

A Merry and Desperate Drought

by Terra

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Chapter 1 of 1

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They'd replaced the slabs of wood and scuttled openings on the doors with bars that grew colder the longer he held on.

He acted like he was too proud to reach through them, so his mother always stayed a careful step away. But it was the helplessness he couldn't forget when his neighbors had jeered and called his mother dirty names the first time she'd visited and pressed herself so hard into the bars that it had looked like she was trying to melt through them. He remembered the pictures of Sirius Black during his imprisonment in the *Prophet*, and he almost felt cheated when they led him instead to this airy space, roomy and uneven enough to be two cells collapsed together.

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He was sitting on a rusty stool behind the teetering workbench that served as his desk when he saw her. Granger laid a hand on the metal bar separating his cell from that of the slumbering man next door, tilted her head and let her eyes rove over his prison as if determining the best angle to snap a photo.

When her gaze finally included him, she said, "Your mother's sentence came down. Just fines and house arrest for a year."

Good. All right. Yes. He didn't know what she wanted.

"You have Harry to thank for that," she continued, with a small smile and a smaller slouch. Everyone else stood taller, threw their shoulders back, heaved up their chests when they said Potter's name, but not Granger. She spoke his name like it was a relief being able to say it aloud. *Alive, he's alive!* sang her every shrug and fidget and grin.

But he was only alive because of Draco's mother. "I have Potter to thank for a lot of things."

Granger gave him a hard stare. "Yes. You do."

"I'll write him a letter, then, shall I?" he said curtly.

"That's not all. They've also shortened your sentence. Harry managed to get house arrest for you, too."

Something about the way her eyes honed in on the ruined skin of his collarbone, exposed by the tattered edge of his ill-fitting cotton shirt, triggered a streak of phantom pain. It scaled the length of his scar on the same path as her downward glance, tracing a wound he knew she couldn't see.

"He needn't have," he replied, voice tight. "I wasn't keeping score."

"Weren't you?" she asked, cocking her head.

"Cut the cryptic bullshit, Granger. What are you really doing here?"

"Harry didn't think you'd want to see him. Ron would rather swallow flobberworms whole than give you good news. That left me."

"All right. I'm going to try this again. What do you *want*?"

Something unreadable flickered across her face, and then her expression smoothed into familiar condescension. "Some answers, I guess."

He couldn't quite mask the anger. "I've already told the Aurors everything. Twice."

"No, it's not about that." She waved the notion out of the air like an interrogation, *two of them*, by grown, muscular men with massive chips on their shoulders and spilt blood in their homes was on par with crossing the street to grab a fucking coffee. "It was just bothering me, and since I was coming here anyway..."

"I don't really give a shit. Ask your damned questions or get out."

"Why did you do it?" she asked in a rush of breath, leaning closer until she was almost propped against the bars. "With what your mother did for Harry and what Harry did to you in sixth year...he hasn't forgotten it, you know . . . they would've let you off with a slap on the wrist. But you told them no one made you take the Dark Mark. You told them you snuck out and volunteered for it. *Why?*"

He laughed, and it snapped the air: brittle, hoarse, sharp. "*That's* what was bothering you?"

Two dots of hard red welled in her cheeks. "Well, it just didn't make any sense! And if there's anything these seven years have taught me, it's that you know how to look out for number one better than anyone else."

Draco wasn't aware of standing up until momentum had shoved aside his workbench and he was clasping the cold bars above her shoulders, hissing in her startled face.

"Just *what* do you think they would've done to my father if I'd told them he delivered a sixteen-year-old to the Dark Lord to be fodder for his mistakes? Do you think they would've taken his word for it that he only did it because he *had to*? Well?" he spat. "You're so smart, you tell me what *you* would've done!"

Granger's muddy eyes widened, and she pressed her lips together, considering. She started to reply when the sound of creaking springs jerked her closer to him. He followed her line of sight to the unkempt figure bundled up on the bed in the neighboring cell, and tensed. Draco had never bothered to learn his name after the filth had crudely propositioned his mother on her last visit; he found it easier to imagine mutilating a stranger, someone the guards talked about in the same breath as *hurt* and *women*.

The man tottered to his feet, a bent smile curling his thin lips when he saw Granger. It only took him three steps to reach through the bars and yank her towards him. Instinctively, Draco wrenched Granger out of the man's grasp, twisting her away in the crook of his arm, and slammed a fist into his cellmate's jaw. The man pitched backwards, his cry of outrage abruptly silenced by the metal railing of his bed meeting the back of his head.

They stared at his crumpled body for a long, wrought moment. Then Granger whispered, "Do you think he's . . . okay?"

He turned to inform her exactly what a stupid, careless, *bloody waste of space* she was when he realized he was still clutching her so tightly against the bars he could almost taste her whisper. "He's a rapist," he heard himself snapping, releasing her brusquely.

"Oh. I see. Um, thanks," she mumbled, dark eyes flitting over him.

"You can thank me by leaving."

"I mean it, Malfoy. That was...I just . . . thank you," said Granger, swallowing, her calm voice belied by the pulse jumping erratically in her neck.

She swayed back from the bars, a fluttery and hesitant motion that felt all at odds with the steadfast, *always barreling somewhere* mental image of her he'd been carrying around since the year she'd slugged him. "What?" he said, harsher than he'd intended.

Whatever she saw in his expression decided her, and she propelled forward, reaching through the bars. Clenching a fistful of his shirt, she pulled him to her and swept a hand along the nape of his neck. He only had enough time to brace his arms against the bars before the crazy girl pressed her lips, *warm and dry and smearing him with softness*, against the corner of his mouth. Vaguely, under the muffling wool of shock, he realized that she had been aiming for his cheek, and might have made it, if he hadn't been turning to yell at her.

She jumped back like he'd burned her. "What the hell was that?" burst out of him in one stunned breath.

"I didn't mean...it was supposed to be your cheek!" Granger gestured wildly at the space between them, deflating the stinging tension with every nervous swipe. "...it's just that a handshake seemed so inadequate!"

"A handshake," he repeated, unable to look away from her mouth now that she'd forced him to notice its every quivering motion.

"Yes! I just wanted to show my gratitude..."

"By kissing me?"

"I'm sorry!" A flood of red stained her face and neck. "No. I'm not sorry! I didn't do anything I need to apologize for. And and don't you dare tell anyone!" she finished fiercely.

"Tell anyone?" The incredulity of the situation, on its face the most ridiculous thing that had ever happened to him, tickled his throat, and he gave a bark of laughter. "Why would I tell anyone that you assaulted me..."

"*Assaulted?*"

"...no technique. It was the worst..."

"How dare you?" Granger dragged in a lungful of air and jabbed a finger at him in emphasis. "I-I'm never thanking you for anything ever again!"

Then she spun on her heel and stalked down the corridor to the stairway leading outside, narrow shoulders flung back rigidly in temper.

"Is that a promise?" he called out to her retreating form, unable to suppress a disbelieving chuckle, and slumped against the bars, forgetting the chill of the metal, wondering if the Dark Lord was currently ice-skating in hell.

February the eleventh saw his release from Azkaban with the clothes on his back and a too sharp quill in his pocket.

He'd learned more about war in prison than he'd ever known as the Dark Lord's eyes and ears and unwilling, fucked *uphopelessly incompetent* assassin. The thought of home left a copper taste in his mouth, and he didn't think the Manor would ever feel like *his* again, not after herds of Death Eaters had stampeded through its corridors and the Dark Lord had fouled up the parlors and dining rooms and dungeons (screaming, lots); even his bedroom appeared foreign, oppressively spacious.

"We're only allowed three permits a month," his mother said that night, across the too-large dining table.

He set down his snifter of brandy. "You take two, then. I think Father would much rather see you."

"Draco," she said sharply. "It's just your father's pride..."

"I know. But you'd be a comfort to him, and I . . . well, I'm a reminder of things he'd rather forget."

Mother dropped her hooded gaze to his hand, skin spread white over the glass. "My love, he may not have acted like it when you made that absurd confession during the trial, but *I* know he was proud that you tried to help him."

"Yes, threatening to disown me unless I recanted," he said with a snort, "that's always been my personal favorite of his affectionate gestures."

"Your father only wanted to do right by us. He knew what it would do to me," the lilt of her voice trembled, "to - to see you locked up next to those filthy criminals!"

"It's worse for him," he said flatly. "At least I had an ocean view. Those bastards keep trumping up the charges to find excuses to send him to solitary. A dank little hole with no light..." he smiled viciously, "when this is over, I'm going to hunt every one of those sorry fuckers down and make them eat glass for this."

It was a testament to his mother's fraught state of mind that she didn't even stir at his foul language. His conviction rearranged the soft set of her features into something hard and unyielding. "Not so soon after your release. We'll need to . . . rebuild our social credit first."

Draco tapped gently on the edge of his armrest, a grim and somber melody. "Believe me, Mother, I can bide my time. It's all I've got now."

She stood, thin and small against the backdrop of the yawning room. "When I was signing the forms, I saw your visitor log. What did that Granger girl want?"

"Nothing. Just showed up to shoot her mouth off."

"Then you didn't ask her to visit?"

His brows arched precipitously. "Good god! Why would I invite that Mudblood to..."

"I thought perhaps you were trying to cultivate her friendship. In these new times," she paused, a distasteful bent to her mouth, "it might be wise to make some new allies."

"Not bloody likely. Granger hates me, and I wouldn't spit on her if she were on fire." The words came out familiar, mechanical and meaningless, and he resisted the urge to shake his arm until he vanquished the feeling of cradling her ridged shoulders. And then there was...but no, he banished all thought of their almost-kiss, awkward and pitiful and disgusting, yes, *disgusting*. "Besides, our paths aren't likely to cross, what with me being confined and all."

Draco should've remembered that she had a spectacular way of overturning his most basic assumptions. When Granger tumbled out of his fireplace the next morning and threw the house-elves into an uproar with the careless, not entirely unintentional, way she left a trail of scarves and mittens in her wake, he didn't know which emotion was stronger: anger or bafflement. Anger, as usual, won out.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he roared from the foot of the staircase overlooking the foyer, after he'd been tussled out of bed by a frightened house-elf jabbering inarticulately about some girl with all-over-the-place hair and pockets bulging with *socks*.

"Mr. Weasley gave me permission to Floo over," she announced perfunctorily, like invading his home was something she did everyday.

"Gave you..." he said, disbelieving. "I don't give a rat's arse if the Minister of Magic wrote you fifty permission slips by hand. Did it even occur to you that this is private property and you haven't got *my* permission?"

Granger tossed her head back, pert nose in the air. "Don't need it. Not while you're under house arrest at least."

"This seems to be a recurring problem for us, Granger," he managed through gritted teeth. "I ask you what the hell you're up to and you evade with the subtlety of a stampeding rhinoceros."

"All right," she snapped. "So I might have lied to you yesterday about why I came. The truth is . . . I've got your wand."

"*What?*"

She sighed impatiently. "Don't you remember? Harry disarmed you the last time we were here. He wanted me to return it if I thought you weren't likely to be the next raging megalomaniac with delusions of grandeur."

By the time she fell silent, his fingers were tingling, and he fisted them in the pockets of his silk pyjamas to hide his trembling-*his wand!* thumped his heart gloriously. No more cheap knockoffs that he couldn't use to charm his way out of a paper bag. Hawthorn, ten inches, whip sharp and humming warm in his grasp. "Where is it?" he demanded.

He saw her hand hover uneasily over the tote bag she had slung across her shoulder. In the next instant, he was diving for it. She cried, "Don't!" and stumbled, tripping over a snag in the carpet in front of the hearth. Granger's arm shot out, her fanned fingers clamping around his wrist for balance, and she would've made it if he hadn't already been running towards her. They went down together, clipping his shoulder against the marble chimneypiece as he crashed over her, stray elbow tipping over the urn of ashes his house-elves had apparently been collecting before Granger Flooed in, and they fled her blasted socks and scarves.

Grimy cinders rained down, most of it upended on Granger's head, splashing soot in his bone-white hair. She coughed and clawed the dust from her eyes, leaving trails of charcoal that gave her the appearance of a raccoon. "Get off!" she yelled in his ear.

He favored his throbbing shoulder and glared down at her black-streaked face, skin flushing puce when she saw that he was spread over her like a blanket, tangled in bony limbs and sharp corners digging into his ribs...probably a damned book, knowing her. For an unhinged moment, he wondered how far down the blush went, the beat in his wrists rioting at the glimpses of skin he caught above the neckline of her cashmere jumper. At this angle, it was impossible not to see that her mouth was still warm and dry and soft.

"Not until I get my wan..."

"I don't *have* it..."

"You're a horrible liar," he snarled, and smashed his mouth against hers.

It wasn't an accident this time. She went dead still underneath him; the clash of their teeth was painful, and that made it all right somehow. He kissed her harshly, gliding across slackened lips, not caring that he was smearing ash on his face because *of course* kissing Granger would be dirty business. Her mouth parted in surprise when his

tongue swept along her lower lip, tracing the swelling warmth. He sucked on it once, twice and then bit her bottom lip. That got a reaction. She bucked beneath him and shoved, the palms of her hands splayed against his ribs, clawing black marks on the gray silk of his pyjamas.

He rolled obligingly to his side, clutching the strap of the bag she'd forgotten in her panic, but he didn't count on her quick reflexes. She caught the bottom of the tote, and when he wrenched back, the seam split; two books, several scrolls and a long, thin black box tumbled out. He snatched the box and popped off the top. His eyes widened. "What...?"

"I told you I didn't have it!"

He ground his teeth together. "Is this a *knitting needle*?"

Granger tore the metal rod from his hands. "That's none of your business, Malfoy!"

"Who the fuck keeps a single knitting needle in a box?"

"Apparently not lunatics who go around attacking people!" she yelled back.

"That wasn't an attack," he pitched his voice shrill, mocking, "it was a show of *gratitude*..."

She tried to stab him, and it was by the merest inch that he avoided getting knitting needle in the shoulder. "You crazy bitch," he breathed.

"That's right. Keep trying to slay me with your wit. I'll nick you, see if I won't, and it'll be no less than you deserve," said Granger, seething.

Draco watched her heft the needle like a dagger, looking like a deranged Amazonian smudged with war paint. Her feet were spread and knees bent prepared to lunge. He chuckled when he realized he was her reflection, barefoot in pyjamas and defensive stance, ready to dodge Granger's next demented jab. Then he thought about how they'd look to someone just walking in, two dirty combatants determined to draw blood in an arena of marble and glass and socks and scarves, and he laughed. It started quiet and wry, swelling louder when Granger lowered her arm, bewildered, until he was choking with mirth.

"What's so funny?" she demanded, incensed.

"Do you have any idea," his voice was almost indulgent, "how ridiculous you look?"

"You're one to talk!"

"Oh? At least I have the decency not to gatecrash your Muggle hovel and try to skewer you to death with a sewing implement."

"No, what you have is enough stupidity to believe I'd have your wand on me," said Granger, scornful. "It's the only bargaining chip I've got *of course*, I wasn't going to bring it with me."

"What are you on about now?" he said, exasperated, raking a hand through his ashy hair. "I thought you were here as Potter's little errand girl."

"Hardly! He only suggested I give it back."

"Let me understand you. You weren't trying to psychoanalyze me in Azkaban, and you're not here to give my wand back," he recapped slowly, like she was hard of hearing. "Shit, Granger. If all you wanted was to provoke me into earning a return trip to Azkaban, you only had to hand over my wand and stand still."

She made a disgusted noise. "None of this is *even about* you. I just need a book from your library, and I'll trade your wand for it."

He didn't know what he was expecting, but this non sequitur was not it. "What?"

Granger held out the knitting needle. "You're unbelievably dense. Obviously, this isn't a knitting needle. I transfigured it to make it easier to carry."

"I was supposed to understand that you wanted to borrow a book," he said, incredulous, "from pestering questions about my father and you breaking and entering at an ungodly hour with *mittens* and a needle?"

"Okay, maybe not when you put it that way," muttered Granger.

"Here's a novel thought. Why don't you try stringing together wordssane people can understand?"

She shot him a dirty look, like he'd assigned her a Herculean task. "Three months after we found the last Death Eater, I got a package in the post. It was from Dumbledore," she ignored his flinch and the tightening of his jaw, "and when I opened his letter, I found out it was a piece of Poseidon's trident."

"A what?"

"Dumbledore found it in Tutunendo, Chile while he was searching for Voldemort's Horcruxes. This is only the spear part." She pulled her wand from the torn tote bag and tapped the needle. It elongated into a silver pole tipped by a sharp arrowhead. Below it were two round holes, one bored into each side. "At the time, his highest priority was Horcruxes, so he never found the other two prongs."

A familiar knot twisted beneath his neck at the mention of Dumbledore, *old and swaying and crinkled, pleading, dead blue eyes* Hearing the Dark Lord's name in the same breath...did Granger even know how close she was to tilting the room?...set off a shiver down his left arm, and he barely restrained himself from cupping the scar. He focused on the safer words. "Why Tutunendo?"

"I don't know. Maybe because Chile's along the coast and Tutunendo's the rainiest place in the world. It could be what the trident does," she shrugged, "make rain or something."

Draco made his voice placid, uninterested. "And you want the other two pieces?"

Granger nodded, absurdly casual, like she was agreeing to tea and scones. "In his letter, Dumbledore wrote I'd get this in the post if . . . if something happened to him and someone tried to use the other pieces."

"Why *you*?"

"I don't know," she answered, worrying her lip. "But I think someone's found another fragment and is trying to figure out how it works. Sometimes when I hold it, I feel so angry. I keep seeing flashes of a flat and once, I thought I saw the Restricted Section at Hogwarts."

"If all it can do is make rain..."

"That's all *this* part can do. But Dumbledore thought that each piece would have its own power. One of the missing bits could start a hurricane, for all we know." Granger took an eager step towards him. "That's where you come in. He listed a book in his letter, *Relics and Artefacts from the Age of Gods* There're only three extant copies, and he wrote that your grandfather bought one at auction."

"And you want it to find the other pieces," he deduced flatly.

"Of course. The trident's dangerous!"

Draco snorted. "But it wouldn't be with you? You're assuming this other person's intending to kill people, you're assuming you're incorruptible and *you'd* never use it, and you're assuming that I'm going to help you. Those are a lot of assumptions, Granger."

It was almost comical how predictably she puffed up in outrage. "There's a reason Dumbledore trusted me with this," she pointed to herself *as opposed to him*, loud and clear in her disdainful glance, "and the book's useless to you anyway. You didn't even know it existed until I told you. Let me have it and you'll get your wand back."

"And give you the power to start tsunamis? Not a chance in hell!"

"Stop pretending we're talking about you. Of course, I'm not keeping it," she said, annoyed. "I'm giving it to the Ministry after I find all the pieces."

"Is that right?" he said, arching a brow. "So why haven't you already?"

"Because Dumbledore gave it to *me*. This is just like when he wanted Harry to find all the Horcruxes. He's trusting me to see this through."

"And at last we get to the truth. Finally got tired of being the sidekick, Granger? Decided you wanted your own team name and cheerleading squad?"

"For the last time, I'm...not...you. Look, I don't have time for this. Are you going to let me have the book or not?"

"Sure," he drawled, "by all means, let's rummage through granddad's secret stash of priceless books. But I've got a couple conditions of my own."

"What else do you want?" asked Granger, suspicious.

"I want in on this heroic mission. I'll give you the book if we turn in the trident together, you get my mother more visiting permits and I have my wand back."

He was mildly surprised when she only lobbed another scathing look at him before nodding stiffly. He wondered what she was holding out on him; she'd given in too easily. "All right. Fine. Where's this . . . stash?"

"In the dungeons." Draco enjoyed her dark scowl. "Come along, then."

He spent a leisurely hour showering and getting dressed, savoring the mental image of Granger wearing a hole in the carpet downstairs with her incessant pacing. When he finally led her down to the dingy library his grandfather had hidden behind a wall, he had to endure her gapes and gasps at the sheer quantity of books on the Dark Arts.

"Take care what you touch in here," he advised snidely. "Old Abraxas wasn't much of a Muggle-lover."

Draco had known from the moment he'd shown Granger the secret library he'd have to Obliviate her. He was ready when she found the blasted book four and a half hours later, under *The Little Compendium of Big Curses and Masquerading the Avada*, and she had just enough time to flash him a brilliant smile, crooked and sappy and lit with triumph, before he snatched the wand from the back-pocket of her jeans and slammed her into the dusty shelves.

Angling the wand tip into her neck, he brushed aside the errant curls crowning her pale face and whispered, "You didn't really think I'd let you walk away, did you?"

Granger's eyes swept half-closed, her inky lashes quivering. "No. Not really," she said, and a sharp pressure hooked into his ribs.

The world exploded in white splotches, roaring pressure pulsing everywhere, and he didn't even know he'd collapsed to the ground until his vision lost its warble and the blurs around him became bushy-haired, brown-eyed, *bane of his existence*, Hermione Granger. "I guess," she said, crouched over him. "I forgot to mention the trident controls anything water-based."

"What did you do?" he croaked, body still tingling and ears buzzing.

"You know that feeling you get when your foot falls asleep? Well, I just did that. To all the blood in your body."

The bitch had the audacity to pat his cheek. Granger bent down and breathed into his ear, "I'm not so green you could pull one over me, Malfoy."

She pulled back, amused, and her eyes took on a devilish glint as they flicked down to his mouth, seeing lips curled over teeth in wrath. The bitch wanted to ~~thank~~ *thank him* again, lord it over him that she'd *won*. He read her intention a heartbeat before she kissed him, as soft and unrelenting as his kiss had been hard and punishing. He tried to turn his head, but she followed him, biting his lower lip to mock him. It began sloppy and wet, but somewhere between the burn of the first touch and the sting of her teeth digging into his lip, he felt her burrowing closer, deepening the friction of their grazing lips until he'd scraped and tugged and mapped every contour of her mouth with his tongue, sliding in and out, not caring that he was betraying what he really wanted, that this was only the preamble to *how much closer* he wanted to be.

Then the heat of her was gone. Granger scrambled to her feet and hovered wide-eyed over him, mouth lush and thoroughly kissed. Her throat worked convulsively. "You weren't supposed to..."

"Bit late for that, isn't it?" he said roughly.

She rocked on the balls of her feet, skittish as a doe, and then crushed her belongings...books, scrolls, trident, wand...against her chest. She swung away from him and darted out of the hole in the wall, the loss of her bittersweet.

February the twelfth ended with Draco ransacking the family vault.

The thirteenth dawned on him reliving Abraxas Malfoy's eventful years in the stack of leather-bound journals he'd found in the false bottom of a trunk. Thumbing through hundreds of pages, he nearly missed the one rambling paragraph that vindicated his hours of feverish reading, embedded between stray allusions to his grandfather's prodigious sex life. More than once he wondered just how many cousins he really had, recognizing entirely too many salacious references to revered society matrons.

...outbid that dandy Molyneux. Bastard tried to deck me in front of the buxom Dorothea after auction. I was expecting it to be valuable, contain a map to El Dorado or Shangri-La, but it's only a bunch of sketches anyone could doodle on the back of a napkin. Thank god for Dorothea...

A folded sheet fell out when he turned the page. Smoothing the wafer-thin paper out revealed a hand-drawn map of a city, the words, "the sunken city of Herakleion and the last known location of the trident of Poseidon," catching his eye and putting a smile on his face. No doubt Granger was still searching frantically for this torn-out page. He penned her a letter certain to infuriate a saint and fell asleep still smiling, anticipating her acceptance of his invitation.

Draco was waiting for her later that morning, thrumming with the knowledge of having the upper hand, when she trudged out of the fireplace, dark circles rimming her eyes, another tote bag tucked under one arm and her wand clenched in the other. "I want your word, Malfoy," she said, keeping a wary distance. "Swear that you won't stab me in the back."

"So now my word *is* good enough? What a convenient turn of events."

Her jaw clenched at his ironic tone. "This is a lot bigger than us. Ever since I started researching Poseidon's trident, I've been keeping tabs on earthquakes, hurricanes,

tropical storms, you name it. Well, there was an earthquake off the coast of Antarctica last night. It completely submerged Bouvet Island. Thank god it was deserted but the island's literally gone..."

"Earthquakes occur all the time. How do you know it's the work of the trident?" he said, unimpressed.

"Because I saw it happen! The spear is more than just, I don't know, a way to *physically* connect the pieces. I think it also lets you know what the other parts are doing. Stop looking so skeptical...of course, I verified it. I remembered Hannah mentioning that Susan's got an internship on Queen Maud Island, so I Firecalled her and she confirmed it. They're all in an uproar..."

"Who the hell is Susan?"

"Susan Bones," she said acidly. "Hufflepuff. Our year. Half her family wiped out by Death Eaters. Fancy that, I guess there've been so many it slipped your mind."

The silent accusation in her frosty voice that somehow *this too* was his fault turned him cold. "You have a funny way of asking for help, Granger," he said, his eyes half-mast in malice.

"And you have a funny way of not giving it! That stunt you pulled yesterday..."

His lengthy strides ate up the distance between them until she was forced to tilt her head back to meet his glare. "Yes," he snapped. "Let's talk about yesterday. You and I both know you had no intention of letting me share any of the glory. You were going to steal that book and disappear."

"Stop confusing us. I keep my promises."

"That's interesting. You'll forgive me for finding that hard to believe after you almost *killed* me."

"Drop the the pitiful victim act. I saw the way you were looking at the trident. You can't be deluded enough to believe I'd let you anywhere near something so powerful..."

"You know, Granger, I'm starting to get whiplash at the number of times you've changed your story. First, it's about my *feelings*, then my wand, then my family's books, so what now? What are you after today?"

"You know exactly what I want," she waved his crinkled letter in his face, "and I'm just desperate enough to want your help. So fine, I solemnly swear that we'll share the credit for finding Poseidon's trident. But I want your *word* that this isn't just a ruse to ambush me and steal it for yourself."

"I thought my word was worthless, unlike yours," he said, sneering.

"At this point, I couldn't care less if I've hurt your feelings." Granger imitated his taunting cadence. "I think whoever it is was just testing what it could do. Who knows where he'll target next?"

"This is my final offer. My wand, more visiting permits, shared credit."

"Only if you promise..."

"You have my word as a man, a pureblood and a Malfoy that I won't betray you," he interrupted, impatient.

She grimaced at the ceremonial phrasing. "All right, fine. Where's the map?"

"My wand first."

She pulled it out of her bag and flung it at his head in a fit of pique. He caught it instinctively, heat surging up his arm at the first touch of skin and wood, warming his blood and melting his bones into molten gold; it passed in a blazing second but the feeling of warmth and *rightness* remained. He handed her the map, wondering idly if he shouldn't have demanded more at the reverent way she peeled it open.

She unfolded the sheet carefully. "Herakleion," she breathed. "So it was sabotage."

"What the blazes is Herakleion?"

"Honestly, am I the only person who's ever paid a lick of attention in History of Magic?" she asked, resignedly annoyed, and he thought *this is the face she shows Potter and Weasley*. "Herakleion was a port for Egyptian pharaohs and sorcerers. It sunk over a thousand years ago and was only recently found by Muggle divers."

"A scintillating story. But how about we skip to what's actually relevant. Is a part of the trident there or not?"

"I don't know. Maybe the trident sunk with the city or whoever used it did it somewhere else. But it's our first clue. We've got to go to the Alexandria National Museum. One of my mum's art journals mentioned that the excavated artifacts are on display there." Granger swayed closer, looking up at him brows crinkled, thoughtful, and her uncertainty was somehow intimate; her look swathed him, not piercing through or glaring at, but including him, and he realized that she was confiding, imploring him to *do something*. "But how can we even get to Egypt..."

The moment battered against the edges of his endurance. Since she'd crash-landed back into his life, he'd been imprisoned, kissed, released, tempted, tricked, attacked, kissed again, and now she was finally giving him what he'd demanded: she was letting him in, and it should've felt wrong. But heat suffused him, and he hadn't felt so *himself* since the gray morning he'd knelt on bruised knees and sworn fealty to fear and rage, corroding everything. *terrified, fantasies of running away, not daring to fail* It was unbearable that she should look at him so indifferently, counting him another lackey, when he could still feel the lines of her, sharp elbows and narrow shoulders and impertinent mouth, draped over him like a tight cloak.

"Are you a witch or not?" barked Draco.

"Well, it's not like I can Apparate us there! You're under the Trace..."

"Which can only tell if I've done magic in *Britain*. So I'll have to portkey out of here, won't I?"

"And you've got one to Egypt just lying around, do you?" she said tartly.

"Something like that." He pulled the signet ring off his left hand, onyx black and azure stones carved into a coat of arms: a knight's helmet and breastplate stark against a blue and silver mantle. "A history nut like you ought to appreciate the irony. When we were the Defoys of France," he held up the ring, "this was our family crest. With mobs of dirty Muggles trying to burn you at the stake, having a trigger-anytime Portkey on your finger comes in handy. Don't throw a tantrum, Granger. I meant *physically* dirty."

She eyed the ring suspiciously. "Where does it go?"

"My grandmother's French villa. The Ministry may be monitoring the Floo here but they've got no jurisdiction there."

"That is not the problem! I can't just let you flee the country."

"You're not *letting* me do anything. You can come along, or not," he drawled, rubbing a thumb over the crest, "but I'm going . . . right . . . now*incipio*."

Granger threw herself at him a beat before the Portkey triggered and wrenched them off the ground into a wind tunnel. It set them down in a velvet-draped room decorated in the Art Nouveau style. When the room stopped spinning, she shook him in spitting fury. "I can't believe you were going to ditch me after all the..."

"You're here, aren't you..."

"That's not the point! I can't trust you for a sec..."

"...you wouldn't even know where to *start* without me..."

"...can I? I must be out of my mind to believe anything you say..."

"...Potter and Weasel have got the patience of *saints* not to have..."

"...swear to god if you try to steal that trident I'll make you sorry..."

"...pitched you off a roof, you fucking ingrate!"

Granger leveled her wand at him. "*Petrifi*..."

He dropped the ring and slapped his hand over her mouth. Eyes snapping fire, she bit his finger hard enough to draw blood, and he cursed, jabbing his wand into her side and disarming her. She flew backwards, lashing out and trying to claw his face. He tripped her, and she toppled over the gilt-edged antique settee in a gasping heap. "Touch me again and I swear I'll put you on a one-way trip back to Azkaban!"

Draco yanked her up, not caring that his brutal grip was leaving bruises. "What makes you think you can threaten me..."

She laughed harshly. "Oh, don't be such a clichéd caricature. The big, bad bully can't handle a taste of his own medicine? Seriously?"

He thought about shaking her until her head fell off, he thought about the worst thing he could do to her, he thought about where the rightness and calm he'd felt earlier had *gone*, and in the end, he wrenched her chin up and kissed her, polluting her insufferable, vindictive body with rage. He felt her return the kiss and then freeze horrified, fighting viciously to get free, but it was too late; that first instinctive urge to *kiss him back* pounded his blood, and he wasn't going to let her escape when he was still ensnared. He dropped his head and traced the throbbing pulse in her throat, savoring the startled beating on his tongue, sucking that soft skin between his teeth; he was going to leave a mark so deep she wouldn't be able to look in the mirror without remembering every drag of his lips and...

"Mon Dieu!" cried a scandalized woman's voice.

Draco swiveled, acutely aware that her sharp gaze missed nothing. "Grand-maman."

He ignored the writhing feeling that he'd been caught with his trousers around his ankles. Draco felt every excruciating swipe of his grandmother's eyes on him and then Granger, knowing she wouldn't miss a single article of Muggle clothing. "Will you not introduce us, Draco?"

"I'm Hermione Granger," she cut in, coming to a full stop under the ice of his grandmother's court stare, because *of course*, she couldn't curb her tongue for something as mundane as courtesy.

"I am Druella Black, this silly boy's grand-mère." She pinned him with a shrewd glance. "Qu'est-ce qu'il y a? Pourquoi est-tu ici, Draco? Est-il arrivé quelque chose à ma fille?"

He kissed his grandmother softly on the cheek. "Non. Maman va bien. Mais on nous surveille en Angleterre."

"Des barbares! Alors, dis-moi ce dont tu as besoin. Et aussi, qui est cette fille?"

"T'inquiètes pas. On va pas aller se marier. C'est personne d'important..."

Granger cleared her throat. "Mrs. Black, we were hoping to use your Floo to get to Egypt."

His grandmother arched an elegant eyebrow, looking to him for confirmation. "L'Egypte?"

He nodded. "Didn't Grand-père keep his Floo connected to the major magical Ministries?"

"But of course. I have not touched the merest thing in Cygnus's office." She gestured for them to follow, and she led them through the winding hallways.

Granger trailed back and tugged his arm, hissing, "What did you say to her?"

"Nothing."

"*Not* nothing. It's never nothing with you!"

He wrenched his arm free. "Well, if you must know, I assured her that we weren't eloping."

That struck the suspicion from her face like a blow. "*Eloping*? I...that's just...what?"

"My thoughts exactly. Except with more profanity."

She pivoted away from him, fingers flexing as if she were imagining putting them around his neck. Knowing her predilection for violence, she probably was. "All right, Malfoy. Let's say we find what we're looking for. How are we getting back to England?"

"We'll portkey from here. That's the point of a safehouse, Granger. Multiple exits."

"Excuse me for not being able to crank up pathological paranoia at will."

"Why not? You've had more reason than I."

"More reason maybe," she gestured at the passing lavish paintings and delicate 18th century furniture, "but since when has that ever tipped the scale of good fortune in favor of those in need?"

Draco didn't miss the bitter lines above her eyes, smoothed clean an instant later. "What happened to wise you up? Where's the incorrigibly idealistic protector of Longbottoms and rights no one gives a shit about? You haven't even accused me of house-elf brutality, and you've been in my *home*."

She let out a coarse rush of breath, only swallowing her retort because his grandmother had halted at a stout black door, an anomaly amidst the frippery decor. It opened to

a cavernous study, animal head mounts dotting the walls and the floor cleared of any extraneous furniture, leaving only the odd chair and fur rug before the hearth. "Here we are!" crooned his grandmother, framing the doorway and fanning them inside.

"Merci, grand-maman."

"Avec plaisir. Prends garde, mon cher garçon." Then she continued in fluttery English, blue eyes slanting over Granger in disdain, "I'm sure I needn't remind you, Draco, that you are too much old now for dalliances."

When the insinuation dawned on Granger, she went still, and before he could clamp another hand over her mouth, she whirled around, eyes mockingly wide, voice hushed and solemn. "I assure you, madame, that whatever you saw was *entirely* one-sided. I'm not so cruel as to dally with *Draco's* affections."

Before his grandmother could recover, he jerked Granger to the fireplace and flung in a handful of Floo powder. "Egyptian Ministry of Magic," he snapped, and shoved her into the green flames. He turned back to the stunned old woman and said, "Je dirai à Maman que vous allez bien. A bientôt!"

Then he stepped into the sweltering heat. Granger was waiting for him on the other side, a small smile stretching her mouth, acrimonious and satisfied, as she assessed their surroundings. "There's a travel stand over there. That tour group looks ready to portkey somewhere."

A crowd milled around a wizard clutching a colorful array of balloons, all of them connected by string to a large red one at the center. "What a clever way to mass transit," murmured Granger.

"Yes, balloons, a marvel of ingenuity," he said. "Let's stand in awe less and walk more. Wouldn't want the eighth wonder of the world leaving without us."

"No need to ask where the incorrigibly irritating *git* has gone," she muttered.

They arrived as the last group vanished, and the proprietor beamed at them. "Comment puis-je vous aider?"

She edged past him. "How much to see the Alexandria National Museum?"

"Ah, not French. *Breetish*. It is twenty Galleons a person for one-hour roundtrip. Thirty for two hour..."

"When's the next trip?" he interrupted.

"The next Portkey to the Al-Saad Bassili Pasha Palace leaves in two minutes," he informed them, unhooking two pink heart-shaped balloons from the rack behind his kiosk, handing one to each. "The four-hour tour is this evening."

Draco dropped forty clattering gold pieces on the counter, smiling blandly at Granger's outraged expression. "Who says fortune never favors the needy?"

"I am not a *pauper*," she said, teeth gritted.

He ran a finger along the scruffy collar of her blue jumper. "No?"

"No, you insufferable a..."

She disappeared and then blinked back into existence, barreling into him. He dug in his heels and they narrowly avoided overturning a table littered with pottery shards. A quick survey confirmed that they were in a storeroom lined with shelves beneath white sheets. "One day, I'm going to figure out how to bottle grace and good manners," he drawled, "and drown you in it. Maybe some of it'll even take."

Granger set her jaw, shooting him a beady glare so reminiscent of McGonagall that he choked down a laugh, almost inhaling the tumbleweed of chaotic brown hair tickling his chin. "Only if I get to ram some humanity down *your* throat," she said sweetly, untangling herself.

"Bitch," he growled at her retreating back.

"Prick," rolled liltily off her tongue.

They stowed their violently embarrassing heart-shaped balloons in the storeroom, noted its location, and then set out for the museum's main floor. They blended easily with the eclectic collection of tourists and followed the stairway maps to the Graeco-Roman floor. Large posters of Muggles swimming in skintight clothing adorned the walls above glass cases of pottery and statues. Draco amused himself watching Granger scour each exhibit so intensely he suspected she was practicing wandless magic.

When they careened past a granite stela of some king with an unpronounceable name, Granger froze, fingers digging into her tote bag. "It's vibrating," she whispered.

"What?"

"The trident. I can feel it thrumming in my bag."

He swiped the air, impatient. "I heard you the first time. What does *that* mean?"

"How should I know?" she hissed.

"Have you still got it transfigured into a needle?"

"Of course! I can't be carrying a spear around..."

"Did I suggest that? Take the needle out and let's see what it's reacting to."

She pulled out the steel knitting needle. The metal rod buzzed on her palm, and she carefully loosened her grip. It pulsed, spinning slowly like a compass needle. They paced the length of the showroom, heading in the direction it indicated, and it didn't occur to him until much later that he hadn't even thought twice before draping an arm casually across her shoulders, obscuring her from view. There was something contagious about her frenzied anticipation, and he found himself scrutinizing every artifact, even sharing her sighs of disappointment.

When the needle stopped flitting about and began glowing white, they found themselves before a glass-encased silver arrowhead, curved like an antler. It was unmistakably a prong of the trident. "Malfoy," she exclaimed, leaning into him, trilling with excitement. "This is it!"

His last holdout of skepticism waned and died under her bright grin. "We'll need a distraction," he decided. "There are too many witnesses around."

"What did you have in mind?" She peered at her wristwatch. "We've got to hurry. Our Portkeys are up in seven minutes."

"We'll have to time this perfectly." He waited until the crowd thinned and the lone guard was watching a school group, the only frazzled adult batting their grubby hands away from the artifacts. "Be ready to vanish the glass and run for the stairs."

Draco retrieved the bottomless string bag from his back-pocket. Drifting to the middle of the room, he Accioed his Hand of Glory and a satchel of Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder. Throwing it in the air, he aimed his wand at its center and shouted, "Look! *Expulso!*"

His satchel exploded, black powder splattering display cases and walls and the people unfortunate enough to heed his command, coating the room in darkness. He heard Granger say, "*Evanesco!* Okay, I've got it!"

The stunned silence was broken by screams and the stampeding of panicked feet. Clutching his Hand of Glory, he had no trouble darting through and finding Granger. He snatched the crook of her elbow, tugging her to the stairwell. "It's me!"

"What did you do?" she yelled.

"It's just darkness powder."

"*Just...?*" She flinched at the sound of shattering glass. "People are going to get hurt! Wait!" She jerked her arm out of his grasp, turned and cast a Whirlwind Charm. A violent gust of wind funneled into the room, swirling darkness powder into the air and scattering it against the ceiling. With another swish, she glued it to the concrete tiles.

"What's wrong with you...they can see us now!"

"That's the point!" she cried as they raced down the stairs, bypassing a dumbfounded guard running towards the screams.

Draco stuffed his Hand of Glory back into the bottomless bag. He heard an outcry behind them followed by thundering footsteps that sounded *official* and entirely too organized. He risked a backwards glance and saw three guards in pursuit, shouting incomprehensibly into black boxes the size of bricks. He pounded around the corner, sighting the door to their storeroom at the end of the hall. He pointed his wand over his shoulder and fired off spells to trip their pursuers. "*Lapsio! Impedimenta!*"

Granger wrenched the handle down and slammed into the storeroom. Heavy thuds echoed behind him as he dashed through the doorway. She kicked it shut and locked it. "Malfoy, the balloons!"

He ripped off the sheet they'd concealed their Portkeys under and thrust one at her. "That was too close, Granger," he sniped, hauling in air, wiping the sheen of sweat from his brow. "A minute later and we'd..."

Pressure hooked onto his insides and dragged him airborne. He exhaled tensely when they rematerialized in the bustling Floo chamber of the Egyptian Ministry, three steps from the counter where the balding proprietor asked cheerfully, "Have a good trip?"

She flashed Draco the glowing tine clenched surreptitiously in her fist. "Yes," she said. "Very good."

Their good humor lasted exactly long enough to almost come to blows over where to stow the two pieces of Poseidon's trident.

They were still snarling when they returned to the Manor, the gauntlet thrown down, both wands drawn. If it weren't for a soft, clear voice cutting a swath through their angry words, it might have come to a duel. Draco turned to see his mother drifting down the staircase, sharp blue eyes drawing him back to their conversation two nights ago. *In these new times, it might be wise to make some new allies.* It was a hell of a time for his mother's practical streak to reveal itself.

"Perhaps this is a conversation better conducted over dinner," said Narcissa Malfoy, chin raised, shoulders swept back; elegant, proud. "We would be delighted if you would join us."

"I...for dinner?" said Granger, astonished.

Mother tilted her head gravely. "Yes. There is so much I want to apologize for . . . and so much we may yet learn from you. That is, if you'd be willing to accept an olive branch from us."

Draco curbed a desire to applaud. That little speech was the precise amount of appeal to mercy and humility to bowl over any bleeding heart Gryffindor. Granger didn't disappoint, her palpable hesitation warring with the noble intentions she'd wrapped her entire existence around. "Stay and you can hang onto both pieces," he offered, more magnanimous than he felt.

Her brows furrowed, as if she couldn't quite decide if his acquiescence was a mark in the *pro* or *con* column. Finally she nodded, pocketing her wand. "All right. I'll stay."

It wasn't until the end of the first course, inanities leeching the meal of flavor, that Mother broached the precarious topic of their mutual past. "I am so sorry," she spoke, regret hollowing out the strained pleasantries, "for what Bella...Bellatrix did to you. It was cruel, and I should have put a stop to it."

"Yes," said Granger with equanimity. "You should have."

"I missed many opportunities over the years to do something, I see that now," his mother said slowly. "And by the time I realized differently, it was too late. I was . . . frankly, I spent most of Draco's sixth and seventh years terrified that he'd be killed. That Lucius would be killed. I imagine that's how all of you felt for years."

"Mother!" he said sharply. "Granger doesn't need to hear..."

"Actually, I do," she interjected, incisive brown eyes boring into his mother's face, searching for *god only knew what* but whatever it was, she nodded as if she'd found it. "Thank you. I know that you were acting under duress. But that doesn't change how I feel about her death. Bellatrix Lestrange tortured my friend's parents, killed the closest person Harry had to a parent, tried to kill so many people I consider family, hurt *me*...I wonder if you know how hard it is for me to even be here."

"I couldn't possibly," said his mother, shaking her head, expression properly morose.

"And I'm not so naïve that I don't know why I'm sitting here. I've already promised Mal...your son that I would do my best to get more visiting permits. And with the Amnesty Act gaining traction at the Ministry, there's a good chance your husband will be home soon."

"What Amnesty Act?" he asked harshly.

Granger turned to him, thoughtful, resting her chin on interlaced fingers. "I'm surprised you haven't heard of it. Shackbolt thinks that tossing everyone connected to Voldemort in Azkaban," she ignored their flinches, "is only going to perpetuate the hate. Imprisoning Death Eaters is one thing, but punishing their family members, especially sons and daughters...it neither brings back the dead nor helps the living heal."

"Are you saying the Ministry bigwigs are going to free my father?" he demanded.

"Yes. It's not something I...well, let's agree to disagree about it. But in light of what your mother did for Harry, *foal* of us by saving Harry," said Granger, her gaze full of a sense of obligation, "let's just say there's not much chance he'll serve his entire sentence. There's been a delegation at Azkaban every day this week reviewing which prisoners should be released first."

Draco stood, momentum nearly flinging his chair over. "Granger," he spat. "I want to speak to you outside. Now. Excuse us, Mother."

She cocked her head at this unseemly display of temper, and looked askance at his mother, who nodded graciously, long inured to his capricious moods. Then she followed him to the hallway, wood double-doors clanging shut behind her. "What's the matter now?"

"You've been lying to me since Azkaban," he snarled. "You even lied about what your *lie* was."

"How do you figure?" she said, arching a brow.

"You told me Potter commuted my sentence. But that's not true, is it? It's your bloody delegation that signed my walking papers. Admit it."

"I'll admit it," she said. "What of it?"

"If Potter wasn't responsible, then the pretext you gave is bullshit. I doubt he even knows you're here. Returning my wand was only a ploy to steal my grandfather's book, wasn't it? And when I didn't say, 'how high' every time you said 'jump,' you threatened to send me back to Azkaban. But that's an empty threat. I wasn't sprung out on your or Potter's whim. I'm a legitimately free man. And I have had *enough*. I want the truth. Now."

"I didn't lie to you, Malfoy." Granger sighed wearily, tucking an unruly curl behind her ear. "I just . . . didn't tell you everything."

He spread his arms, an odd smile twisting his mouth. "I'm all ears."

"Dumbledore tracked the missing piece to London. No one used it during the war, and he was afraid that someday, someone would be desperate enough to try. When I singed you with it, that was only a tiny spell, and it gave me a horrible migraine afterwards. What the trident does...it's meant to be used on a cataclysmic scale. With the user's life as its fuel."

"Not good enough. You knew I would be released the next day. What were you doing in Azkaban?"

"This part, I was going to tell you when I was sure." She rubbed her wrists absently, eyelids lowered in remembrance. "I told you about my visions. But I also saw names, your family and other Death Eaters, written on a wall. I had this gut feeling that whoever wrote them didn't have benevolent intentions. When I realized everyone on the list was incarcerated, I went to Azkaban . . . and Malfoy, that place's built like a house of cards. Protected from magic, yes, but not from hurricanes or tidal waves. Then I learned Bouvet Island had been wiped out by an earthquake. The whole thing felt like an experiment, and I knew I *had* to find the other trident fragment."

"Are you saying whoever's got the missing part is going to trigger an earthquake to destroy Azkaban?" he said, a razor chill slicing through his chest.

"I don't know. But if he wants to hurt the people on that list, there's no better time than now. The delegation'll grant more and more people amnesty. Malfoy, with these two pieces, we're stronger than him. We can stop him!"

"Stop him?" he repeated, disbelieving. "You think I give a fuck about *him*? I want my father moved from Azkaban. I want him out now!"

"You know I can't do that!"

"No? What good are your heartfelt ballads and sentiments if you won't lift a bloody finger to save my father?" he roared.

Granger pressed a knuckle over her eyebrow, setting her mouth into a mulish line. "I told the delegation my suspicions, and they laughed me out of the room; you know how stuffy bureaucrats are! But now that we've got both parts of the trident, we have *evidence*," she said, eyes smoldering, imploring. "We can show them how dangerous this thing is..."

"And while we're giving our damn presentation, my father could *be* killed!"

"That won't happen. I'll know when he uses the trident. We might have enough time to evacuate everyone. Or - or we can connect the two parts we have and use it to protect the island."

"How? I thought you said the cursed thing was powered by human life?"

"Well, it's not a Horcrux. You don't have to kill anyone. It operates on the . . . self-sacrificial principle."

Draco laughed brutally. "And you'd risk your life for a bunch of Death Eaters?"

"Yes," she answered softly.

He clenched his fists to keep himself from touching her; he wanted to wrap them around her narrow shoulders and shake the selflessness out of her. "The thing I hate most about you, Granger," he said, "is that you mean it when you say shit like that."

"Do you? You prattle on and on about lies and bullshit. Acting all indignant and betrayed because I'm no more truthful to you than you are to me. But you know what? I don't really care about outsmarting you anymore. You keep expecting me to blindly trust you without once returning the favor, and I don't know how you do it. It's *exhausting* being so suspicious all the time. And the funny thing is, I think it throws you. Because I have this ridiculous idea that for all your scorn for my feel-good principles, you wouldn't want me any other way."

She took a step, and another and one more, until they were separated only by a wisp of air. She was almost a head shorter, and staring straight. He moved instinctively to turn his shoulder aside, pushing his scar from view, startled at their sudden proximity. Her eyes drifted to his collarbone. "This must've hurt," she said.

"What are you..."

"But the strange thing is, you don't glamour it. You don't do anything to hide it. I think on some level, you're glad Harry did this to you." She traced a finger along his marred collarbone, running down the curve of his scar, as if she could see through his shirt, his skin, his bones. He expelled a trembling breath, waiting to be flayed. "What I hate about *you*, Malfoy," she murmured, "is that you're so full of shit. Stop lashing out at everyone just because you're consumed by self-loathing."

"You don't know the first thing about me," he rasped.

"I wouldn't say that." Granger smiled faintly, gripping the tail-end of his shirt. "We grew up together, really. I always thought Ron was his own worst enemy, but he's an amateur compared to you. I don't know anyone better at self-sabotage than you."

Draco seized her hand, unwilling to fling it away and unable to keeping holding on, contorting his features into what he hoped was revulsion. "Funny, I never pegged you for the delusional romantic."

"Hardly delusional. No one could accuse me of seeing a prince under all your sneers and vicious slurs."

"Then what do you *want*?"

"I don't know," she tried to free her hand but he refused to let go, didn't dare give her an inch, because she was the girl who always took a mile, "but I think I'm learning to like you. For all your horridness, there are moments when you're worth knowing."

He made one last valiant effort to deny to himself that he wanted to kiss this girl, that he'd wanted to kiss her since the first time she didn't give him any choice. But this was the girl who'd defied his every attempt to *explain* her since the moment they'd met, smudged all lines in the sand, who had no qualms ruining him, no illusions that he was *good*, and yet didn't care, wanted to be near him despite the history and prejudice and hate. What he saw in her quiet scrutiny felt a little like faith. "You're going to regret this," he told her, voice dipping low, husky.

"No." Granger's brown eyes raked his face, drifting to the heartbeat he was trying desperately to hide, pounding in his throat. "This won't hurt a bit," she promised, and pushed her lips against his mouth, feather soft, enough pressure to cave his chest in.

There was no anger, no motives, no force; she kissed him like it was the first time, shy and tentative, the best welcome hello in the world.

Someone once told him that reality is relative, and the hallowed facts and truths he'd layered his life over *blood, honor, duty*...were misnomers.

For a sliver of a moment, Draco believed it. He accepted that perception was truth, that it wasn't sinful and disgusting to want to drag this girl closer until she blotted out reality altogether, swayed him within the way she already tainted everything without, made him *notice, care, do*.

Then Granger slumped into him, eyes scrunched shut, and sensibility returned. "What's wrong?"

"It's him. I don't understand...it looks like he's standing in a blizzard. It feels so cold," she whispered, fingers digging into her temples.

He braced her crumpled form. "You see anything else?"

"No. But he's furious. And there's something in the dist...no, it's gone now." Granger raised her head, pushing off him gently. "I think I was wrong about how much time we have."

He touched the two glowing barrettes pinning back her hair. "We have to warn someone. What about Shackebolt?"

"It's no good. He's been closeted in a closed door meeting with the Russian and American Ministers all this week. Apparently, Harry defeating Voldemort means our government is the de facto expert on felling Dark wizards."

"Terrific. Short of storming Azkaban and flailing until they let everyone out, have we got any other options?"

"We could," she hesitated, "reassemble the trident. If one part gives visions, maybe two'll broadcast a clear picture."

"What do we actually know about it? The spear controls water, makes it rainy. The missing part triggers earthquakes. What does the one we stole do?"

"I don't know," she bit her lip, "I didn't even know *how* to use the spear until I gave it a try and it just . . . knew what I wanted. I mean, according to mythology, which is about as reliable as someone telling a funny story in a pub, Poseidon also controlled ocean currents."

"So what, tidal waves?"

"That would make sense."

"Then what's to stop us from fighting back? Look, no earthquake, no matter how powerful, is going to dislodge the wards anchoring Azkaban to that Unplottable spot. But you said it yourself, there's nothing protecting the fortress from being submerged by a tsunami. If he triggers an earthquake that sets one off, why can't we raise a wall of water to protect the island?"

"We *can*, but that kind of power doesn't come free. There's a cost. Maybe years of life."

"Then consider it the death-imminent contingency plan we don't use," he said grimly, breaching the distance between them, pausing when she forced herself still, refusing to heed the instinct to shy away, and threaded a hand through her curls.

She shivered when he pulled off the barrettes. Not meeting his eyes, Granger tilted her head, shaking loose a cascade of hair that hid her face, and flicked her wand, undoing the transfiguration. She angled the spear tip-first towards him and held out the curved tine. It sparked warm between his fingers, shaking like a nail near a magnet, and he felt the reservoir of power in him through the metal; he only had to tap it, *such possibility*, he visualized channeling that cool, seductive energy, cresting every wave and ripple into infinity, and all he had to do was *wish*...

His head whipped back from the force of Granger slapping him. "Malfoy! This is exactly why I wouldn't let you touch it!"

Clearing the wool clogging his throat, he ignored his throbbing head to focus on the five strips of pain splayed across his face. "Damn it, could you have hit me any harder?" he hissed.

"Being fond of you doesn't mean I'm suddenly going to kowtow to your every megalomaniacal urge. On three," she continued, ignoring his vitriol, "one, two, three!"

The two pieces slid together, neat as two sheets of melted metal, flaring white. The hall fragmented, paint chipping into darkening sky, tiles bleeding into rock, and he found himself staring down the buttress of a too-familiar fortress into an orange horizon of water beneath a setting sun. Draco pried his fingers off the humming trident, now a perfectly curved glaive, and croaked, "Fuck, Granger. He's right above my cell."

"We have to sound the alarm at the Ministry..."

"There's no time!" He reached for her hand, yanking her to the fireplace in the foyer. "If we don't stop him now, there won't be anything for those cock-up Aurors to Fldo."

"If we rush in without any..."

"For once in your life," snapped Draco, "would you act first and analyze to death later? Azkaban!"

They pitched through green flames and stumbled out into a waiting room, the watchwizard on duty, slouched in his chair, droning, "Visiting hours are over. Please come back tomorrow at..."

"Who just Flooded in?" demanded Draco.

The watchwizard swung his legs off the battered desk and frowned. "What business is it of yours, Malfoy? Just got out and already making trouble..."

"I don't have time for this," he snarled. "Whoever just came through is going to kill everyone here!"

"It's true, Ernest," assured Granger, holding out a hand in appeal. "He's dangerous."

"*He?*" The grizzled man snorted. "I don't know what you kids are playing at, but you've got no business here after hours. Now, are you going to leave all peaceable or..."

Draco jabbed the end of the trident into the watchwizard's side, waiting until the man seized violently before crashing over his desk, shaking. "Relax," he said when Granger made for the fallen man, "It's the same thing you did to me. It wears off, remember?"

She swallowed hard. "Right. Okay . . . this way to the roof."

They darted through the crooked passageways, dashing past empty and occupied cells without a second glance. Thundering up the narrow stairs, they saw that the door was already open, swaying on creaky hinges. Every other step, bursts of fury and fierce wind pulsed through the metal, and as he cleared the last stair, he swept Granger behind the crook of his arm and charged the figure perched on the ledge, trident swinging. "That's enough!" he shouted.

It was a woman. Her long plait of hair whipped erratically in the torrential wind when she turned to face them, eyes dark and mouth curved into an inconsolable, satisfied smile. "You're too late," she told them, voice hoarse, cradling the missing shard of the trident like a knife.

"Susan?" said Granger, stunned.

Draco remembered the Susan Bones from school, merely another victim in crowds of schoolchildren marked for death, a girl he only knew by sight. But there was nothing of that girl in this woman, once unlined face now ravaged and cracked, streaks of white creeping down her hair, spine bent, limbs twisting tighter, gnarled. He knew she was right; he could sense the roaring tremors beneath the sea far, far away, shock waves battering ripples into tides into surges into a tsunami that would smear Azkaban off rock into sea.

"The blizzard, your Ministry internship in Antarctica, that's why Ernest let you in and laughed at us. I've been so blind," whispered Granger. "But - *but why*, Susan?"

"You thought you were the only one eavesdropping? I saw you talking to those backstabbing bureaucratic traitors! They want to free these murdering Death Eater scum!" she cried over the thrashing wind. "Rapists and killers and torturers, every one of them! Do you have any idea what they've done to me? To my family? *Do you?*"

"Stop it! Can't you see it's killing you?"

"You th-think I care about that?" said Susan, eyes delirious, teetering as a mountain of water rose in the distance behind her, slowly obscuring the setting sun.

Granger jerked forward, fists clenched. "But there are other people here! Aurors and guards and..."

"They're complicit," spoke Susan harshly. "All of them..."

There was no time and no options. The image of Susan, nearly skeletal, trembling from the strain of her life siphoning away, and Granger, vibrant and angry and even now, sympathetic, burned in his vision. He thought about his gaunt father, nearly all his hair shaved, waiting in a dark room, the first hint that he would soon be dead the water flooding slowly into his walled cell, and he would yell and scream and kick at the door, but no one would be there to let him out, and he'd swim fighting to keep his head above water until there was no space left, then he'd burn inside, lungs charring, until he lost consciousness and breathed to death. No, *not* his father and *not* Granger.

And he knew what he had to do. He'd felt that pool of power just beyond reach; only a grasp and it would be his.

"Malfoy, no!"

Draco slammed the trident into a crack between the stones in the ground and *fell into the abyss within*. It was so simple to scoop the tides splashing against this little rock, where hundreds of unaware water bodies sat in their cells and offices and patrolled corridors, and fling it into the air, a curtain of roiling sea unfurled. He was above, below, in the liquid dome that distorted the dying sun and gold clouds and open sky, *all his to command*. He felt the faraway earthquake like a soft rumble and he stomped it silent. When the first tidal waves smashed into the ball of water encircling Azkaban, he absorbed them, then came the tsunami, pure terrifying relentless, and he poured its smooth edges into the shield, melting enraged storm into drizzling rain.

But why stop there? There was so much more he could do; this small sea was nothing to the vast oceans caressing mere specks of land. With only a thought, he could smash the dirty landmasses into mud and have water, only water...

"Malfoy! You have to stop! *Please!*" echoed a scream, trailing his barely audible heartbeat.

Granger. *Granger*. He hurtled through the void, wind whistling in his ears, and he was torn out of himself, sheathed in physicality, skin bones blood, and thrown onto uneven ground. "Granger?" he rasped, vision reforming into a pale face, dry tracks of tears under pleading eyes.

"Oh my god," she said, on trembling knees. "I didn't know if I could pull you out."

Draco spotted the fallen trident lying in the dirt next to the moaning body of Susan Bones, and remembered *Granger wrapping herself around him, bearing the slicing pain, sharing the cost of his rupture of power*. "Did it work?"

The light drizzle became pouring rain. "Yeah," she told him, clutching his hand. "You saved everyone."

"Well, damn," he said softly. Water soaked into his clothes and dripped down his face. He laughed, shaky; free, joyous, ironic. "What a coup, finally beating Potter to the punch. And it's not even the best part."

Granger leaned down, peering unblinkingly, as if trying to discern brain damage. "There's a best part?"

"For 93 blasted days, I looked out the window of my rusting cell and prayed for rain. For thunder, for a storm, for *anything* to break the nothing. But it never did. Not one drop. My damn prison wasn't the bars or atrocious food. It was the monotony, the bloody drought, air so still it felt like breathing sludge. And now I finally get something right, but of course, playing hero hurts like hell. *Of course*, it's finally fucking pouring when I'm probably dying for it."

"Don't you dare, you melodramatic ass!" she said fiercely. "If you die on me, I-I'll bring you back and curse you to death myself!"

"Morbid," he said. "But a deranged kind of sweet, I suppose. Don't get so worked up, Granger. It's not too attractive from this angle. A little scary, even. Oh, stop glaring. You should know better than anyone the only surefire way to shut me..."

Granger kissed him, and shy bitter desperate need made him arch and raise aching arms to envelop her shivering body, burying her so close he felt not wet, cloying clothes but colliding heartbeats and singeing slick skin. He heard whirring voices and stampeding footfalls above, but that would matter later and for another night.

For now, for every now, there was only this...Granger and rain to quench a merry and desperate drought.

Fin.