with breathtaking views over luscious hills and mountains.

Sometimes he held her hand.

Very carefully he had breached the topic of her visiting the manor with Julius, and after a bit of contemplation, she had agreed.

To her astonishment, he had freely offered her a legal magical contract defining his role in Julius' and her own life.

In fact, he insisted on a contract to provide for her and Julius in the event something happened to him, so she could claim the Malfoy fortune for Julius, even though they were not married and Draco was as of yet not officially recognised as Julius' father.

Hermione allowed Draco to spend time with his son, and Draco had to take the time to see his son, no matter how busy he might be.

Not that he was overrun with business proposals, fresh out of prison as he was.

It also stipulated a monthly allowance for Julius and Hermione. Her lack of 'leadership' in the resistance during The Reign and her status as a single mother had the wizarding world look down upon her.

The Weasleys tried to help as much as they could, and they loved to babysit Julius; but they also had to come to terms with their own mourning and rebuilding of a family life, however small this family had become.

The allowance would enable her to step back and decide what she wanted to do. University had been unaffordable, but now, it was a realistic option.

Lost in thought, Hermione stared at the thick scrolls of vellum on Draco's desk in the study, in the exact spot where another magical contract had waited for her signature more than three years ago.

Draco laid a light hand on her shoulder.

Warm fingers grazed the bare skin along the neckline.

He could still cover her body in gooseflesh with a simple touch.

"I have something for you." He fidgeted a bit, suddenly nervous about his choice.

"Yes?"

He produced a bouquet wrapped in delicate, yet concealing paper.

"Thank you," she said, while he attempted to unwrap the bouquet without tearing the paper too much.

When the paper finally came off, it revealed several bright red peppers, sitting in a large bouquet of tightly arranged lettuce leaves.

Hermione stared at it without comprehension in her eyes that Draco horribly assured that he had made a grave mistake *idiot!* To remind her of how they had met back then!

"I am so sorry, Hermione, I should have taken the roses, I honestly have no idea what I had been thinking, I..."

She suddenly leaned into him, her forehead resting against his chest and her shoulders shaking.

Terrified, he did not know whether he was permitted to comfort her after causing her, yet again, pain.

He groaned.

"Oh gods, Hermione, I am so sorry!"

She looked up at him, a brilliant smile on her face with tears of laughter in the corners of her eyes.

"I love it! Thank you, Draco." She motioned with her head toward the desk on which the contract rested. "I only have one request."

"Yes?"

"I would like to be allowed to kiss your mouth."