Castle

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Chapter 1 of 1

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"Dammit, Malfoy, you scared me half to death." Hermione reached down to pick up the book she dropped. "You shouldn't be lurking in the shadows like that."

"Maybe you shouldn't be down in the dungeons after curfew, Granger. Never know what type of danger is creeping about, might not be safe for a Mudblood." He stepped forward, forcing her closer to the wall.

Hermione rolled her eyes. There had hardly been any bite in his threat. "Using that disgusting word make you feel better? I'm not afraid of you, Malfoy." She tried hard to believe those words but, truthfully, she didn't feel completely safe around him.

He backed off slightly. "What are you doing down here?"

Fiddling with the edges of her book, she said, "I was working on my Transfiguration essay and then Ron and Lavender started...talking and, well, I remembered that Professor Slughorn said I could use the Potions classroom anytime I wanted to. There are some finer points of Amortentia I've been meaning to go over, for NEWTs." She stopped, realizing she was babbling.

What was wrong with her, going on and on like that? She needed to get out of here. There was something about the way Malfoy was looking at her that made her uncomfortable. Taking a deep breath she started to walk away.

He blocked her path. Her first thought was to hex him, the insufferable git, but something stopped her.

Malfoy laughed and leaned in to speak in her ear. "Must be easy for you, Granger. All you have to worry about is NEWTs and who Weasley's shagging." She ignored the feeling in her stomach that came as his hot breath stroked the shell of her ear. "You have no fucking clue about what's really going on here, do you? Every day it gets a little closer."

'*Now!* her brain was screaming. Now would be a good time to hex him or push him away. "What are you talking about? What's getting closer?"

"Death."

She took in a gulp of air. He was joking; just trying to scare her a bit. But something in his tone told her otherwise. Studying his face closely, she realized he looked like death itself. It was as if he was wasting away. Maybe Harry was right and Malfoy *was* up to something.

Suddenly looking defeated, he said, "Go on, Granger, get out of here." She didn't move. This was it. She should say something; do something to stop him. Damn, this was supposed to be Harry or Dumbledore, not her. Why was he talking to her? She didn't want this responsibility.

"Malfoy." She reached for his hand. Merlin, what was she doing! He'd probably kill her right in this hallway for touching him. Her brain was scrambling for the right words.

He looked down at their intertwined hands. "It doesn't matter. One way or the other, I'm already gone." He slipped his hand out of hers.

Hermione held her breath as she watched him walk away.

"What are you doing?"

"Huh?" Hermione stopped pushing her food around as she turned to Ginny. "I'm eating."

"No, you're not. You've hardly touched anything and if I didn't know any better I'd say you've been staring at Malfoy."

"That's absolutely ridiculous." Her cheeks blushed. "I haven't been feeling well is all." Beyond exhausted was more like it; she hadn't slept properly in days.

"Hermione, something is wrong and I know it. Just tell me."

"I'm fine," she insisted. "And no, nothing happened." She tried not to but her eyes glanced over to where Malfoy sat. She felt bad for lying to Ginny, but really, what was there to tell? She had her suspicions about him but nothing more than Harry had already feared. Their conversation in the dungeons had yielded no concrete evidence that she could bring to Dumbledore.

"Fine, don't tell me." The anger was evident in Ginny's voice.

"It's not important. Can't you just let it drop?" she pleaded.

An almost triumphant smile appeared on Ginny's face. "So there *is* something!"

"I said it's *not* important," she spat out through gritted teeth. Merlin, that was a bold-faced lie. She hadn't stopped thinking about what had happened for days. Malfoy's words were eating away at her. She needed to talk with him again to try to convince him that it wasn't true; he wasn't beyond saving just yet.

If she didn't at least try to, she would regret it.

Hermione spotted him walking out of the Great Hall alone. This was her chance. She quickly grabbed her books and said goodbye to Ginny.

Suddenly she felt a hand reach out and pull her into an alcove outside the door.

"What the hell, Granger! Are you following me?"

"No... yes, but I just wanted to talk."

He chuckled and pulled her further into the alcove. "I prefer our chats be in the dungeons," he purred into her ear, mimicking their previous encounter. She realized that this may have been a mistake.

Trying to maintain her bearings she spoke calmly, "It isn't true, what you said before. Whatever it is you're planning on doing, you don't have to."

He pushed her forcefully into the wall. "What do you know about what I *have* to do? My family has nearly been destroyed and I will do what I need to save what's left."

Looking at him, her heart clenched at the desperation in his eyes. "No, you don't understand. Volde... he is willing to destroy anything that gets in his way. Doing this won't keep you safe forever. You need to stop him! You need to stop this!"

He pushed his face closer to hers. She could feel warm air cascading over her lips. "Listen, you stupid bint, just leave me alone. You're wrong. He will kill me and my mother if I don't. There's nothing I can do to change that."

When he walked away, she wanted to scream at him that he was the *only* one who could prevent it.

"You're stirring it too fast!"

He ignored her, just like he had been all class. She was getting frustrated and almost missed Professor Snape and his intolerance of inter-house partners.

"Malfoy, just let me do it or we'll have to start all over for the second time!"

"Well, if you could manage to tear your eyes away from Weasley's arse, we wouldn't be doing it twice to begin with, now would we?" He was right; she had accidentally put in too much fluxweed. But it had nothing to do with Ron. This entire time she had been distracted by Malfoy's presence near her. It disturbed her that he could get under her skin so easily.

"Oh, I'm glad to see that you're speaking to me now."

He laughed and began making the proper number of counter-clockwise stirs. "I hadn't realized we were on speaking terms to begin with."

"We're not, but that's never stopped you from spouting off insults. You haven't said a word to me and it's because you're mad about what happened."

He slammed down his wand and stepped closer to her, invading her space. "Keep your mouth shut, Granger!"

She looked at him defiantly. "And if I don't? What are you going to do?"

Leaning in, so no one could hear him, he said, "Maybe our next little private chat won't end so well."

She would have laughed at the idea that either of their encounters had ended all that well, but he was standing too close, and she couldn't breathe quite right. The thought crossed her mind that he might be desperate enough to be serious. She turned and looked at her Potions book, still trying to get her breathing under control.

Apparently, he wasn't finished. He pressed up against her back, leaning over her shoulder as if he were reading the book with her. Turning his head slightly, he said, "I mean it, Granger. I want it all to stop. I see the way you look at me. You're trying to save me like I'm some bloody house-elf."

"You know what you're doing is wrong. Just let me..."

He thrust forward, pushing her stomach into the edge of the table. She winced in pain. "I don't want to hear what you consider wrong or right. And I'm certainly not seeking any salvation from a filthy Mudblood."

"You're a liar. You wouldn't even be bothering to talk to me if that were true, and I know it."

His stance slackened a little, and he dipped his head a fraction of an inch into her hair. She held her breath, waiting for him to move away. After a few minutes, the warmth

of his body behind her started to make her uncomfortable. She wanted to get away, but he seemed so insistent on keeping her there. She was almost afraid to move. "Malfoy, please." He shushed her. She could feel his chest moving against her back.

Finally, he stepped away as the professor moved towards them.

"Oh, bugger. I forgot to send that letter."

Harry shot Hermione a worried look. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, thanks. You go on."

"Good, 'cause I'm starving." He gave her a friendly kiss on the cheek.

She smiled at him and hurried towards the West Tower.

When Hermione finally reached the Owlery, the sound of a voice inside startled her; she hadn't expected anyone to be there during supper time. She recognized it immediately and her instinct was to run. Being alone with Malfoy again made her queasy. He had upset her that day in Potions, and she had been unconsciously avoiding him since. Trying to truss up her confidence, she gripped her wand fiercely.

It seemed Malfoy hadn't seen her yet. Good, she'd do this quickly and quietly so she could get out of there as fast as possible. He was whispering to his owl, his voice soft and almost childlike, as if the owl was an old family pet he told all his deep, dark secrets.

She sighed louder than she had intended. Malfoy looked up and threw her an accusatory glare.

"I'm not following you. I just needed to send this straight away," she said defensively.

He reached her side in only a few strides. Malfoy stroked her owl's beak as he spoke, "Given up on me already, Granger? What happened to all that Gryffindor rubbish about courage?"

"No, I just..." she let her voice trail off. It was a hopeless fight; he would never see her side of things. That fact did nothing to diminish her guilt. He smiled triumphantly.

"Isn't that what you want?" Her guilt quickly changed into anger. How dare he accuse *her* of being a coward! "It's not as if you'd listen to me!"

He grabbed her shoulders, pushing her against the edge of the window. "You're right, Granger. I have no intention of listening to you." He was holding her tightly, yet his hands were perfectly steady. She hated that he seemed so calm. She wanted him feel off kilter like she did.

So she kissed him.

It was a tiny peck and her lips barely touched his. Hermione expected Malfoy to be disgusted. She almost laughed, thinking how she had gotten the better of him.

He reacted by kissing her back violently, his mouth closing over hers tightly. She felt as if she couldn't breathe. Tiny pinpricks of pain erupted as he entwined his fist in her hair, using it to keep her head steady. The weight of his body pinned her wand arm against the wall. She tried to push him away with her free hand but he was relentless. The taste of blood hit her tongue as he pressed her lips even harder against her own teeth.

Then, for a brief moment, the kiss became almost tender before he dragged his mouth to her ear. "Don't, Granger. Don't start things you're not willing to finish."

He left her standing there, shaking slightly.

"Where might I find *Theories of Transubstantial Transfiguration*?"

Madam Pince gave her a critical look and handed her a slip of parchment.

Hermione stopped and glanced around before proceeding into the main library. She knew what she was doing and hated herself for it.

She was looking for him.

And if it weren't for Pansy Parkinson's annoyingly loud laugh drawing her attention to Malfoy's table, she would have missed him. Good, he was sitting far from the shelf she needed. Turning quickly on her heels, she headed towards the stacks, almost positive that he didn't have time to spot her.

"Damn!" she muttered under her breath. Where in the bloody hell was that book? Madam Pince must have written down the wrong location.

"Looking for something, Granger?"

The sudden intrusion startled her.

"Yes, I was looking for that." She nodded to the book resting in Malfoy's hands. "Why do you have it?"

"Same reason you're looking for it, I suppose. Transfiguration essay. It's due Friday."

"Yes, I *know* when it's due. Are you done with it?"

"Yes." He moved closer. Their bodies were almost touching. He was taunting her, trying to get her to fight with him. He leaned down and whispered into her ear, "Tell me what you want, Granger."

"The book." She tried to make her voice strong and steady.

He came slightly nearer, and she backed away, keeping their previous distance. "Is that *all* you want?" He pressed his mouth to her ear, keeping his voice low. She was shaking slightly. Dammit, just hex him and get out of here!

"Scary isn't it, Granger? To want something you shouldn't."

Leaning forward, she said, "Yes. Almost as scary as being forced to do something you don't want to." It was a low blow. She had said it to make him angry. So he'd do something stupid and give her good reason to hex his bits off. But when she looked up at him, all she saw was pain.

Now she was at a loss. He was just standing there, looking at her. She almost *wanted* him to shove her up against the stacks and call her an ugly Mudblood. At least she knew how to react to that. So she did what she would have if Harry or Ginny had looked at her that way.

She slipped her arms around his neck.

He did nothing to return her hug. It wasn't as awkward as she would have thought. She was about to let go when she felt his lips brush the skin of her neck. It sent a shock of electricity through her body, and unconsciously she gripped him tighter. She almost thought it was an accident, but when he did it again a second time, she let out a small gasp. His lips lingered for a moment and then he dragged them slowly across her throat. She didn't dare breathe.

When the sound of Madame Pince's footsteps became louder, he walked away without a word.

"What are you doing up here, Granger?"

She didn't answer, watching him as he placed his broom against the edge of a seat. He spoke again as he removed the elbow pads of his uniform. "Don't tell me you've been sitting here, watching me fly for at least an hour, and now you have nothing to say."

Had she really been there that long? She paused before speaking; maybe this was a bad idea. "I... Harry told me what happened. I wanted to see if you were really okay."

"Just dandy," he said with sarcasm. "Get out of here, Granger. I don't need your pity. Go back to chasing Weasley. I heard he broke it off with that brainless slag, so now's your chance."

"No." She stood directly in front of him. "I want to stay. Now, what did Madam Pomfrey say about how you're healing?" She gestured to his chest.

"Nothing. I didn't see her."

Unease spread across her face at his admission. "Well, Snape must've told you to use Dittany."

"Yes."

"Well, is it working properly?" His nonchalant attitude irritated her.

He moved forward, causing her to step back closer to the edge of the stands. "Stop it! You are not my mother or my nursemaid!" He leaned in and said through gritted teeth, "I want you to leave me alone."

His anger didn't surprise her but that his words hurt so much did. What the hell was she doing? He didn't deserve her concern.

"You know, you're right. What was I thinking!" Her composure was failing and she felt the tears stinging her eyes. "I shouldn't have come here."

"Right, you shouldn't have." He gave her a gloating smile.

"And to think I actually cared," she muttered under her breath as she shoved past him.

He caught her arm. His grip was tight, painfully so. "Hurts doesn't it?" He took her other arm, pulling her close. "To care, when you shouldn't."

Her heart pounded as he propelled them both backwards toward the edge of the stands, high above the ground. Just when she thought he was going to do something rash, like toss her over the side, he captured her mouth in a searing kiss.

It was nothing like the last time, when he had been trying to hurt her.

When she responded, he groaned and lifted her up onto the low wall that separated them from the pitch far below. The feeling that she might fall made her pulse race and instinctively she wrapped her legs around his torso.

It was far longer than it should've been before she realized _what_ exactly she was doing. She forced herself to stop him. "Malfoy..." Slowly her breath came back. "We can't."

Resting his forehead against hers, he whispered, "I know." She watched his face. His eyes were tightly closed. She wanted to say something to change things. If only he would accept her help. Knowing he wouldn't, she pushed him gently and slipped away without looking back.

"Dammit, Malfoy! Watch where you're going!"

Hermione studied the hand she used to brace herself. The stone wall had scratched it slightly.

"Granger, what are you doing here? It's past curfew," Draco said, his voice tinged with anger and surprise.

"_I'm_ doing my rounds." She liked to make the Astronomy Tower her last stop. "What exactly is _your_ reason for being out this late?"

Ignoring her question, he asked, "I thought you had them yesterday?"

"What?" He kept track of her schedule? "I switched with Hannah, she had some..."

He cut her off. "Where's Macmillian?" What was the problem? Prefects traded duties all the time.

"He's taking a first year to the hospital wing."

His agitation scared her. Suddenly he was dragging her away from the stairway that led to the tower. "Go! Now! You are not supposed to be here."

"No! I will not. Not until you tell me what's going on!" She looked directly at him but he avoided her gaze. Then it dawned on her. Everything that Harry said, everything that she knew to be true was happening. She clasped her hand over her mouth, slowly removing it before she spoke. "Draco, what have you done?"

She thought maybe her use of his given name had startled him. He paused briefly before shoving her further away from the entrance to the tower. "I said leave!"

"Please, tell me," she pleaded. "It's not too late. I know it isn't." She wouldn't let go of his robes, forcing him to face her.

"Don't look at me like that. It's always been too late. I need to do this. To save my family. To save everyone I love!"

The pain that filled her stomach was unexpected. His words roared in her ears. _Everyone I love_ but not her he didn't love her. Hermione hadn't realized until that very moment that she wanted him to. She knew she wasn't in love with him. Why would she think that he might feel differently? Because he had _kissed_ her, _wanted_ her, and deep down in a place she kept hidden even from herself, she thought that he might love her.

It was a foolish fantasy, that somehow loving her would be enough to change him, to make him do the right thing.

It took her a moment to realize tears were streaming down her face. Angry tears shed at her own stupidity.

His posture changed as he pulled her closer. Roughly brushing his thumbs across her cheeks, he wiped the tears away.

Without thought she kissed him, slowly at first, increasing the intensity until it became almost painful. His hands pressed fiercely against her back. Minutes passed and the burning in her lungs traveled to her throat, yet she continued, as if kissing him would stop time. Eventually, her need for oxygen forced her to let up slightly, and he used the opportunity to pull away. "Go, find Potter. Warn him if you can."

With that he disappeared up the stairs.