

# This Mortal Coil

by Terra

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## One (of Three)

Chapter 1 of 3

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*"Tell me. When are you going to let me in?"*

I should've known then that all roads led to you.

No, I'm not talking about fate or some romantic bullshit. God, who I've surmised is a scorned woman from my hellhole of a life, only knows why females need to read cosmic implications into every fleeting feeling. Just the other day, I was at Florean Fortescue's when I was accosted. *No*, I'm not stalking you. I just need that jar of honey. And no, I'm not tongue-tied because my feelings are threatening to overwhelm me. You've actually appalled me into silence. I don't remember seeing you a day before in my life...oh, were we in the same House? Well, this is awkward. Theresa, Tina . . . *Tracey*, you say. Right. Of course. No, I'm not staring because I'm too shy to ask you out to dinner. I really do need that honey.

What it boils down to is coincidence. And I've decided the only suitable entity to blame all my misfortunes on is you, Granger, considering God hasn't seen fit to bless me with a single favor in at least twelve years. Potter, the Man-with-Rainbows-Shooting-from-his-Arse, clearly being her, yes *her*, anointed savior on earth and hopefully her nancyboy whipping post in the thereafter. That's right, I blame you. It came to me in a moment of clarity between my eighth tequila shot and the strangest desire to order a Bikini Appletini. It began, as you know, with my nonappearance at my wedding. Terrible scandal, that. No, don't get up! I know you know the story, but I want...*need* you to hear it. Because you see, that was the end of the beginning.

Pansy was dressed to the nines. In truth, I stood outside those crenellated double-doors for over an hour, anticipation scraping the back of my throat like unaged bourbon. But there would be no blazing warmth awaiting that first swig. When I finally worked up the nerve to give the doors a good heave-ho, I found her standing alone in that dark banquet room, a white figure blazing like a spotlight.

"Draco, you sodding bastard," she said to me, not even bothering to turn around, so sure that only the worthless groom would dare to scurry in ten hours late.

I managed two very inadequate words before she whipped around and slit my face with rose-tipped nails, bleeding me to match her tear treks long since dry. "I'm going to kill you for this someday," she said softly.

The pain vanished in a flash of heat, leaving my cheek to burn in shame and anger. "What, this not a good time for you?" I asked, weary.

She threw the bouquet she had been clenching at me, an explosion of color that splattered my shoes like sick. To this day, I don't know why it should be that bouquet I remember most vividly. Not the flower names, of course, but what they reminded me of: A confection of pink, yellow and white that Pansy had once shoved in my face when we were in leading strings, and she'd wanted to share her treat. I'd run away, spooked by the speculative glint in her mother's eye. So really, I should've expected this execrable lack of taste in my farce of a wedding; I'd given her colorblind tyrant of a mother carte blanche, after all.

"I knew you were going to do this to me." Pansy's small white hands disappeared in the voluminous folds of her white dress. "*knew* it but some pathetic part of me hoped that you cared enough...that you couldn't humiliate me like this."

This could be it, I remember thinking.

"I'm sorry," I said again and waited for Pansy Parkinson, sweet, vicious girl, still mourning the loss of me in her glassy eyes, to do something irrevocable.

"You're sorry?" she echoed with unsteady laughter. "I'd rather you were dead."

"Pansy..."

"Do you know what you've done? I don't even care that you couldn't be arsed to show up to your own wedding. Not when you've made me into a husk. Do you hear me, Draco?" she said in a whisper so flat and barren of pain it was shouted in every syllable. "I don't feel anything anymore."

"I know," I said.

She flung a thin, pale arm to the silk curtains encasing the tall rectangular windows of the ballroom. "I stood at that window for nine hours. I stood there watching all our guests leave. I stood there watching them take down the tent and pack up the chairs. I stood there as the gardener threw away all the dead roses and . . . it hit me. What we have isn't even as eloquent as that. You're not just dead; you're not even *real*. You're this delusion I have, that I've had since school, and I saw for the first time...what must've been so obvious to everyone else. If you'd come, I'd spend the rest of my life waiting for you. And you would never be there! You've taken everything from me and I can't even blame you."

She shrugged, a too careless gesture of grief, the bony ridges of her shoulder stretching her porcelain skin even tighter. "I wanted to give you *me*. And in return, I just . . . I wanted this one thing, this one tiny thing from you."

"Pansy," I murmured, "I don't love you."

"Oh, I know that! Believe me, that has always been nauseatingly, perfectly clear! But I thought I could make you. I thought there was something wrong with me, something defective I could *fix* for you. But you never wanted that, did you?"

She pressed her trembling lips together, a proud, beautiful creature to the last, silencing a barrage of needs and hopes and fears she wanted to etch onto me, so that someday, what was skin-deep might seep through and be real. I read those thoughts in that pretty, quivering mouth and fragile rigidity, and suddenly, I couldn't bear to look at her, because the despair she reined in with every harsh breath, this ruptured moment, *this* was her last stand. I traced the sheer veil pinned above her hair; it cut a harsh outline of her face, and the truth was that for all her battering words, she was still trying to force a confession from me.

That's when I knew this wasn't it; nothing irrevocable was happening.

I crushed the plea in her half-mast brown eyes. "No. I never wanted you."

She laughed harshly. "O-Of course!" She reached for me, her white hand drifting from my shoulder to rest weightlessly on my elbow. "I've loved you for seven years and two hundred and one days, Draco Malfoy. I hope you never find out what that's like. I wouldn't wish that on even you."

Then she brushed past me, head tilted mutinously high and shoulders wrenched back. The train of her gown clipped my ankle, and it throbbed harder than the red wasteland of my cheek. The doors wedged closed behind her. And once again, I hadn't been late enough.

Don't leave, Granger. I'm not making excuses here. I behaved abominably, I know. But I couldn't *not*. I'm sick with it. It's the sludge in my veins, inertia hooking onto my insides until I'm dawdling by newsstands and dithering by entrances waiting for that perfect sliver of a moment sandwiched between unforgivable and merely insufferable to come in. I can no more stop pacing outside those restaurants and operas and auctions than Atlas can shrug. I've *got* to be late, don't you see. Not unfashionably or insultingly late, but just enough so those buggers'll know I don't give a damn. No, I can't tell you why. I'd slot these feelings into perfectly packaged words for you...this is my last stand after all...but *I don't know why*.

Maybe I'm waiting. Hovering on the edge because I've only ever been brave enough to court ruin. Someday, probably far too damned soon, I'll put someone in a blinding rage, and then I'll finally be abandoned and given up on.

By whom? I don't know. Maybe Pansy or my mother or the fucking postman. Why do you care anyway? That's the problem with you; you always have ~~to~~ *now*. It's your compulsion. You squeeze everything into little checkboxes on to-do lists that never end why not bypass all that red tape and just file your life under death? You cram yourself so full of hearty, frenetic living just to feel accomplished, playing it up for an imaginary audience, but *who's watching?* My compulsion is different: It's a thumping need to linger and linger and linger, so that it can all pass me by. My internal *tick-tock* is on permanent snooze, and I've given up being *in* it. You called it fleeing and you were right.

But there's no place in this shiny new exterior your lot has given my whole world for the carcasses of privilege and prejudice, gifts that have ruled my life for so long I only realized their existence in their absence. What's a pureblood scion to do when he's a Hogwarts dropout with a rap sheet by day and a coward with prison wrapped around his throat by night?

I remember everything about you that day. How puffed up and earnest and outraged you were to find me in Mockridge's office. Don't think I wasn't put out, either. There was something so damned uppity about you that one look was enough to know that having your pert, judgmental eyes inflicted on me daily would be the worst part of my probation. I threw quite the dustup, didn't I? If Mockridge hadn't shooed us both out, I'd probably still be Transfigured into a dung beetle...don't deny it, you know you were within an inch of hexing me. But the point is, you had no idea how nerve-wrecked I was, shaking in my leather boots...don't snort, I was!...when you came down on me like a hoity-toity harpy.

There I was being condescended to by a creaky old man with an alarming likeness to my batty Aunt Boudicca, the one convinced that unibrows and busty shoulder pads are the new black, when you burst into that shanty of an office.

You gave me a disdainful once over, a masterful imitation of Pansy's best sneer, and dismissed me to turn the full force of your indignation on poor Cuthbert. "What's Malfoy doing here?" you demanded.

Mockridge blinked owlishly and pushed his spectacles higher on his nose. "Mr. Malfoy has been assigned to our department," he answered, voice croaking. "It's the Committee on the, uh," he squinted at the slip in his hand, "Rehabilitation of Former Death Eaters. Their first assignment. Mr. Malfoy's probation, so to speak."

"Really?" You bit your lip. "The Committee's first assignment?"

"So it says. Mr. Malfoy is apparently the first in a pilot program. I understand the two of you were in the same year. This won't be, er . . . a problem, I hope?" asked Mockridge with tentative, and utterly misplaced, optimism.

"Problem?" you said shrilly. I fancied I could hear your teeth grinding.

Imagine how I felt standing there being discussed like an unwanted, moldy old lamp that he'd just proposed you auction at Christie's. Can you blame me for the ensuing vitriol?

"Excuse me," I said, cold with premonition. "I thought my assignment was to the Centaur Liaison Office." Crumpling the parchment with my new ball-and-chain scrawled across it, I manfully resisted the urge to throw it on the raty floor and stomp repeatedly.

You gave a sharp bark of laughter and crossed your arms, drawing my attention to the ugliest knitted jumper I'd ever seen; darned onto the wool about your left hip were your initials your *initials*, for Merlin's sake, as though you were likely to lose that assault-on-the-eyes-of-decent-and-fashionable-people in a sea of similar abominations and might need to know which one was yours. Every huffy inch of you only ratcheted up the humiliating absurdity of the whole encounter.

"If you must know, this is Amos Diggory's idea of a practical joke," you admitted and then paused, speculating. "Or it might be more than that. There's certainly no love lost between him and your family, not since Cedric. But no one's ever actually worked in Centaur Liaison. It's where we send Ministry employees who're about to get sacked."

"Is that right?" I said, voice tight. "Well, then put me somewhere else *Anywhere* else. I trust there's no shortage of bureaucrats in need of a tea-brewer or subordinate to yell at all hours of the day."

Mockridge crinkled his lined face into an apologetic pucker and muttered, "No one's in need of personnel save for you, Hermione."

You shifted your weight against the doorjamb, tapping ink-stained fingers along it and darting me indecipherable looks, probably weighing your bleeding heart sensibilities against your certain knowledge that I would be a jumped-up bastard to work with. But by then, I'd lost any veneer of composure you were always spectacular at provoking me.

"I don't think so. I'd rather be in Azkaban than work for a Mudblood," I sneered.

Vibrancy drained from your face leaving only two hard red dots in your narrow cheeks. The condemning silence struck me like a whip. Stupid, stupid *stupid!* You were the vanguard of the new elite; the only thing I would accomplish by insulting you was a position as lunch lady in the canteen, and only if I were lucky. Watching fury collect in your stillness, my chest caved in for air and a seeping phantom pain danced down my scar, craggy and shameful under the glamour. If not you, only dank, dark, distant Azkaban awaited. Fear swooped into my lungs, bitterer than oxygen.

But I had thrown down the gauntlet, and not even the certainty of a blistering tirade ending in my being tossed back into prison could make me swallow my words.

"Believe me that can be arranged!" you hissed at last, and turned to a dumbfounded and mildly appalled Mockridge. "Sir, *refuse* to work with him."

The old man floundered, running his gnarly fingers nervously along the ivory grip of his cane. "Well, I . . . that is, the Minister wanted to make an example of Mr. Malfoy and he thought you could I-lead us all with your example."

"My example?" you repeated.

"How quaint," I snarled. "So I'm to be the poster boy for penitent Death Eaters, and what are you? Spearheading the Ministry's PR facelift?"

"That's rich considering it's your lot who convinced everyone the Ministry was a cesspool of murderers and corrupt sycophants in the first place!"

"My lot? So much for the party line that you war heroes are above name-calling and rehashing the past ad nauseam!"

"How can you say 'penitent Death Eater' without choking? Anyone who believes you're the least repentant is deluded," you snapped. "I'm saving my sympathy for the deserving..."

"And who would that be?" Scorn flayed my words into chips, rusty and sharp. "Who's got even the remotest chance of passing your little test?"

Your muddy eyes smoldered in protest, and I found myself suddenly three steps closer, fists clenched and fighting the welling fear that you knew then, as you always had, exactly what you were about. No sheen of awe or rose-tinted admiration had ever clouded your vision; you were always ridiculously clear-sighted, and *why* when I had the proof of purity and breeding and wealth did you always manage to see me, only *me*, beneath the sum of my parts and find me lacking? I wanted to shove you out of the room and out of sight, somewhere you could never force me to follow your gaze and know what you knew.

"Can't name anyone, can you?" I spat instead. "It's easy to talk big and lofty, Granger, but actions speak louder than petulant whinging."

The rims of your nose flared and I braced myself for a barrage of hexes or an angry retort. Neither came.

Instead, you tilted your head, eyes sweeping down with a small vindictive smile, savoring the irony. "The way you carry on, anyone would think you're dying to help house-elves. And if you're so keen on it, who am I to stand in the way? I've been looking at this all wrong. It's practically a miracle is what it is. A pureblood scion reforming his bigoted ways and frothing at the mouth to liberate house-elves? Front-page news if I've ever read any."

You turned to address Mockridge. "I've changed my mind, sir. I'd *bedelighted* to welcome Malfoy to the Office of House-Elf Affairs!"

Your expression was . . . how to describe it . . . you were positively demonic, Granger. A lesser man would've bolted, family honor and the rule of law be damned. But of course, I was made of sterner material. What do you mean *be serious*? I'm deadly serious. I'd already been trussed up and gawked at by what felt like every damned employee in the Ministry and processed with bone-aching ineptitude by a MLE intern; having to suffer your ignominious attitude on top of it all was the first crack in the ice I'd padded around me since Father's trial. Don't look so smug. Yes, yes, you've always been marvelously talented at making me champ at the bit.

Now where was I? Mockridge's office was little better than a hole in the ground, but our office was somehow even worse. It was furnished like a creaky old flat and had the audacity to look *cozy*, every nook and cranny bursting with shelves overflowing with rolls of parchment. Even that ink-stained puce couch in your corner...I always think of it as *yours*...only added to the room's misbegot charm. It felt occupied; a place someone cared enough to make look lived in, and was nothing at all like the rich fur rugs and cavernous elm and Carpathian desks slumbering in every study at the Manor.

I think that's why I staked out the enchanted window. With you and me and enough paper to fell a small rainforest packed together like Weasleys in their hovel. *Yes*, I know they're your friends, but it's not like you've ever shown a modicum of good taste. Ow! What was that for?...*anyway*, I needed at least the illusion of space. I can't remember how we fell into our routine. You worked during the day and I came in at night to be at the beck and call of every house-elf with a sniffle. It was more than a year after that tumultuous first day before we crossed paths again, so assiduous were we in following every step in our dance of avoidance.

The wedding, you say? Yes, you might be onto something there.

Indeed, it was the second morning after my non-wedding, and every secretary, flower-peddler and coffee shop waitress was in raptures over my jilting the bride of the year. They flocked around stands of *Witch Weekly*...exclusive interview with the jilted bride, my arse...like pigeons dive-bombing bread crumbs, all trying to feel marginally better about their own pathetic little lives. Tell me something: What is it about acute misery that makes it irresistible to the masses? The bigger you are, the harder everyone wants you to fall. Well, I suppose I can't claim complete ignorance here. The amount of money I've donated to churches, praying for Potter to snuff it, is obscene.

What's that? You found my would-be wife's humiliation sadistically satisfying? *You*, Granger? Well, I'd better wrap this up then; the world's clearly going to hell in a hand-basket if someone as sanctimonious as you is copping to having a bad thought. I suppose you're right about the day. It was on that second abominable morning we met again. I slipped into our office bright and early, determined to avoid the mobs who inexplicably knew I worked the night shift...wait, that was *you* who hung up signs with my schedule? Well, color me impressed and a bit appalled. I think my worldview's coming apart at the seams. You've owned up to bad thoughts and siccing batty women on me; what's next? Admitting you and Weasley don't turn the lights off, all virgin-like, and snuggle after...*all right*, woman!

Hitting is not *on*. As I was saying, the shit had truly hit the fan. The speed at which gossip travels down the office grapevine has got to violate some fundamental law of physics. We should figure out how to bottle the stuff and use it as rocket fuel...yes, I know what rockets are.

When you came in, you found me perched on my windowsill trying to cling to the fabric of blissful nothingness.

You weren't expecting me. I heard you shuffle in, a mass of unwieldy limbs and packets of crinkling parchment, and halt mid-stride on a caught breath. I wondered then what you would do, if you would turn tail and run...I certainly hoped so...or meet me head-on. For a taut moment, the only sound in our cramped little room was your hitched breaths. Undoubtedly, you were working yourself up into a proper tizzy. Then you slammed your things on your desk and rummaged through an unnecessary number of drawers, making a ruckus. I didn't move...infuriating people being one of my finer talents...and when you finally gave up trying to rouse me, you stared at me outright.

I felt your gaze rake my face like a brush of callused, nail-bitten fingers.

It's something I still wonder about sometimes. If I had opened my eyes, would I have seen you taking a catalog of all my features...cheekbones angular enough to cut glass and a thin aristocratic nose that bespoke Black as surely as my family ring...or would your look have been more intimate, a glance to drink me up and fill in all the faded spots in your memory? I suppose I'll never know, because I wanted to unbalance you as unfailingly as you always could me just by being in the same volume of space.

"You're staring so hard I can hear you," I drawled, eyes still lidded.

I heard you trying not to bristle and enjoyed the feeling that I had made *you* the trespasser for once. "What are you doing here?" you gritted.

"Avoiding the mob."

You snorted. "I would've thought avoiding Parkinson would be the higher priority. She isn't about to burst in here, is she?"

At that, you drew me into engaging you as effortlessly as ever, never mind that I'd known you were coming *damn you*. My eyes snapped open, and I wanted to snag handfuls of your jumper and shake until you were intimately acquainted with the feeling of slamming into a wall, over and over, the same way I always felt, pulse rioting in my ears, from your every capricious presumption. I wanted to mar your miles of tanned skin and leave marks no one could mistake.

"That's what happens when interfering nobodies try to *think*. You inevitably jump to the wrong conclusions," I sneered.

A piquant spot of triumph bloomed in my chest when you wiped me from your field of vision altogether. I saw you swallowing curses as you tried to disengage, but when had that ever been possible between us? The interplay of tensions in your stiff jaw line fascinated, a reflection of the same tightness in me, and I imagined stroking my fingertips along your mouth just to see how you would react. Probably shriek, as though good breeding and wit were contagious.

You spoke to the bookshelf in the corner, "I'd appreciate it if you did your hiding elsewhere. Some of us have work to do."

"Then shut your mouth and do it. Let's go."

You whirled back with an unattractive gape. "Excuse me?"

"Mockridge wants us both on the case."

"*What* case?"

"Just crossed my desk last night. One of Zabini's house-elves has been murdered."

"Murdered?" Your chin shot up, and you gravitated unconsciously towards me, chapped hands furled into fists, quashing what looked like an impulse to grab me by the lapels and shake out complete sentences.

I slid to my feet and stretched to my full height, looming a full head over you, enjoying the way you tensed. "*Yes* ~~murdered~~. Are you going to repeat everything I say? This conversation's getting cumbersomely one-sided."

You ignored my surly tone, brows knitted in familiar concentration, the same stare I'd seen year after year dissecting and reconstructing facts, absorbing knowledge wholesale and never missing a beat. "Tell me everything," you commanded.

Do you know that I've always despised that clinical and whitewashed gaze? There's no room for me in the look that reduces the world to fragments. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. It's not as if I've ever appeared in anything you file away as meaningful, is it?

Turning on my heel, I didn't answer until we were ensconced in the lift. As usual, you were careful never to present your back to me, as though keeping me in view would ward off an attack. I wanted to laugh in the face of your absurd caution; that or slam my fist into a wall just to see your reaction. Nothing made my blood boil faster than skittishness. It tempted me to vindicate your every last thought about big, bad Death Eaters. I felt your muddy eyes scraping the nape of my neck during the entire ride up to the Atrium, hiking up the already stifling sensation of airlessness in the lift.

Temper and cloying hate clogged my throat and condemned me to silence. It was many minutes before I forced out, "A word of warning, Zabini's mother is hysterical. Turns out the daft thing was her favorite companion, and she's the kind of woman who barely makes sense during her lucid days. Blaise trusts us to be discreet about this and not make it public..."

"You're barking mad if you think I'm hushing anything up!" you said tartly.

"Right," I snapped. "Hushing things up. That's clearly what I had in mind when I invited the most self-righteous, interfering busybody this side of the equator."

The doors couldn't have opened an instant sooner. We stepped out into the milling crowd of stragglers. A few people gaped, but I pushed past them before they could recover from the shock of finding the man at the center of London's latest *on dit* in so mundane a place as a lift. I queued up to a fireplace, and you were smart enough to stay quiet when you caught up, wary of the wiry tension in my stance despite the placidity of my words. As the last person shuffled into the fire, I flung a pinch of Floo powder into the flames and muttered, "Briar Rose Lodge," trusting that your hearing would be acute enough but hoping it wasn't. It was no skin off my back if you ended up at Briar Ridge Asylum.

The sensation of hurling about in a wind tunnel abated when I landed in a cavernous foyer, tiled with creamy marble and lined with the paintings of famous ancestors. Cesare Borgia and his ravishing sister, Lucrezia, were displayed most prominently, I noted with approval. Then the moving portraits locked into an amorous embrace, and I became a little less enamored. Blaise's mother being named Lucretia began to make perfect sense, a truer throwback to her licentious ancestor you'll never meet.

You tumbled out of the fire with characteristic lack of grace, barreling into me and clutching handfuls of my robes for balance. I flung you off in the same instant you darted

away, eyeing me with contempt and swallowing whatever insult was perched on your tongue. You turned aside instead, appearing content for now to follow my lead which really should've been my first clue. I thought it'd finally occurred to you that if this case weren't on the level, I'd never have mentioned it. In fact, I would've buried it so deep in paperwork even that useless paper-pusher Mockridge would've thrown up his hands in disgust.

Surveying the foyer, you looked like you'd smell something foul. "Calling this palace a lodge has got to be a rich man's idea of a joke."

Blaise Zabini appeared from around the corner, so resplendent in his elegantly pressed gray suit I wondered, not for the first time, at his sexuality and mine for noticing.

No, that last's a lie. But the look on your face; priceless doesn't begin to cover it. You know, I don't think I'll ever tire of yanking your chain, Granger. Now, where was I?

"Not a rich man's joke, I assure you," said Blaise. "Just a matter of relativity. This place is so much smaller, you see, than our other estates."

Even though it'd been almost two years, Blaise looked like a carbon copy of his swaggering school-self. The sleek handsomeness he'd always worn like an invisibility cloak, long the butt of Slytherin jokes rooted in bitter envy, had only accentuated with age. "Blaise," I greeted with a nod.

"Draco," he returned. "I'm glad the Ministry's seen fit to let you handle this situation."

"Actually, we're both on the case," you said, mouth pursing at the coolly amused glance Blaise exchanged with me. Distrust couldn't have been more clearly etched on your face if we'd been canoodling with snakes while whittling a totem pole to the deity of suspicious Slytherin behavior. "Why don't you tell us what happened?"

"Certainly." Blaise waved us into a sunny sitting room with exaggerated courtesy. "My mother's house-elf Zita went missing yesterday morning, but it wasn't until last night we found her locked in the family vault. Or at least we assume it's her."

"What do you mean, you assume?" you asked, not quite masking a shiver at the faint scorn in his smile.

"To put it bluntly, someone or something blew her up. Her . . . remains are splattered all over the walls."

"I suppose she was locked in from the outside?" I inquired, tone bored, tilting my head in a mockery of interest.

Your disgusted looks have never yet failed to force nonchalance on me.

Blaise gave a casual shrug. "That's what makes it all so curious. Mother knows better than to show the help how to get into the family vault. Even if the house-elf managed it herself, it's quite impossible to lock from the inside. On top of it all, nothing was taken."

You frowned in thought, and I knew then that your observant eyes hadn't missed the artificiality in his poise, something put-on about his detachment. The way Blaise carefully avoided looking at me appeared too much like a feint, as if counting the beats until you were out of the room. "May I see this vault?" you requested obligingly.

"Of course." Blaise snapped his fingers and a sharp crack rent the air. A wrinkly house-elf in a yellowed pillowcase appeared, teetering on knobby knees. She bent into a low curtsy at the sight of her master. "Amata, show Miss Granger to the vault."

"Will miss please to follow Amata?" she squeaked.

You cast one last speculative look at us; a wry smile on your lips when your glance absorbed the jarring image we made, two somber men with unreadable countenances in a sitting room bedecked in soft colors and lit with cheerful sunshine, as out of place as two gangsters in a nursery. Then you followed the small creature into the hallway. When your unnaturally bright voice, syrupy as a child's, asking after the house-elf's health faded, I turned to face Blaise.

"Now the unedited version," I said.

He sunk a little into himself, rubbing his thumb over the ring on his last finger. I'd never seen him wear one, but I recognized the nervous habit of running his fingertips along things from years of cataloging the tells of my schoolmates, a handy skill for poker and eliciting secrets. "It's true that Mother's house-elf is now a bloody collage in my family vault, but she was still alive when we opened it."

"What happened?"

"I ordered her to tell us how she'd got in. She said something about 'Master forbidding her to speak.' I lost my patience," he admitted with a touch of chagrin, "and tried to force her. That's when she blew apart."

"Some kind of curse?"

He nodded slowly. "If so, it's an intricate piece of spellwork. I don't think the creature was in any danger until I tried to make her answer my questions."

"I trust you're not showing Granger the real family vault?"

Blaise smiled in ironic acknowledgment. "Not much gets past you, does it? But no, it is the real one. The prospect of . . . ruining another vault for show was unpleasant."

"Understandable under the circumstances. I assume you've cleared out all the family heirlooms?"

"Of course," he said, brows arched in mock affront. "I'd be very green, indeed, if I hadn't secured our Dark artefacts before calling down the Ministry bloodhounds."

"You know, Blaise, that's what's been bothering me about this whole situation. Why even bother to report it?"

He grimaced in remembrance. "Mother insisted. Threw the most tiresome fit and threatened to owl the Aurors herself if I didn't do something. Naturally, I thought of you."

"Careful. I'll blush," I said dryly.

"What I'd give for *that* to be my most pressing problem," murmured Blaise. "The worst of it is that Mother says one of her rings was stolen but won't tell me which."

"If I were a betting man, I'd wager on it being an ostentatious rock with a sobby back-story."

"Thwarted love and all its assorted drama?" hummed Blaise. "One can hope."

"Maybe your mother will feel more comfortable sharing the story with me of how your second, fifth or seventh stepfather kicked it," I suggested, savoring his glower.

He scowled. "She's upstairs."

And that's when I felt a tingling sensation down my spine, a portent of the future perhaps, warning me to keep going or to stop, or maybe neither. *Oh all right*, stop glaring! So there weren't any feelings, tingly or otherwise. Honestly, a wrinkle-faced bat has got more sense of humor than you. What's the point of this show-and-tell if I'm not allowed any liberties? Tingling and premonitions that's what all the narrators get to say in adventure stories. Okay, so I didn't *actually* have an inkling that our little quest for one ring would eventually spiral into a deadly duel the likes of which I'd never experienced and you thought you'd left long behind you.

Had I known then what I know now, would I have flipped Blaise the bird and tottered back into my notorious but dull existence? Not on your life. After all, it's what led me here to this smoky, poorly lit...it's all about atmosphere...little pub with you as my captive audience. Yes, yes, I'll get on with it.

Blaise's mother was one of those women; you know, the kind who's ravishingly beautiful at first youth, a bit faded around the edges but still breathtaking in middle-age, and crinkled and saggy once they've rolled over the hill. That's the woman I had the great fortune of coaxing out the story of the Ring yes, capitalized, she referred to it *that* reverently.

Blaise, that smirking bastard, abandoned me with nary a backward glance. I was left in a heavily cloaked room, all the windows shuttered despite the pungent odor of burning incense. Lucretia Zabini was draped...no really, there's no other way to describe it...on the divan in her suffocating sitting room, stroking a sly white cat with one hand, running her fingers through her long blond hair with the other, and bemoaning the plights of her existence.

I cleared my throat and tried not to faint from the fumes. "Mrs. Zabini."

"Draco, is that you? I have been waiting for someone to take my statement," she said, in a fair approximation of the husky voice she'd affected to great success over the years the titillating kind brimming with all sorts of sexual promises. I'd heard that voice all throughout puberty whenever Blaise, the gang and I would drift into one of her summer homes. I can tell you from personal experience: She's never failed to get a rise from any male bystanders.

"Mrs. Zabini, I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Ah," she sighed and flicked a single, glistening tear from her eye. "The men, they come and go, even my dear Blaise, but not Zita! No, that darling looked after me when no one else would."

I refrained from pointing out that unlike men, Zita was bound by magic to be blindly obedient. It spoke volumes for the kind of 'looking after' Lucretia Zabini apparently expected from her husbands, and explained the sheer number of them. "Blaise said a ring of yours was the only thing missing."

"The Ring!" she cried, green eyes raking eagerly over my face. "You have it?"

"No. But I assure you, Mrs. Zabini, I'll do my best to find it. Can you describe it for me?"

"It is how you say . . . incomparable. There is no other like it in all the world," said Lucretia, mouth curving in reminiscence.

"No other like it. Got it." I reflected briefly on the vapidly all that beauty had apparently hidden from appreciative male eyes, like a cakey orange nestled in fragrant peels. Her nine marriages and subsequent divorces were no longer a mystery. "What kind of metal and stone?"

"White gold. Diamonds so clear they were sparkling ice," her eyelashes fluttered over dewy eyes, "and a single ruby so exquisite it was like peering into my beloved's soul."

I braced myself, and then took the bait. "Beloved?"

She glanced at me coyly, hands resting demurely against her knees, as if to say, *very good*. "Yes," she said, tone mournful. "My dear Gaston. He was my father's caretaker. And we were in love. Oh, how naughty we were back then, sneaking out after lights out, so many liaisons in the darkness! French and Italian men, my dear, they know how to *romance*."

She tossed her head imperiously, a coquettish affectation that was comical in this old, too heavily perfumed woman. And another thousand lustful teenage dreams wilted to ash. I bit back an appreciative smile at her heavy-handed hints of drama and history. "What happened?"

"I promised to elope with him but Michel, my first husband . . . he locked me in his mansion when he found out my plans. And my lovers, how they dueled over me. To the death!"

"Really," I said. "The death?"

"Well, wounded perhaps," she amended. "Gaston swore that he could not forgive my betrayal and the next morning, he vanished. Never to be seen again."

"And the ring?"

Lucretia glanced at her jewel-encrusted fingers woefully. "The Ring came to me after my wedding, but I could not bear to put it on. It was too beautiful, too painful, too *pure* to show my brute of a husband, so I left it in its box to prove my faithfulness, and there it stayed all these years until last night when I found it missing. It alone of all my jewelry! My most precious piece...why, if the thief came back and offered to trade for that ring, the only thing I have left of our love, I would give him anything, everything!"

"Let's not be too hasty." I held up my hands to ward off the rapid reappearance of waterworks. "Who knew you had that ring?"

"Only Zita. It is not a story for the young and innocent," she lamented. "I do believe my Blaise still thinks the love of my life was his father."

"It's possible," I told her. And about as likely as me giving a toss about house-elves.

"So you will look for it for me, Draco?" crooned Lucretia.

"If you could give me a drawing of some kind..."

"But of course!" she said, laying a hand on the crook of my elbow with effortless intimacy.

Wait. Am I still *in lust*...have you lost the plot, Granger? She was old! And less faithful than the alpha lion of a pride, you crackpot. For the record, I resent the insinuation...just a minute, you couldn't be . . . *no* . . . but you are! You're *jealous*, Granger. Honest-to-god splotches of envy all over your face. Now, now. She was ugly and plump and had less depth than a kiddie pool. Happy? No, I will not stop grinning. In the tally of comeuppances, that's a point to me. Draco: twelve, Granger: three. And no, I'm not explaining the other eleven.

We met up again ten minutes later in the nauseatingly cheery parlor downstairs. Your eyes bore into me the moment you stamped in, house-elf chaperone trotting at your heels. "Apparently, nothing was taken," you announced, with a flash of uncertainty as you took in our conspiratorial silence.

"You doubted me?" said Blaise, amused.

Your gaze flicked from me to him. I could almost hear you thinking, *Slytherins*. "Trust is an occupational hazard," you said sweetly.

I made a show of checking my wristwatch. "Then we're done here."

Blaise didn't miss his cue. "Thank you for coming. Both of you have my gratitude for such prompt diligence," he said, striding forward to shake my hand, his palm a dry cool that was smooth to the touch but for a sliver of metal, the gold circlet on his little finger.

We drifted back to the foyer. Perching an elbow on the mantle above the fire, I drawled, "We'll be sure to owl you updates."

When we filed out of the fireplace back into the Ministry, that bustling hub of paper-pushing lightweights whose most strenuous activity consisted of walking from the lift to the canteen, I made a gesture to forestall all the questions I could already see bubbling up. "We'll talk about it downstairs," I said.

We rode down in contemplative silence, sandwiched between what felt like the entire lunch crowd hadn't any of them heard of the concept of *work*? In that interminable

year serving my probation, I'd only seen the light of the workday once. Long nights at the office had often left me antsy, too wired to sit still but not enough to overcome listlessness whenever I wandered the dark empty halls, occasionally spying the odd workaholic scratching away at rolls of parchment rivaling their desks in length. As Blaise said, everything's relative and more often than not, their passion for cranking out reports only made me realize how little I had for the remnants of my life a newfound freedom more cloyingly restricting than mere rusting metal.

Once we were safely boxed into our cramped office, I sauntered over to my window, counting down the seconds to our inevitable confrontation. You didn't disappoint.

"What did you and Zabini talk about after I left?" you asked, narrowed eyes and set jaw indicating you were in this for the long haul.

I pivoted towards the illusion of cotton clouds, showing you my back. "We caught up on old times," I said.

"You're doing this. You're actually doing this," you replied. "Weboth know Zabini was hiding something. He wasn't going to talk with me around, so I thought I'd get out of the way. Either the vault Amata showed me was a decoy or he knew there was nothing to be found. I mean, you didn't even care to *look* at it."

"Why should I?" Shrugging, I switched tactics. "Blaise has no reason to lie. Since nothing was taken, it was all an unfortunate accident. The house-elf probably touched something she shouldn't have."

Skepticism filed your words razor sharp. "And it blew her up?"

I crossed my arms, tapping my fingers on my arm, the picture of bureaucratic blandness. "It happens. Some people are of the overkill security measures persuasion."

"Lunatic purebloods, you mean."

I gritted my teeth. "What's that?"

"Only someone completely *daft*, which you obviously think I am, would take your word for it."

I made a noncommittal noise. "It's not as though you've got any other option."

You drew your wand and grinned, a fiendish smile. "Well, I could always take Zabini's word for it."

"What..."

Before I could react, you aimed the wand at my robe pocket. "*Accio* audiostone!" A glowing pebble shot out from my robes and plopped onto your palm. *Moderio!*"

That's when I knew you'd pulled a fast one on me. Realization trickled like acid to the pit of my stomach as the vibrating stone began to replay my conversations. I cursed, remembering your tripping clumsiness. It had all been an act. I was caught halfway between admiration and rage.

"Now, the unedited version," warbled my voice from the stone.

"What the hell!" I breathed.

"Having not been born *yesterday*, Malfoy," you turned your eyes heavenward at my incredulity, "I decided to cover all my bases."

"That's cute," I spat. "It's funny I should be so surprised. Don't know why, really. You've always had filthy manners."

You went rigid, a deep frown curving your mouth as anger penetrated your voice. "You're just sore you misjudged my gullibility!"

"Or because...gee, I don't know...it's a dirty, filthy trick no respectable witch would..."

"Oh, that's rich coming from *you*! Dirty, filthy? You're really going back there? Why not just say it..."

"...you aren't seriously calling me a rotten cheat while defending a nasty, underhanded..."

"...that you want to call me Mudblood! Stop dancing a jig with all these euphemisms. Just *say it*..."

"...and give you the satisfaction of putting another mark on my record? Let you herd me back to prison? I don't think so," I hissed, fury drumming a staccato in my ears. "Getting rid of me won't be that easy."

A bitter smile touched your lips. "Then admit what I did was preemptive and warranted. Your lies have madd~~ed~~*that* much clear."

I was already toeing a thin line, barely remaining on this side of visceral rage. But the way your eyes flicked up and down, raining all that preachy judgment on me, nearly undid me. I wanted to hook my fingers onto the soft flesh of your arms and bruise you on the outside to match the demolition you'd wrought on me inside. I ached to shake you until you became too brain-damaged to form another sentence. In the end it was a very near thing, but I refused to give you the satisfaction of unhinging me.

"The only thing I'll admit," I spoke, voice dripping scorn, "is that you and I both know you'd have done the same thing for Potter or Weasel."

You flung your shoulders back, chin jutting out in defiance. "Oh, really? Well, unlike you, my morals aren't for sale! And I don't have the kind of friends who think they get free passes for breaking the law just because I work here. They would never abuse my position..."

I smiled viciously. "Not exactly a newflash, Granger. You're the saint of crossing Ts and dotting Is. There isn't anyone in a ten-mile radius who doesn't know that. It would take a bloody miracle to wrest your nose out of the fucking rulebook."

"Is that right? And your way is so much better, is it? Do whatever the hell you want, screw the fallout?" You gave a sharp bark of laughter, shaking your head. "I can't believe I ever felt sorry for Parkinson. My pity is wasted. She dodged a *curse* when you decided to bugged up your own wedding..."

Red lanced my vision, splintering the room until I saw and heard and felt only you and the lashes of your contempt and derision. Who the hell were you to say these things to me? One moment I was standing clear across the room and the next, I'd shoved past you to the door, taking malicious pleasure in the way your arms wind-milled as you pitched back, falling against your desk.

"Don't you ever say her name," I snarled. "You haven't the right...you're nothing compared to her."

Nimble as lightning, you shot back to your feet, wand drawn, jabbing it in the fulminating space between us. "Oh, right, how silly of me to forget. Your standards are so skewed you actually think you're the total package. When what you are is a Death Eater slumming it out in probation because prison is oh-so-scary. And a textbook case of arrested development with a shot-to-hell moral compass. Yeah, you're a real *prize*."

"You might want to tone it down," I sneered. "I can't hear over the envy in your shrieking."

"*Envy*?"

"You act like you're so much better than us. You think by laughing at Pansy no one'll notice that she's worth a thousand times more than you! I wanted to marry her. Other men *still* want to marry her. Where are your rows of suitors? Who gives a toss about you? Potter? He's carved himself a nice surrogate family with the Weasleys, hasn't he, and they've never needed *you*, have they? You're a third wheel, tolerated at best, with the kind of personality I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. Face it. You're the girl some middle-aged bloke eventually settles for but who'll never be anyone's first choice," I spat.

You flinched like I'd struck you, and in another time and place, I might've swallowed those words, but you'd clawed inside and dragged out ~~there~~ who'd spent a childhood preying on weaknesses. The me who recognized yawning openings from ten paces and never failed to take advantage. I tore the drawing of the ring from my back-pocket and hurled it at you. The parchment smacked against your collarbone and fluttered to the floor.

"You know something, Granger? You *should* take comfort in your precious rules. Smother yourself with them. It'll be the only thing keeping you warm at night for decades to come."

Without a backward glance, I wrenched open the door and stalked out, caught between despair and triumph at the slashes of your face I saw. Your shock and rage and hurt burned beneath my eyelids.

## Two (of Three)

### Chapter 2 of 3

*I should've known then that all roads led to you. No, I'm not talking about fate or some romantic bullshit.*

Draco is drunk in a pub with a confession to make and a story to tell. Hermione listens.

Don't get up. I didn't mean to dig up the past. You have to know I didn't mean any of it...okay, that's not true. I meant all of it, but I meant it in ~~the~~ *moment*. That's got to count for something, right? Everything comes in degrees; it's not all black or white. That's why manslaughter's not murder, *not* that what I did was a crime. And if it's any consolation, you gave back as good as you got. I vomited all those hateful words out of anger and right now, right here, in *this* moment, I regret it. I do. But let's be fair here. You can't have it both ways. You said you wanted full disclosure from me. Well, here I am, wholly uncensored for your viewing and listening pleasure...and no, you can't mute me.

The truth is you'd struck a nerve with that throwaway line about Pansy. On any other day, it would've slid right off, another perfunctory insult, but that morning, I was still raw from having rejected her and from her having rejected me. Yes, it was my fault for leaving her at the altar...I jolly well know *that*...but she'd given up on me, too. Call it a damned self-fulfilling prophecy. Illogical as it may be, her walking away cut a scar which was still scabbing over when you decided to sink your teeth into it. But even you've got to admit this was the turning point in our theretofore nonexistent partnership. I would even go so far as to say it was necessary to soak in the insults we'd slung at each other and find the kernels of truth in them.

When I came back that night, you were waiting for me. Before I'd even taken one step over the threshold, you'd hexed me until the world tilted black. I woke up bound to my chair.

When I could see again, you were peering down at me. "You crazy bitch..." I managed hoarsely, and then you sighed and Conjured a gag.

"Malfoy," you began, my name sharp as blades, "I hoped you'd come in for your shift. Save me the trouble of hunting you down. You had some words for me earlier."

I tugged violently at the bindings around my wrists and legs, but like the way you did all things, they were perfectly fastened.

"Then like the spoiled ingrate you are," you continued, "you ran away before I could respond. You accused me, of all ridiculous things, of being envious. Now jealous of *Parkinson*, I could maybe understand. It's not as though you know the first damn thing about me." A perverse part of me enjoyed hearing you curse. I liked thinking that beneath all those self-righteous, grumpy layers, some of my disgrace had smudged on you. "But jealous of *you*?"

You shook your head, pitching your voice lower as if I were a sad head case, a creature to be smothered with pity. "That stretches reality to the breaking point. It's . . . well, it's laughable. And that's what I did. Laugh. After I got over the urge to disembowel you with a fork, that is."

Had you untied my gag then and there, the ranting invective slamming around in my head would've shamed a Scottish sailor. I plotted vengeance.

"It's interesting how fast you forget a negative report from me goes a long way toward sending you back to Azkaban." Twirling your wand between your fingers, you paced back and forth, sweeping your gaze around the room as you spoke. "But unfortunately, I just don't have it in me to be vindictive. You should take notes, Malfoy. This is what's known in the civilized world as being a decent *human being*. But that's not even the point. It's not like I'm holding my breath waiting for a crumb of humanity from you. I mean, we both know I'd have suffocated long ago. But I *did* expect you not to be a raging nutcase."

You sighed, tucking back a chaotic strand of brown hair. "But I guess I'm doomed to be disappointed. Not only are you apparently deaf and blind, in addition to inbred and thick, you can't distinguish between having a sense of integrity and being a middle-aged spinster. Not that the ravings of a prejudiced prick matter, but I thought I'd clear something up. I've never lacked for," you paused, weighing your words, "romantic interests and unlike *you*, I didn't have to ensnare them with poisoned promises and piles of gold. But that, too, is beside the point. I can't help your rampaging around like a crazed animal, but I can and *will* solve this case."

You fixed an imperious stare on me. "It's the first house-elf homicide in ages, and I won't botch it up just because you'd rather turn a blind eye to your cronies. Got it?"

I grunted some more curses and made another futile attempt to dislodge the ropes. You rolled on the balls of your feet, apparently undecided, but at long last it occurred to you that you couldn't keep me gagged and trussed up in our cupboard of an office forever. Glancing upwards in a silent appeal for heavenly intervention, you pulled off the gag with a weary *let's hear it, then* look. I narrowly quashed the temptation to bite your fingers, but only because you'd accused me of behaving like a crazed animal, and I am nothing if unpredictable.

"Waited all day to recite that little speech, did you?" I said nastily. "What was that? Draft ten?"

"Malfoy..."

"Flattering. Really, it is. Except I'd rather you'd just gone ahead and blown out my eardrums."

"Malfoy..."

"I think I'm beginning to understand the permanent dumbstruck expression on Weasley's face. It's from your incessant preaching clobbering him upside the head until you'd concussed him stupid."

"*All right!* You hate me, you hate Ron, you hate everybody. The world got that memo in first year when you decided to bully anything that moved," you snapped. "Now that we've cleared the air, are you going to help me with this case or continue being such a jumped-up bastard about everything? Honestly, I don't even care, Malfoy. You want to go back to lock-up? Good on you!"

I ground my teeth together. "Are you threatening me?"

"What, you think only Slytherins can play hardball?"

"No. But we're smart enough not to make threats we can't back up."

"Oh, believe me, I can back this up. Your evaluation's in the post. And if I don't write every three days to keep it from being owled, it's going to find itself in the hands of the Rehab Committee. Go ahead. Have the last laugh . . . if you want it behind bars!" you said.

And wasn't that just fucking checkmate.

"You'd better keep me tied up, Granger. I'm going to smash you to bits when this is over." I swore on every worthwhile thing in my life that I'd make you eat dirt before long.

"Why must you be so dramatic about everything? You lost this hand. Buck up and take it," you sighed. Turning, you plucked out the drawing of the ring from the stack of dusty books on your desk. "This ring is so much more important than continuing our little spat. In fact, I think I've found it."

"What?"

"Well, maybe not *found* exactly, but I think I know who it originally belonged to." You reached for the biggest tome, juxtaposing the cracked, yellowed book with the drawing. "See? The Zabinis are descendants of the Borgias. It can't be a coincidence. This has to be Lucrezia Borgia's poison ring."

The sketches were uncannily similar. Both bands appeared to be silver or white gold with a huge teardrop ruby in the center that was framed by diamond shards. "The ruby isn't actually as big as it looks," you explained. "There's a small catch here, an invisible hinge. Historians believe that's how some of Cesare's assassinations were carried out, with belladonna hidden in the stones of their poison rings."

"They're locket rings," I said, more than a little sore that I hadn't been the one to make the connection. "Poison rings are for Muggles. Just because the only thing they could fit was poison doesn't mean we should take their name for it. In case it's slipped your mind, *we* can shrink anything."

Exasperation lined your face and you sighed. "Fine. Locket rings, whatever. The point is there must've been something in it. A Dark spell of some kind. Maybe opening the ruby triggered it."

I laughed, raspy and sharp. "The love of her life...poor Lucretia. The bastard wasn't giving her a gift. Knowing her penchant for jewels, he was trying to do her in."

"The lover her husband drove off?" you pondered, wrinkling your nose. "But I thought she said he was her father's caretaker. Where would he get an heirloom like this?"

"Maybe he stole it from her father. I wouldn't put it past any pureblood patriarch to hide a few valuables here and there for emergencies. Besides, any shiny rocks would've been snatched up by Lucretia the instant she knew about it. You heard what she's like, a veritable niffler of a woman."

"Then it's a good thing she never got curious enough to pry out the stone," you said, lowering your eyes, grim.

"I suppose cloying sentimentality does have its uses. Although a prematurely dead Lucretia would mean a world without Blaise," I said, casting my mind to the possibility. "There have certainly been days I wouldn't have minded it."

Other than Crabbe and Goyle, he'd been the only friend worth having at Hogwarts. There was no telling how many of my mannerisms or views had been influenced by him. Without Blaise, I'd likely have relied on Nott for intellectual companionship, and with his aloof nature and aversion to the Dark Arts, who knows if I would've been so eager, desperate even, to impress everyone by champing at the bit to join the Death Eaters. No doubt I would have *eventually*, but I might not have been roped into the sheer hellhole that was sixth year. That's the problem with what-ifs: once you get caught in its spiraling tangles, the best outcome is a bitter aftertaste of regret.

"No Blaise Zabini swaggering about seducing anything bipedal and insulting Muggle-borns? Perish the thought," you muttered.

"Every time I forget your hypocrisy for so much as a second, you bludgeon me with it again. When I poke harmless fun at your friends, you start shrieking, but I'm supposed to let you insult *my* friends without comment?"

"If the so-called insult is a statement of fact?" you said snootily. "Yes."

"Then so long as we're on the subject of *facts*, how about you untie me before I lose all circulation and you have a corpse to explain to the Aurors?" I mocked your shrill voice, "But, sir, Malfoy was teasing me and he's such a big, mean bully! If he'd just stuck to *facts* I wouldn't have let him die."

"Cute." A scowl curved one corner of your mouth. "We have an understanding, then?"

"Sure," I drawled. "I'll help you. Wouldn't want the blasted ring to splatter anybody else into the walls. Unnecessary trouble and all for Blaise. You can even exorcise the damn trinket if you want, but I'll be returning it to him." At the flaring protest in your face, I continued, "I thought you were a stickler for the rules. Shouldn't you be tripping all over yourself to return his property?"

You fixed me with a hard stare. "Right. Because the Ministry isn't the least interested in confiscating Dark artefacts."

"Okay. So we'll cross that bridge when we get there. First order of business," I said roughly, "is to fucking untie me before I lose all sense of self-preservation and decide AK-ing you would be worth an eternity in Azkaban."

You eyed me shrewdly. "Just to be clear, Malfoy, the only reason I'm not reporting your racist arse to the Committee is because I need your help figuring out how Zita got into the vault, smuggled the ring out and somehow locked herself inside. Zabini won't confide in me. Our priority here is capturing whoever else is involved."

"And sharing the glory when we bring him in."

"Personal gain," you said, rolling your eyes, "of course, that's your first consideration. Yeah, okay, fine."

I rocked the chair on its hind legs, drumming an impatient beat against the wood floor. "When I said 'first order of business,' I didn't mean let's talk out our grand plan of action, banter some more, exchange pithy threats and *then* untie me. I meant do it  *fucking now*."

"Prick," you murmured before Vanishing the bonds.

"Bitch," I returned and sprang from the chair in an explosive motion.

I snatched your arm in a vice grip, twisting harshly back until you dropped the wand with a startled gasp of pain. Hooking one foot behind an ankle, I swept your legs out and toppled you hard onto the worn cushions of the puce couch. When you shot up to claw at my face, I shoved you back down, pinning your arms beneath my elbows and locking your legs between my knees.

"Mal..."

"Shut. Up," I breathed onto your flaming cheeks and wide, fury-spitting eyes. "Did you really think I was going to play detective with you after tying me to a bloody chair?"

"Evaluation. In the post," you snarled back, twisting in my grasp until your hair was rioting with static and I was pushing my full weight on you to keep you from kneeling me in the groin.

"What makes you think I give a flying fuck anymore?"

"Gee, I don't know. Your unfailing cowardice maybe?"

I made a disbelieving noise. "You just keep shooting your mouth off, Granger. See where it gets you." I dug my fingers into the back of your head, forcing you to face me, and my heartbeat drummed in unison with the pulse in your neck. For all your defiant cracks, the uneven pounding against the sides of my wrists betrayed you. "It's not very smart trying to provoke someone who could snap you like a twig."

"The notion that you're remotely dangerous," you taunted softly, "is even funnier than you being a catch."

That's when it happened. Don't ask me what aneurysm of lunacy burst in my brain in that splinter of a second.

One moment, visions of choking your words down your throat were skidding across my mind, and the next I was running the back of my hand along your collarbone and pressing your cheek into the scratchy fabric of the couch to expose all the smooth skin trailing down the column of your throat. "Don't," I said. I had no idea what I meant.

They say that madness can be fleeting; that sometimes, it bears down on you without warning to slip through the cracks that deranged moments like these leave in people pushed beyond endurance. Well, they're not wrong.

I found myself leaning down to whisper something, and I would swear that's all I meant to do, but instead I breathed wordlessly in your ear, blowing hot air that jolted shivers down your frame. I savored them...yes, they were an uncontrollable reaction, I know...and fixated on the heartbeat thudding beneath your clenched jaw. I wanted to brush my fingers over it, touch the rhythm of *you*, and see that you were just as vulnerable as I was, just as much knitted flesh and thrumming blood despite all the recriminations and slicing glares. My hands were full of holding you still, and I didn't realize I was bending to press my mouth over that thudding heartbeat until it was far, far too late.

At the contact, you startled violently and sunk into the couch, inadvertently revealing more of your throat. Maybe another man...the kind of bloke who'd find out your favorite flower and take you to drowsy cafés...wouldn't have taken advantage and snagged that delicate skin between his teeth, sucking on the pulse point, and tracing the flushed warmth with his tongue while your chest hitched with gasping breaths, but I sure as hell wasn't that man. Because I was finally, *finally* giving into the desire to mark you black and blue. I don't know how long I kissed the crook of your neck, how many interminable beats I counted with my tongue, but the instant I realized you'd stopped struggling, my psychotic break lifted.

I hurled myself off like you were on fire...or maybe I was...stumbling to put as much distance between us as the cramped quarters allowed. You stared after me, mouth slack in shock, frozen in a posture of burrowing into the cushions, your rumpled jumper pulled over one shoulder, revealing an expanse of welling red over the spider web of veins in your neck. For once your darting, wide-eyed gaze focused entirely on me, trying to absorb my every chink and edge and pare me down into lines you could redraw into a legible blueprint. I wished you luck.

"What...why," you stuttered.

I swallowed hard, the roof of my mouth suddenly dry. "That wasn't...it was just payback." Your eyes widened, even more bewildered. Desperate, I kept going, "To see how you'd like being the one made helpless."

I saw your lips part to form words, but all I could hear and feel were my harsh breaths and the pressure of my lungs pushing ridges of bone into the inside of my chest, an unbearably tight sensation. I was lightheaded from the sheer intake of air...only minutes before black would fringe my vision...and *still*, I couldn't make myself stop.

I fumbled like a drunkard for the door. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" you said, expression still stunned.

My answer was the banging of the door as it swung on its hinges in my wake.

Admittedly, not my most suave exit.

You wanted to know when it began, well, that's it; that was the moment. I'd noticed you before...how could I not when I'd taken such a careful catalog of you in school, desperate to figure out what made you so special, so fucking different...but this night started a torturous awareness of your every motion and word and inch of bare skin. You think I'm exaggerating? Well, I'm not. Somehow, I'd developed a preternatural sense of you, and *only* you; all you had to do was walk anywhere near me, even one step into a room I was in, and I'd know you were there. I waged an internal war scrapping like a back alley bruiser not to show it. The thought of you knowing all this hung about my neck like a noose, even more scorching than the parson's one I'd so narrowly escaped.

But now you do know, and I don't know which blighter came up with the idea that confessions are supposed to make things easier because they aren't any fucking easier or simpler or less complicated. You're looking at me like I just stripped and announced I was taking a dip in the Thames. Which I have to say, I don't much appreciate. If I were going to jump off the trolley I'd certainly do it with more panache and style than a jaunt through putrid water. Of *course* I've surprised you...have you somehow missed the entire *point* of this conversation? If I thought you already knew all this, would I be rehashing my madness so you could give me another blistering set down?

I'm fairly certain I would've downed every last drop of liquor at the Château the next day had you let me. Don't get me wrong. It's not as though I fell for you that night. It's *me*, remember? I never do anything by half measures; it's all-in or nothing, and I sure as hell wasn't ready to leap to flights of loving fancy when I'd barely just cleared muted resentment gnarled up with a palpitating fear of my own inadequacy how many times had my own father reminded me that a Muggle-born outshining me was the plainest proof of all that I was little better than a squib? Let's just say I wanted you after that night, and that was it. No queasy declarations or the urge to break out into song; just a slow-burning mesmerizing attraction.

When your pesky owl woke me the next morning...and pecked my knuckles something awful, I should add...I almost threw your letter in the fire. But your neat handwriting on the envelope spelled out my name in a looping schoolteacher script, even including my given name. And really, who am I trying to fool here? I've already chucked every last vestige of pride out the window, so I'll admit it: It was seeing 'Draco' in your hand that did me in.

Your letter was short and pointed:

Malfoy,

Neither of us were ourselves yesterday. Let's just forget it and do our job. I found a lead.

H. G.

And wasn't *that* rich, because I'd fully intended to say the same to you. The fact you'd got there first, instead of banking the coals, only made me burn harder to show you my freezing indifference.

Later that morning, I put on my most bored face, the aristocratic one you hate so much, and sauntered into the office. I swept a perfunctory glance in your direction before tossing myself atop your puce couch, arms behind my head, and stifled a yawn. You were decked out in another of those obnoxious wool jumpers, a turtleneck this time, and I refused to gratify you by trying to suss out the spot on your neck I'd marked while unimpeachably insane, and which was no doubt perfectly unblemished now. I imagined you still bruised; that made it easier to concentrate.

I assumed a post of unruffled presumption. "What've you got?"

You leveled a penetrating stare on me, sitting prim and proper at your desk. "An address," you said curtly, apparently deciding that so long as I was faking amnesia it might as well be catching.

"For whom?"

"Gaston Morel. I owed the French Ministry and they sent over the old Auror case file for his disappearance."

I arched an eyebrow. "How efficient of you, Granger. It's a wonder Weasley can button his shirts when you're not around. Speaking of, you might want to see to that. He obviously attempted it himself this morning given that he looks like he lost a wresting match with a gnome."

You stiffened, curling your fingers around the armrests. Your voice cracked the air. "When did you see him?"

"In the lift. Settle down. I won't accuse him of being bollocks at hiding closet sex hair if you'll spare me the disgusting details."

"For the last time, we are *not*..."

I directed my attention to the folder in your lap. "Look, are you going to show me the file or not?"

You flung it at my head. It was a good thing I was marvelously talented at Quidditch because avoiding that nasty paper cut to the temple was a very near thing. The folder contained several sheets of a standard missing wizard's report spelled to appear in English. There was also a glossy photo of a hawkish looking man with slicked-back brown hair and arctic blue eyes. He faced the camera and nodded once before turning away, over and over.

"Pretty standard so far." I flipped through the investigator's notes. "Don't tell me you dragged me out of bed for the French equivalent of, 'We don't know shit all.'"

"Last page," you barked.

It was a laundry list of Dark artefacts that would've made the proprietors of Borgin and Burkes salivate. According to the report, they'd been recovered beneath an enchanted floorboard in the caretaker's cabin. I let out an appreciative whistle. "Impressive."

You gave a disgusted snort. "Try not to swoon from admiration. Gaston was clearly working on something Dark. It may have been the ring."

"And what are you proposing? That we Floo to France and requisition the goods?"

"They're no longer impounded." Your arms crossed, disgruntled. "It's policy to torch all confiscated Dark artefacts in unsolved cases."

I thumbed through a few more pages, examining a map of the grounds. The caretaker's cabin was a speck on the vast estate. "So another dead end."

"Not necessarily. There's no reason to assume the Aurors found *everything*. They never searched the place again after that initial sweep, and whatever spells Gaston used to hide his things would be weaker now, easier to detect."

"Another field trip?" I drawled. "And here I thought this was a desk job. So much for truth in advertising."

You indicated the stack of forms on my desk. "Then stay. Shuffle papers. Have at it. Wouldn't want you to overexert yourself," you said, viciously sweet.

I snorted. "And let you break our bargain? That's the funny thing about self-righteous bints; you always forget you're bound by the same rules you try to ram down everyone else's throats."

"Don't be ridiculous..."

I stood, tucking the folder beneath the crook of my arm and headed for the door. "When we find the ring and whoever killed that house-elf, we're bringing him in together. Then the Committee can see what a good little trooper I am and we can both get on with never seeing each other again."

"*Amen*," you muttered.

The hallway was empty but when the lift doors slid open, those Ministry drones disembarking were less than tactful with their speculative looks as they careened around us, more than one showering you with sympathy. I'd yet to meet a single bureaucrat who didn't know I'd been dumped here as part of my probation...goddamn *Daily Prophet* was no better than a gossip rag...but being partners on paper was an altogether different thing than being seen in public. You stayed behind me as usual, and I tamped down the instinct to whirl around and commit some atrocity to shock you out of your wits, also per usual.

Queuing up to the fireplace that connected to all the other Ministries, I ignored the tittering women who spotted us and darted me looks about as subtle as an anvil to the face.

You followed my glowering line of sight and a rueful smile touched your lips. "At least it's not hero worship. Every time the anniversary of the Final Battle rolls around, Harry has to take a 'vacation' to avoid getting mobbed."

"Right," I said, brusque. "Because universal adoration is such a trial."

"It is when you didn't ask for it."

"That line works better on people who haven't seen Potter lap up all that attention firsthand. Not to mention, cashing in on it with every professor, Auror or fangirl in a ten-mile radius."

"*Lap up*..." you repeated, outraged.

I hurled a handful of Floo powder into the flames. "French Ministry of Magic."

The French Atrium gave one an immediate impression of elegance, the welcoming chamber curving outward like an upside down thimble lined with rows of blazing

fireplaces. I felt your presence behind me like a thin blade of heat through my abdomen, a feeling I would come to savor and curse, but I refused to give you the satisfaction of discomposing me, so I didn't move and remained squarely in your way. Then I felt the tingling of a spell sweep over me. "What the hell are you doing?" I snapped.

"It's a translation spell, Malfoy," you said, brow arched as though I were hard of hearing or had oatmeal for brains.

"And what the hell makes you think I can't speak French?"

You tilted your head in consideration. "I don't know. My firsthand knowledge that your much-vaunted superiority has no basis in fact?"

With that parting shot, you clipped past me and smiled at the welcome witch behind the help desk. "Hullo, we're looking to Floo to Pégord."

"Take the eighth hearth," said the bored welcome witch, who glanced at the next wizard in line.

You barreled around me to the indicated fireplace, calling over your shoulder, "Are you coming or not?"

"After you." I waved you ahead with a mockery of courtesy.

I vaguely remembered the summer I'd spent a day and night at Château de Cazenac. It was one of those drafty old properties which appeared pleasant enough aesthetically but was dashed uncomfortable to live in. Sandwiched between two rivers, it was a merry enough place if wholly unsuited to Blaise's urbane nature. He had the right of it to live in his thoroughly more modern lodge. As far as provincial went, it wasn't quite as decrepit as I'd expected after years of abandonment and postwar fines. Blaise was apparently even wealthier than I'd suspected. Such things were always worth remembering, and I filed that tidbit away.

The sitting room we emerged into was dark, only a few stripes of light peeking out from between frayed curtains. The fire died immediately after we stepped through. White sheets covered most of the furniture, and the room slumbered beneath a fine sheen of dust. "I take it you didn't inform Blaise we would be stomping through his childhood haunts," I murmured.

"And let him snatch up anything Gaston left behind ahead of us? Not a chance."

I refrained from pointing out that as this was *his* property, everything on it already belonged to him. Briefly, I considered Firecalling but in the end, self-interest won out. I wanted to see the lost Zabini treasures for myself, and if I found anything truly valuable, there was no reason I couldn't suggest a reward for my vigilance and quick thinking in keeping it out of the Ministry's grubby hands.

"This way." I made my way through the doorway into the even danker hall. "The caretaker's cabin is in the north garden."

We hadn't taken more than three steps before a house-elf blinked out of thin air right in our path. He was a wobbly creature, old with drooping ears and spots on his hands, in which he clutched a meat cleaver. "Identify yourselves," he croaked.

I had my wand out and ready to decapitate, or at least wreak magical mayhem, within a breath. You brushed by me and yanked my wand-arm down. "I'm Hermione Granger. And this is Draco Malfoy. We're from the British Ministry of Magic on official business," you said, voice soft and placating.

The pruned house-elf lowered the wickedly sharp kitchen implement and peered into her face. "You is not here to steal?"

"No," you said. "Just, er . . . to follow up on a missing person's report."

"Warren is sorry, miss." He gave a trembling bow. "Warren is not meaning to jump to conclusions."

"That's all right. It's perfectly understandable," you said with more friendliness for a total stranger of a magical creature than you'd shown me in eight years.

It was a sobering thought that the totality of our relationship amounted to less shared affection than one could squeeze on a teaspoon.

"What do you know about Gaston Morel?" I said roughly, no longer in the sleuthing spirit of things.

Warren turned to me and his big, dewy eyes swiped up and down. "You is young Mr. Malfoy, sir?"

That threw me off. "What?"

The house-elf bowed again, knees knocking together. "You is visiting the young Master once and being partial to lemon custards."

"Oh. Uh, right. But that's not why we're here now."

"How can Warren be helping sir and miss?"

You looked torn between wanting to press the ancient house-elf into a chair before he fell over and pouncing on him with questions. Curiosity won out. "What can you tell us about the old caretaker, Mr. Morel?" you asked kindly.

"He is missing since Mistress is leaving the main house, miss," said Warren.

That seemed to hang together with Lucretia Malfoy's version of events, albeit a far cry less melodramatic. The danger of hacked-off limbs apparently averted, I tucked my wand back into my robes. "No one ever saw him again after that?"

"After Mistress is gone, he is coming back and being injured. He order Warren away and locks himself in his cabin, sir, for three days. That is last any of us sees him, sir."

We exchanged *this is it* glances and I nodded. "Show us where his cabin is."

"If sir and miss please to be following Warren." He hobbled painstakingly down the hallway through the ghost of a house to the main entrance.

I began to think there was something to be said for your insistence on a mandatory retirement age. Warren was a veritable moving fossil.

It was starkly sunny outside. That was the problem with using the Floo everywhere; you start to misplace your hours and any scraps of the outside world you glimpse are filed away as dilatory reminders of the intervals between meetings and appointments and deadlines. The grounds were overrun with weeds and appeared as a wild as a tundra. I remembered a clear morning long ago when Blaise and I'd raced on brooms from one river edge to the other, circling the waters bordering his lands.

The cabin was in far worse shape than the main house, strings of ivy snaking up to the roof, mostly a jumble of shingles, and one window missing several panes.

"Thank you, Warren," you said, struggling not to give into your inner meddler. As that was always a losing battle, you foraged on, "Are you alone here? Isn't there anyone to help you?"

He pulled himself straight, a ridiculously proud gesture for a creature nearing his bicentennial. "Warren is not needing any help, miss. If you is not needing anything anymore, there are rabbits eating Warren's carrot patch."

You looked uneasy, caught between satiating your curiosity and tackling the worn house-elf and tucking him into bed with a cozy and crumpets. "Er . . . yes, that's all.

Thanks."

I drew my wand and turned the rusty doorknob. The hinges groaned as I opened the door, streaming sunlight illuminating all the dust motes in the air and the glistening spider webs overlaying the wood furniture. "*Lumos!*"

The front room was furnished pragmatically if unfashionably with its bare walls and a ragged, serviceable settee. The place looked utterly unassuming, drab and dirty even. "Well, this is disappointing," I muttered.

You scooted in after me. "It would have to be if you wanted to hide something, right?"

I cast my wand's light into the next room, a fancier parlor barely tasteful enough to entertain. A crumbling office stood across the hall, and here, it was clear the Aurors had been thorough. Papers and shelves were strewn all over the room, the walls stripped bare to reveal any safes or hidden compartments. I thought about the most unlikely place to hide a secret workshop or a stash of Dark artefacts, and I found myself wandering into the cramped kitchen. There was a ladder squished in the corner, its shelves emptied of all cans and goods. I very nearly overlooked that pantry when it abruptly occurred to me that if I were going to hide a secret passageway to a Dark laboratory, I'd do it in a cheerfully domestic room.

I heard your footsteps shuffling behind me in the bedroom. Satisfied that you were preoccupied, I ran my fingers along the wood shelves, feeling out its width and depth. Then I aimed my wand at the corners of the pantry. "*Revelio.*"

The top two corners yielded nothing but the bottom left shimmered for a split second, a network of gold strands stretched over wooden plank, before vanishing. "Got you."

Feeling around my pocket, I pulled out what was ostensibly a cologne bottle and sprayed the air. The moment the mist came into contact with the concealment spell, it dyed the magical threads I'd glimpsed blue and red. At the center of the web glowed a taut white string drawn across the diagonal length of the pantry, nestled between an enmeshment of blues and reds. This was the master wire of the spell; sever it and the entire incantation would collapse on itself. The trick was getting to it without tripping any of the other strands. It was impossible to predict what fail-safes had been woven into the concealment spell, and any thief worth his weight in gold...or who had once had the misfortune to experience an Antler Hex...proceeded with caution.

I pocketed the cologne bottle and unhooked my wristwatch, popping open the back. A small shard of cat's eye glinted between the gears. I pressed the knurled knob on the side and thrust it into the glowing web. The yellow jewel hummed and flared to match the glowing web.

The threads around the watch bent, warping away from my hand, repelled as though around an invisible curved field. I pushed my wand through the opening. *Finite Incantatem.*

The white wire snapped and the web flickered once, twice and dissipated. The pantry shuddered and shape-shifted. It reformed into a flight of stairs. "What are you doing?" you called from the hall, voice ringing with suspicion.

"Our job," I replied, reigniting my wand. I began the climb down.

"Wait!"

The stairs twisted left six steps down and curved steeper. At the bottom, I found myself in an earthen cave, moss on the ceiling and clinging to slanted rock walls. It didn't look anything like one of those secret workshops you read about in the fiction aisle; it was too gritty not to be real. Magic circles drawn in chalk littered the ground and the two workbenches overflowed with stoppered flasks and ashy potions ingredients.

You thundered down and narrowly avoided barreling into me at the foot of the stairs. "What is this?" you breathed.

"What does it look like? I'd say we've hit jackpot."

"I can't believe..." You stopped when you saw that the jewel in my watch was still gleaming, fingers curled as if you wanted to snatch it and coo over its intricacies. "Where did you even learn how to do that?"

I slanted you an annoyed look. "Where do you think, *Hogwarts*? As it turns out, Azkaban wasn't completely useless. Rooming with thieves and murderers was a more formative experience."

"Not enough to make a dent in your personality," you muttered. When you saw I had no intention of answering, you cleared your throat. "Fine, keep your secrets. There may be other spells lurking around. We should be careful."

I strode between the two workbenches and noted the myriad candles waxed onto their surface. *Incendio.*

Their wicks caught fire and bathed the cavern a flickering sick yellow, chasing away the shadows. I spotted a shelf in the corner laden with sooty volumes, vaguely familiar. When I got a closer look, I recognized more than a few from the Manor's own forbidden library, tucked unobtrusively beneath the marble staircase where countless Aurors had never thought to look.

"Shit," I said. "He wasn't playing. These books are levels of Dark miles above the average dilettante."

"What do you mean?" I felt rather than saw you sidle up beside me. The light of your wand fell over the cracked spines. *The Thirteenth Use of Dragon's Blood. Demon Summons. A Sorcerer's Magicks.* My God, you weren't joking. I thought these books were myths."

I cursed. "How the bloody hell did some nobody caretaker get his hands on these? They're worth...don't touch that!"

I caught your outstretched fingers an inch from brushing a book with its cover so faded, the title was illegible. "What?" you asked, startled.

"These are clearly the most valuable things here. I wouldn't put it past Morel to guard them. Lethally."

"Oh, right," you murmured.

I extinguished my *Lumos* and retrieved the cologne bottle. You watched with ill-concealed fascination as I sprayed the length and width of the bookshelf. Before the mist could touch the books, it set off a kaleidoscope of colored threads, a rainbow web wrapped over the entire shelf. Every book was encased in this cage of spells. The grim realization that we might've met a similar fate to Blaise's house-elf settled in the pit of my stomach.

Your eyes riveted on the cologne bottle. "What is that?"

A serrated smile touched my lips. "This? A Detector Potion. Rule the first of sneaking and general thieving: come prepared."

You snagged your lower lip between your teeth, amusement warring with reproach. With a rueful sigh, you said, "All right, duly noted. So how are we going to untangle this mess?"

I squinted at the gnarled glowing strands. "Well, when you layer on protection like this, there tends to be a keystone spell. Something to hold it all together."

Your brows furrowed in remembrance. "A Collating Spell?"

"Exactly."

"I've never seen anything like this before," you said, a tinge of awe in your voice. "What do the colors mean?"

"The potency of the spell. The darker it is, the more dangerous tends to be the rule of thumb."

You sunk to your knees and peered between the gleaming gaps at the sliver of dirt between the shelf and the periphery of the cage. "What about that white knot? That one where all these strands tie together?"

I followed your gaze to the layers of glowing string wrapped around the top and bottom of what looked like a spindle. The core of it was a thick white braid bundling the spelled cage around itself. "Sharp eyes, Granger. That looks like a collator, all right."

"Will your watch work on that?"

"I doubt it. This isn't your everyday security spell. And I'm not too keen on sticking my hand in there to test any theories," I said dryly.

Brows slanted in concentration, you scrutinized the contents of the room and smiled at something in the cauldron. You flicked your wand. *Accio* ladle."

A grimy piece of wood sailed across the room and I caught it instinctively. "Give me your watch," you said.

I gave you a speaking glance. "Why?"

"Turn the jewel thing on and put it in the spoon. We can slip it through that crack." You pointed at a small opening between the edge of the cage and the next thread above, inches below the white spindle. "If we unravel that Collating Spell, maybe it'll all come apart at the seams."

"Maybe? Not your most reassuring plan."

"Fine," you rolled your eyes, "I'll do it."

"No." I held up a hand to forestall you. "You're about as coordinated as a one-legged duck. I'll do it."

I opened the back of my watch and pressed the side knob. The cat's eye burned from its proximity to the morass of potent magic. I placed it on the ladle and bent down to rest flat on my stomach. Slowly, I stuck it through the tiny gap between the bottom of the cage and the next strand of its body, nearby threads wavering as the watch passed through but not exhibiting any other observable effect. "It's no use. It's not powerful enough to repel Dark magic."

"But a Collating Spell isn't Dark," you argued. "See if you can't get it any closer."

My watch clinked on the ladle as I maneuvered it painstakingly to avoid contact with any magical threads. There was no way to know if touching any of them, even with an inanimate object, would trigger whatever spells crisscrossed the air. The white spindle flickered and tilted away from the cat's eye, shaking a few strands loose. The moment they disconnected, they snapped and wilted into nothingness. "Here goes nothing. I've got one shot left in this stone." I aimed my wand. "*Concito!*"

The gears around the cat's eye whirled and the yellow jewel pulsed once, twice and then shattered. Its concussive light shredded the white strings tethering all the bars of the cage to the spindle. I dropped everything and shot to my feet, grabbing you a split second before the air exploded. The resulting blast from layers of Dark magic collapsing in on itself flung us across the room and we skidded along the dirt floor into a sprawled heap beneath the stairs. Heat lapped against my back and I tightened my grip, draping over you like a too-large cloak.

"What happened?" you gasped in my ear.

I chanced a look behind us. The fireworks faded and amazingly, the shelf seemed wholly untouched. "You know what happens to a bridge when you take out the keystone?" I felt you nod into my shoulder. "I'm thinking these spells worked the same way."

We remained still for a long moment, drinking in the silence. "Malfoy . . . you can get off me now," you whispered finally.

I stared down into your dark, wide eyes and didn't move. *I couldn't* because I had finally seen what I didn't want to know. The sleeve of your turtleneck had snagged beneath my elbow and the neckline was pulled down far enough that I couldn't mistake the petal of a bruise dabbing the side of your neck. I ran a callused thumb over it, and your heartbeat convulsed at the touch. "You didn't get rid of it," I murmured.

"I-I was getting to it. There were so many other things to do...and I f-forgot," you stammered, shifting nervously beneath me.

I cupped your face and made you meet my gaze. "You're a horrible liar," I breathed.

"It means nothing!"

A rueful smile touched my lips. "No? Then why are you being so jumpy?"

You tensed, chest caving with the effort to breathe normally. "No more than you were yesterday!"

I chuckled, glorying in this fleeting moment that finally I had the advantage after years of your knotting me up with only a glance. "We aren't talking about me. You could've healed it, but you didn't. Why?"

"It wasn't worth the bother!"

"No. I don't believe you." A rosy blush flushed down your skin and I tugged at your turtleneck, enthralled by the evidence that you weren't, and maybe had never been, indifferent. "You kept it but you didn't want me to see. Why? I thought I repulsed you."

"You do. You absolutely do," you said fervently, eyes darting from my face to the fingers prying your jumper over one shoulder.

My heart smashed against my ribcage when I saw you linger on my mouth for just a beat too long. A need at once foreign and *soo* familiar became piercing pain that sung until all the blood in my body tried to burst from my veins and a fierce ache spread in the marrows of my bones. "Granger," I said, painfully winded. "Tell me no."

"What?" you asked, just as breathless.

"Not good enough." I lowered my head and kissed that same spot over your thudding pulse. You let out a drawn breath as though you'd been waiting, terrified you knew what was coming but not enough to stop wanting it, and fisted your hands in my robes, pulling as I bit down lightly. Then you arched against me and I lost all coherent thought.

# Three (of Three)

## Chapter 3 of 3

*I should've known then that all roads led to you. No, I'm not talking about fate or some romantic bullshit.*

Draco is drunk in a pub with a confession to make and a story to tell. Hermione listens.

Granger, you're *still* blushing! What an adorable squirm you have. Come now, it wasn't so bad. Kind of inevitable when you think about it. There we were, two teenagers who'd just survived an adrenaline-packed explosion and ended up wrapped around each other. Of *course* something was going to happen. As usual, I was...am compelled to take notice of you, don't ask me why, and there you were, having not got rid of the hickey I'd given you. What else was a red-blooded bloke to do?

I wish you could see yourself. Your face is a blazing, hotrod red. I really must make these soul-bearing, excruciatingly embarrassing confessions more often. If it makes you feel any better, I would've gone a mortifyingly lot further if you'd let me. But naturally, your prudish lesser half chose that moment to kick start.

"No!" You wrenched your mouth away and planted your palms over my shoulders and shoved. "Get off!"

I fell heavily on my side and narrowly missed dinging my head on the stairs. "The hell!" I snarled.

"What...we can't!" You swiped at the space between us, panting. "This is *wrong*."

Longing seeped into chilly anger. "Is that right? It would've behooved you to protest a little sooner!"

Your mouth fell open. "*What?*"

"But no, you decided it would be fun acting like a cocktease..."

"How dare you..."

"I've had enough of this shit," I snapped, jostling to my feet. My words came out harsher than I meant, hiding the jaggedness in me your rejection carved. "Let's just get this fucking job over with and get out of here."

Did it matter that you weren't anything close to a cocktease? No, not while I was still two beats from pitching headfirst into familiar self-loathing at having succumbed to something I'd cursed and stomped on and twisted into an emotion that just barely, only remotely resembled hate.

"Believe me, on this we can agree." Your voice seared with conviction. "There is nothing I want more than to never see you again."

"Good. Great." I stalked back to the blasted shelf that had started this whole heartrending business and knelt to pick up my discarded wand, half-empty bottle and mangled watch. The cat's eye was in all of a million pieces, and the metal casing was warped beyond repair. I threw it at the shelf in a fit of temper, and the watch bounced harmlessly off the book you'd tried to remove before I stopped you and quite possibly saved us both from being splattered against the walls.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" The row of books on the top shelf pitched into the air, and you pointed your wand to one of the workbenches, piling the lot of them on its surface. "I'll be over here. Reading."

"And I'll be over here not giving a shit," I responded. "*Accio* chair!"

The lone hardback chair scraped across the dirt floor, narrowly missed scoring you in the thigh and halted by my knee. I fell heavily atop it and pulled out a book at random. The entire thing was in Latin. I gave it a perfunctory thumb-through and tossed it over my shoulder. I heard you muttering about mistreatment of books and the next one over my shoulder landed even farther. We probably passed three or four hours in that terse, moody silence not that I can give you an exact time seeing as how you sacrificed my wristwatch at the altar of diving headfirst into the only library in existence you hadn't already smeared your fingerprints all over.

I was finally beginning to settle into the silence when my reverie was broken by a sharp intake of breath. "Oh, my God," you said, voice muffled behind the leather-bound tome you clutched, arms outstretched, as if you wanted desperately to let go but didn't dare.

"What?" I asked sharply.

You gave me a horrified glance, tinged with the remembrance of a long-ago terror. "It's a Horcrux. He made that ring *a Horcrux*."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

White-faced, you babbled, "That's what Voldemort used to stay alive! He had a piece of his soul in that diary your father gave Ginny. That's what opened the Chamber of Secrets. And his snake . . . that was another one! He had seven of them. That's why it was so hard to kill him, why it had to be *Harry*."

I flinched at the ease in which the Dark Lord's name dropped from your lips. "But what is it?"

"It's an object...anything really...that you put a piece of your soul in," you struggled to keep your voice even, "and you've got to murder someone to make it. That's what splinters your soul so you can stuff a fragment of it in . . . a locket or something. Remember that diadem we were searching for in the Room of Requirement? That was one, too."

The lingering taste of ash and serrated screams as Crabbe melted in flames he'd so proudly unleashed pounded in my head. I quashed the memory ruthlessly. "And that's what Morel did?" I asked tightly.

"I don't know. But it can't be a coincidence he's got the how-to manual right here. There isn't anything more. *this* is as Dark as it gets." You slid off the workbench and carefully set the offending tome down on the stack of books you'd already discarded. "We need to ask Warren if anyone died at the same time Morel disappeared."

"If that ring's like the Dark Lord's relics, then why hasn't it already taken possession of Lucretia or anyone else? Why now?"

"I don't know." You bit your lip, eyes hooded and wary. "As soon as I realized what the book was, I stopped reading. Nothing good can come of it. There are some things no one should ever know."

I stared at the threadbare book, cover discolored and the leather peeling. Was it possible such an unassuming thing could hold the secrets to immortality? I didn't realize I was moving towards it until I felt you yank hard on my elbow. "Don't!" you implored.

"Why not?" I jeered, slamming away from you. "Knowledge is amoral, isn't it? I thought you of all people would condemn censorship. Knowing how doesn't mean I'm going to make one."

Digging in your heels, you stood bodily in my way. "Maybe not. But this isn't something controversial or unpopular. It's *evil*. There's no way around that, Malfoy!"

"And what if the answer for how to stop Morel is in that book?" I challenged. "What then? We plug our ears and go our merry way while he's loose, wreaking all manner of unspeakable evils on the unsuspecting public?"

"Oh please, don't act like you give a damn about the unsuspecting public. I can read it all over your face; you just want the first stab at it!"

"And what's wrong with that? I'll admit it, I'm curious. And maybe that's all I am. What makes you think you know shit all about me?" My furious strides ate up the distance between us. "Maybe I want some closure on the Dark Fuckwit's reign of terror on my family. Maybe I want to know what the point of our fucked-up war was. Why these *Horcruxes* were so bleeding important."

"The point?" you repeated. "Are you serious? The *point* was that your side decided one day armchair racism wasn't doing it for you, and that you needed to force your prejudice down everyone else's throat. Oh, and there was also that whole trying for genocide thing, if that slipped your mind!"

"You know what the problem is with you, Granger? Your side can only see things in black and white. You paint us all with the same brush. Well, guess what? Not everyone wanted to commit mass murder. Not everyone was peachy keen with torturing people..."

"Don't even try pretending you had nothing to do with..."

"Stop ramming words in my mouth! I never said my hands were clean. I did things...and I wish I could take them back, but I can't. I can't. No prison sentence, no amount of shame heaped on my family, *nothing* can make me sorrier than I already am. So if you're done shrieking, I've got it. I'm a despicable human being. And you lot are saints. I *got it*," I spat.

You shrank back against the workbench, expression suddenly weary, and I yearned to nail each lashing word and my every cutting feeling onto your skin. "Whatever you're looking for, whatever closure you think you'll find, it won't be in here," you said, voice wavering. "I can't let you take this back to Britain. I have to burn it, see if I won't!"

I gave a bark of laughter, jagged with venom. "All that'll accomplish is to cripple us with ignorance. You say a Horcrux makes someone immortal. Well, have you even given a thought as to how we're supposed to capture someone who can't be hurt?"

"There are ways. There have to be. If we destroy the ring, it'll destroy him, too."

"You want to bet our lives on that?"

"I can't *believe* this," you said, shaking your head. "A day ago, you thought this was just a house-elf setting off a security spell! And now you're toying with my fears just to get what you want! Is there no depth you won't stoop to?"

"No." My words were frostbitten and sharp. "And the sooner you realize that, the better."

You gritted your teeth and clasped the book to your chest. "Fine. That's *fine*. Then I'll turn these books over to the Aurors. They can decide how to handle this."

I made a scornful noise. "I don't even know why you bother. It's not as though Potter and Weasley have got enough bollocks between them to deny you a flipping thing."

"I don't know where you get this absurd idea that because we've become celebrities we have any real power..."

"It's only absurd because there isn't a Knut's worth of business sense between the three of you. If I had anywhere near the..."

"Yes, yes, you'd be halfway to ruling Great Britain," you cut in, bolstered by this return to familiar jibes and less weighty enmities. "We all got that memo when you decided slicked-back Napoleon hair and a peacock strut were a good look on you."

A nasty smile curved my lips. "I could say a thing or two about buck teeth and rat's nest hair, but I think I'll just savor the mental image. After all, it's not like much has changed."

"No," you snapped, penetrating gaze traveling up and down, flaying me to the bone. "Not much has."

Clutching the verboten book, you pushed past, clipping my arm with your shoulder. I watched you charge back up the stairs and disappear into the sunlight, silently cursing that for every step forward, I invariably chucked us twelve back.

Warren was waiting for us by the doorstep, clutching a frayed picnic basket nearly half his size. "Lunch," he pronounced, tone solemn.

"Thank you," you said, taken aback. "But we really should be go..."

"For crying out loud," I said impatiently. "Are you really going to make him lug it back and toss out the lot like rubbish?"

You tried to skewer me with a dirty look, but the house-elf's stiff silence must've wrought a miracle on your prickly mood because you slowly sat down on the creaky sun-bleached doorstep and blessed him with a radiant smile. "What are we having?" you asked.

Warren snapped his fingers and a tea service appeared on the unkempt lawn. Then he doled out the offerings in the basket and spread out a picnic of cream crackers, beans on toast, pickles and tiny cuts of egg and cress sandwiches. A tray of lemon custards sat on the bottom. When I sat down on the lowest step, you shot me a wary glance and pointedly placed the dusty book on your other side.

Ignoring my sardonic snort, you asked, "Warren, do you know if anyone else disappeared at the same time Mr. Morel did?"

The house-elf raised his head wearily. "No, miss."

I took a bite of the sandwich. "Are you sure? No one at all?"

"No, sir."

"Well, there goes your fear-mongering Horcrux theory."

"Not necessarily," you argued. "Warren, after Mr. Morel disappeared, did he or anyone ask you to owl something to your mistress?"

He blinked once. "Yes. Warren always does his duty, miss."

"What do you mean?" I asked sharply.

"There is a note, sir. It tells Warren to wrap up the ring and owl it to Mistress. A gift, it was."

"And you sent it?" you said in a rush of pent-up breath.

The house-elf straightened painstakingly to his full height. "Of course, miss," he said, chin tilted proudly. "When there are being packages on this doorstep, Warren is sending them to the post."

Fiddling with a cream cracker, you bit your lip, troubled. "You never saw him again after you sent that ring?"

"No, miss."

"Then there's no choice. We *have* to let the Aurors know what we've found as soon as we take the Floo back to the Ministry."

"Warren is sorry, miss," said the house-elf with difficulty. "But there is no more Floo powder. No one is coming or staying here for ten years."

"Oh . . . well . . . then I guess we'll Apparate."

He bowed. "Warren is bringing sir and miss brooms."

"Er, what?" you asked.

"Because of the Anti-Apparition ward. Only family can come in. Sir and miss must cross one of the two rivers," said Warren, indicating the fields in the distance with a knobby finger.

You paled. "But I-I don't like flying."

"In old days, there is being a barge to cross rivers. No more," he said, ears drooping as though this was a personal failing.

"It isn't your fault, Warren. Brooms sound great," you said faintly.

When the house-elf snapped out of existence and you fought not to glower at the placid river in the distance, I laughed. "A pity there isn't a N.E.W.T in flying. I would've paid cold, hard gold to see one Troll in your tower of Outstandings."

"Har har," you muttered. "I'll have you know flying is a pointless, dangerous activity for adrenaline junkies and..."

"Relax," I drawled. "I'll fly you across."

"What? No!"

"All right. Then you can subsist on egg and cress sandwiches until you rot and I'll leave with the book."

You trained a death glare on me, tempering flaring your narrow shoulders rigid. "Don't you dare *eventhink* of..."

I chuckled. "Isn't it embarrassing how easy it is to wind you up?"

"Yeah, I find it uproarious," you said, scowling. Then your tone turned sober. "I'm serious, Malfoy. This could be much bigger than one house-elf."

"And I'm serious that we should read that book and see how Morel made himself a Horcrux without killing anyone. Unless he did it somewhere else."

At the mention of the book, you hunched a little into yourself, slumping tiredly from an invisible weight. "I may . . . have read more than I let on," you admitted at last.

Since I'd been expecting something of the sort, it was a supremely unsurprising revelation. Indignation and protests had never yet failed to persuade me that festering beneath all the layers of pretty posturing were always, always lies. I smoothed my voice into nonchalance. "And?"

"There *is* a way to make a Horcrux without killing anyone. I mean, it still comes down to using murder to splinter your soul, but instead of doing ~~it~~ *before* you create the Horcrux, you make the kill afterwards."

"How does that even make sense?"

"I don't know exactly. But it's...when you hate so deeply, when you're so intent on killing someone that you're willing to suicide and fragment your own soul. Then you become the weapon that kills whoever your target is."

"He . . . became the ring?" I asked, arching a skeptical brow.

"Yes. No. I don't know!" you said. "It's a fact the ring *doessomething*. It's a fact we've got a how-to for making Horcruxes. It's a fact Gaston Morel disappeared after the ring was sent to the Zabinis. But how these things are somehow connected to a house-elf wandering into a vault and getting blown up when she's forced to account for herself is beyond me."

I tilted back to lie on the top rickety plank of the doorstep, resting my head only a hand-span apart from you. Above, the sky was painfully blue and unblemished by white wisps or avian specks. It was the sort of blasphemously beautiful day one hated to waste indoors. A crack lacerated the bright silence, and two broomsticks, coarse and outdated, tumbled in a twiggly heap on the grass before us.

At the sight of their chipped handles, I winced. "I'll be damned if these aren't the same Cleansweep Fives we rode the last time I was here. House-elf's got a memory like an elephant."

You eyed them with distaste. "You know, I've never understood that expression," you mumbled, a sour bent to your mouth. "What have elephants got to do with remembering?"

"Does it matter? That's why these associations stick." I turned to stare at the sky, light prickling my irises until the world became moist. "They sound absurd."

I felt your gaze scour over me, searching for some answer or key or clue that I would be only too happy to share if you'd just tell me what you wanted. But that would be too easy, wouldn't it? This time, I really did feel a harbinger tingling down my spine; my bones turned to lead beneath your scrutiny, and I knew beyond reason or facts or logic that *this moment mattered*. "They mean nothing. And they're absurd," I repeated slowly. "But they stick. They stick because people repeat it, dress it up with new and old meanings and implications, until you can't not know what they mean."

"What are you on about?"

"That's how words work, you know. They're not just bits of a mental lexicon you can try out and discard like an every-flavor bean. Words stick. It's always been so easy for you to define everything: This is good, this is evil, the line is here. You're always so *sure*. But it's the same, don't you realize . . . it's the same for us."

Shifting on the creaky stair, you leaned back on one arm and bent over me, long brown strands dangling loose, a veritable mess I would've called unkempt a year ago, disgusting two years ago, and somehow *just fine* today. "What are you on about?" you repeated.

That was my cue to drop it. There was never any point in trying to share my perspective with you, because if I had a choice, if I could ~~choose~~, I'd never want you to be smeared with my taint. Maybe a less selfish man would've chosen what was best for you and left it alone, but I'd always been fiercely selfish and I have never, ever been able to leave you alone.

I angled the back of my hand over my eyes, resting my elbow on your leg, and when you didn't shove me off, I forced myself to relax and speak over the knot in my throat. "It wasn't like they put us through Death Eater camp and drafted us into a cult. In one form or another, we all volunteered. Our way of life, of *everything*, is dying, Granger. Nobody gives a damn about bloodlines or how deep your pockets have always been, just how deep they *are*. Can't you see how tempting it might be to cling to each other for any justification of superiority? No," I sighed, "I suppose you can't."

"Of course I can," you said savagely. "You think racism is a uniquely wizarding condition? It's a human condition, and Muggles are just as susceptible."

My voice came out hoarse. "Then why . . . when you've forgiven Blaise and Nott and Pansy and Goyle...why can't you forgive ~~me~~?"

I felt you jerk above me, suddenly tense, swaying as though whatever you'd been expecting, that hadn't been it, and holding a caught breath for so long my ribs began to ache in sympathy. When you finally spoke, I nearly pressed my hand over your mouth to stop you, because whatever had taken that long to think, to phrase, to pour into politely shaped words I didn't want to hear it. There was the tiniest flutter of your fingers dancing on my collarbone, touching ruined skin, that small preview of Potter's hideous tribute and my rancid desperation.

"It's hard for me," you said. "If I seem headstrong or so certain, it's because I'm terrified. When I got here, into this world you live in and move through as though it were *nothing*, it was the scariest thing I'd ever seen. All the rules and logic I'd taken for granted, I found out they were only illusions, and if I were just willing to look, there was an entire universe where everything I'd ever yearned for or dreamed about was *real*. And I wanted to belong; I wanted so badly to fit in. No one had ever wanted me out there, and for the first time, I could point to a reason and say to myself, it was magic...that's why those other girls didn't like me. They could tell I was too good for them."

"Granger..."

"No, you don't get to interrupt me. You wanted an answer, here it is. I came to Hogwarts all alone, and the girls there didn't want me, either. I cared so much ~~turned~~ to be good enough for this new place where I was supposed to belong, damn it, and still, no one wanted me. Then Ron and Harry came along, and that's when it began to feel like home. Home, Malfoy. But around every corner, sneering in every classroom was you. Challenging me to be better, hoping to chuck me out if I ever slipped up, and I couldn't afford to, not while you and the professors and my parents were watching. The reason I can't think of you the same way I think of Zabini or Parkinson is because I've *never* been able to. You have always meant something more...even when I didn't want you to."

"I'd say I was sorry for being a relentless bastard, but I wasn't," I said, clenching my hand draped over my eyes into a fist, trying not to give in and look at you. "I liked being a bully; it reinforced the hierarchy I'd spent my lifetime building. Without it, I was only a sack of gold and a surname I'd done nothing to earn. Which is to say, completely worthless."

"I know that now, even if I didn't back then. Malfoy, you mattered back then...you've always mattered. Sometimes, when you look at me, it's a little like falling off a cliff, and I can't do a thing to save myself. Then other times, you look at me and spew so much hate, and it feels like you're running me through with a hot poker because so much of what you say is *true*. Even if...especially when you're being cruel."

"That," I said softly, "I can be sorry for. Just like I can be sorry for being too much of a fucking coward to say ~~no~~, I won't let a bunch of murderers hack away at schoolchildren. No, I won't torture snotty-nosed first years for detention. No, I won't kill Dumbledore. No, Aunt Bella, I don't recognize this girl. No, I won't lead Crabbe on with delusions of grandeur until he'd swallowed my half-truths as gospel and got himself dead. But it's too late, you see. I can be sorry until I'm on my deathbed and not a bit of it will do any good."

"That's not true. It'll do me good. It...I mean, you shouldn't make me say it again," you ventured, voice gentle, "that I'm not indifferent to you...it's kind of mortifying. But I'm not, so there you are. And I want to hear it. Tell me you don't still think I've got dirty blood, that I've no right to breathe the same air. Tell me."

I rolled on my side and rested my head on the curve of my arm, peering up into your wide-open face, vulnerable as all get out, waiting for devastation or hope or maybe both. "Bar none, you're the most extraordinary witch I've ever met. You can do things with breathtaking ease I couldn't master given an eternity. When I called you Mu...that slur before, it was never about you. It was jealousy eating me alive and helplessness because you were so strong, and I knew of no other way to hurt you."

You closed your eyes, lips quivering. "That's not good enough. Tell me you don't believe ~~any~~ of it anymore."

"I . . . can't," I gritted. "I would be lying. I can't just undo...wipe clean things I've believed since I could walk. But I'm trying. Don't look at me like that, Granger. I'm *trying*, damn you. I can't accept that Muggles are just as good as we are. How can anyone without magic be the *same* as us? But Muggle-borns? They're not any less. You're not any less."

"Okay," you breathed, eyes wide and dark with want. "Okay, that's a start. Just one more thing."

I'd already been vivisected and set aflame; what more could there be? I murmured, "What?"

"Why do you need me to forgive you?"

Sorrow and amusement wrung my mouth into a smile. "Still haven't figured that out?"

"I wouldn't be asking if I knew."

"All right." I sat up and caught the hand you were idly trailing over my scar. You startled at our sudden proximity and tried to move back, but I held firm and wrestled you closer, a breath away. "How about now?"

I kissed you. At first, it was only two mouths rubbing together, uncoordinated and blundering. Then you kissed me back, and I forgot what 'uncoordinated' and 'blundering' meant. The instant you gave in, acknowledged wanting *me*, that confirmed everything I'd so desperately wanted to be untrue, exposed my self-lies for the concealment spell they were. All that hate I'd shaved and filed into something that snagged and made others bleed had always been more, a desire that swelled until it was unrecognizable even to me, and I'd known in my lumbering, idiotic youth that I couldn't afford to recognize it. So I'd chosen not to.

Why? Because it was the beginning of what Pansy had spent long, chilled years trying to pry from me.

You tasted of cream and something elusively tangy. It wasn't perfect. I didn't repent of all my sins in the fold of your arms; the way you curved into me wasn't a blazing rightness; it was hesitant and untutored. You ran inquisitive fingers along the nape of my neck and clutched at the collar of my shirt in marvel. Despite the soft velvet of your lips, and penetrating heat that felt like a chest wound but was something infinitely better, I didn't quite lose my mind. What I glimpsed was a precipice ahead and the knowledge that I could jump, that I *should* jump, and that if I did, it would be the most terrifying freefall I'd ever known. That choice was mine.

I jumped.

Granger, say what you will, but you'd have to be half-dead not to have felt it. We were closer in that moment than I'd ever been with anyone else including ~~during~~ *you* know. Oh, don't glare. You wanted total honesty from me, right? Then you've got to take your lumps and bruising truths come what they may. I don't think we even budged until it was almost sunset, trailing languidly along the river shoreline talking about a blurring number of things, probably more sappy confessions from me...I can't tell if it's

the alcohol or maudlin memories wreaking havoc on my gag reflex...and more devastating questions from you.

*Stop fleeing*, you told me then.

Not that syrupy sentiment could keep you out of the count for long. I think it was my quiet admiration of the descending sun that jolted you back to reality. "Malfoy!" you said, grasping my wrist in a panic. "We're still in France."

"Yes. And this is news because?"

You hefted the book that was the bane of all our troubles in my face. "We've got to report this to the Ministry and hand it over to the Aurors."

"All work and no play?" I gave you an exasperated look. "Fine. If we must, we must *Accio* broom!"

The broom that least resembled kindling shot up and dived arrow-straight for us. I snatched it out of the air and tested its solidity. "Hm, not hopeless."

Fear flickered in your eyes. "I am *not* riding on that. It's . . . old!"

I exhaled and mentally asked the higher powers for strength. Mounting the broomstick, I made room for you. "I'm already regretting this but . . . imagine I'm Potter," I forced out. "Ol' reliable with a built-in detector for damsels in distress and a heroic streak a continent wide."

You gaped at me, anxiety momentarily abating from the absurdity. "Imagine you're *Harry*..."

I grabbed you and seated you in the circle of my arms before you could finish. I slammed my feet against the ground and we took off. I enjoyed a few hundred feet of crisp, lung-dragging air before you started shrieking in my ear, gripping onto me so tightly I began to feel as though your clawed handprints had always been a part of my back. "Relax. *Relax*!"

"I can't!" you shouted.

The water below shimmered, a rippling canvas of someone going to town with every warm shade in existence. I considered briefly extolling the virtues of the scenery and then thought better of it. The more you imagined this was a ride in one of those auto car things the easier for you and my eardrums. I landed as gently as I could. The instant you felt solid ground beneath your feet, you tore off the broom and hauled in air like you'd spent the entire journey underwater.

"M-Malfoy!" you managed.

Anticipation arched my brows. "Yes?"

"I'm taking you driving on the M4. Tomorrow!" you promised, mouth bent in a fit of pique.

"Do your worst," I said, grinning. I yanked you against me to Disapparate.

We reappeared in the welcome chamber of the French Ministry of Magic. Since it was the end of the workday, the place was packed, and we queued up to the international fireplace. You clutched the blasted book like you expected a den of thieves to be lurking amidst the genteel employees trickling home.

I tucked the broom behind me and ran a hand through my windswept hair. "You couldn't be more obvious about having something valuable on you if you painted a sign that read, 'Rob me,' and plastered it across your forehead."

"I'm just being careful!"

"Scrutinizing everyone who walks within two feet of you is not being careful. It's being bloody stupid, and if this were the city, you'd be a homing beacon for every pickpocket and mugger in sight."

"Oh, just get on with it!"

I threw in a pinch of Floo powder. "British Ministry of Magic."

Two whirlwinds later, we found ourselves deposited in the maelstrom of employees streaming home. "Guess our timing's off," I commented, noting more than one Auror with his arm swung jovially around a colleague, the lot of them heading for the pub.

"Well," you hesitated, "I guess..."

"Draco!"

We turned to find Blaise weaving through the crowd towards us. He flicked a curious glance at the book you hid guiltily from view and turned to me. His tone was affable to take the sting off. "I was looking for you, but they said no one was in. What happened to keeping me updated on the case?"

"I meant to owl you when I got back to the office," I lied. I hadn't thought a moment about Blaise since I became lost in the hellfire that was you.

"How fortunate then that I should have run into the both of you. My mother's remembered more about the break-in. She's been asking urgently after you."

You bit your lip. "Can't it wait...?"

"I'm afraid not," said Blaise with an apologetic gesture. "She's not often as clearheaded as she is right now. She practically begged me to come get you."

"Well, all right, then," you relented, darting me a *them's the breaks* look.

Blaise gestured us graciously through the fire, a small smile of enjoying a joke we weren't privy to arching his mouth. If I hadn't been turning around to ask him why Lucretia would want to see *you* when the two of you'd never met, I would've missed Blaise drawing his wand the second he stepped out of the flames and pronouncing in a deep, cold voice, "*Avada Kedavra*!"

But because I'd been turning to do just that, I managed to shove you out of the way a bare inch shy of the jet of green light that pierced over your shoulder and punched a crater in the marble tiles of the foyer wall. "Blaise!" I yelled, dropping the broom and whipping out my wand.

He had a head start in aiming. Another Killing Curse ripped through the air and slashed the portrait of Cesare Borgia in half before I could fire back a Stunner. "What are you doing?" I roared. "*Stupefy! Stupefy!*"

You fell heavily when I knocked you aside, but you were already scrambling to your feet, one hand clutching at your ribs and the other fumbling for your wand. "Oh, my God. He's wearing it. Draco, he's wearing the ring!" you cried.

And indeed he was. The pinky ring I'd seen the day before, only a simple gold circlet then, was now the exact dimensions and same jewels as the Ring. I cursed my stupidity. As much of a dandy as Blaise aspired to be, I'd never yet seen him don jewelry. "Blaise, can you hear me?" I shouted as he bore down on us. "*Impedimenta*!"

"No," said the imposter. "He can't. The boy is asleep."

All the blood drained from my face at this euphemism for death. "What do you mean?" I snarled.

"Ah, how touching, this concern. But not to worry. The boy is not dead. I still have much . . . need for his body," crooned the false man. "He is only resting. He resisted long and hard when he realized he couldn't remove a ring he'd never seen, you see."

"Then he was still himself yesterday," I croaked, shaking from a crest of rage threatening to boil over. In another place, in another time, I would've sunk into despair at lamenting the loss of yet another friend to evil Dark fuckwits, but not here, and not today, not while you were still in the line of fire. If only to give you a chance to escape and sound the alarm, I needed to keep him talking. "Who are you?" I forced through gritted teeth.

"Haven't you guessed? I'm Gaston Morel," drawled the man who'd tried to murder Lucretia Zabini.

"Bullshit," I hissed. We circled each other, alert to the slightest movement. The killing glint in Blaise...no, Morel's eyes was vicious and empty of mercy. My perception of time and all my senses...of the current in the air, the twitch of his face, your silent steps in getting within Stunning range...slit razor sharp as I honed in on my prey, and I slowly began to understand the thrall of a true wizard's duel. Only one of us was walking off this killing field; the other was leaving in a body bag.

"I was such a silly boy once. Too soft-hearted to take a life," his smile widened like a gash, "so I took my own. And for what? To revenge myself on that useless bitch? It all seems so pointless now."

*Look at me*, I thought, trying to trap his focus,*that's right, keep looking at me*. "You failed because she never put on the ring."

Morel nodded, amusedly cordial expression melting into a mocking taunt. "Oh yes, who would have believed it? The vainest creature that ever lived, sentimental enough to treasure my little gift. Wonders never cease."

"And the house-elf?"

"Ah, now *that* was a stroke of fortune. Dear, absentminded Lucretia often asked her little Zita to put away her jewels. It was ever so much easier to tempt a non-human mind, compel her to slip on the ring."

My jaw clenched at the silken relish in his voice. "Then when Blaise opened the vault, you made her put the ring on him."

"Précisément."

"And you tampered with his memory," I gritted.

"But of course. If only that woman hadn't gone into hysterics, I might have taken over then and there," he said scornfully. "But your Blaise is yet another soft-hearted fool for that woman and I had to . . . keep the house-elf quiet."

Fear swooped in and clawed at my chest. "Where's Lucretia?"

Morel hummed with pleasure. "Her, I will deal with last. I have waited so . . . very . . . long, you see."

"And you're going to what? Kill me, kill her, kill everyone here? The Aurors'll crash down on you like a mountain before our bodies even cool."

"But why should they? When the real killer will already be dead." He struck, lightning fast, hissing, "*Avada Kedavra*."

I dove out of the way, another narrow escape, but the teeth-rattling fall thrashed the wand out of my grip. Morel summoned it to him and tossed it aside, far out of reach, chuckling at the tormented helplessness in my eyes. He was moving to mow me down when I heard you shout behind me, "*Confringo*!"

Morel deflected the streak of blue and smashed it into the floor, blasting a smoking hole the size of a body. "I almost forgot about you, Mudblood," he said, laughing. "Do you know, I had the most edifying morning reading all about the two of you?"

Unfazed, you slashed another spell at him. "*Reducto*!"

The bolt singed the sleeve of his robes and blew apart the portrait of Lucrezia Borgia over his shoulder. "To think that one of the Malfoy clan, greater pureblood fanatics you won't find this side of the Channel, would be consorting with a Mudblood. These are new times, indeed."

He jerked his wand at the doorway behind you and a sofa sailed out of the parlor, crashing into you and knocking you flat to the ground. Your wand clattered out of reach. "Draco," you whispered, breathing shallowly from the pain.

I read the intentions in his face a second before he raised his wand. He was going to make me a spectator to your death, and it would be neither painless nor quick. Desperate, I made myself laugh, as wintry and barren as any I'd heard from this monster masquerading as my friend. "You don't really think I give a damn about some Mudblood girl, do you?"

Morel looked briefly away from you, arching an amused glance at me. "No? Then you won't mind if I take off her pretty little head?"

"To think that all these years my mother was lying about the courageous exploits of the older generation. Butchering an unarmed Mudblood? Really?" I mocked, wresting boredom into my voice.

"Actually," he tilted his head back to you, a perverse smile curving the edges of his mouth, "while I was still . . . corporeal, I'd fantasized about hunting Mudbloods. It's fitting that on the eve of my rebirth, I should finally make that fantasy a reality."

For boundless excruciating moments, I'd been slowly inching back towards the fireplace. The instant he retrained his attention on you, I shouted, "You know what else they are? Bloody good distractions!"

"What?" Morel whirled to face me as I took to the air on my discarded broomstick and barreled straight for him at the speed of wind.

I was an impossibly fast target, and his spells, controlled bursts of death, only just missed. A split second before we collided, I swooped to pick up your wand and jammed it into his leg, shouting, "*Expelliarmus*!"

We smashed into hard marble, and the force of impact knocked me off him. Scrambling for purchase, I pulled on his robes and jabbed your wand in his neck.*Stupefy*!"

A jolt of red flared. The nascent groans of an enraged Dark wizard about to call down all manner of hell and damnation abruptly ceased, and he slumped to the floor. I crawled over to his arm and covered my hand with a wad of robes. Then I yanked the ring off. It spun on the marble tile, sparkling in the light, the ruby a malevolent crimson tint. On my hands and knees, ignoring the charring ache of my undoubtedly broken wrist, I dragged myself over to where you were sprawled, pinned beneath the sofa.

"*Deprimo*," I panted, desperate for you to lift your head and look at me.

My spell blew the damned sofa clear off you, but when you finally did meet my eyes, it wasn't with the gratitude I expected or even the smallest shred of warmth. Instead

you focused on the ring and said flatly, "Fiendfyre or something equally corrosive."

"What?" My voice broke in disbelief.

"What's the matter?" you said with derision. "Danger's passed. No more need for Mudblood distractions."

Now is that fair, I ask you? There I was, all brave and heroic, Homeric even, while you slew me with brown eyes as hard and unforgiving as quartz. All right, so I may have made some hasty promises about never using that word again during our rapturous walk by the river, but this was the *heat of battle*, and I only said it to save both our arses. How have you somehow managed to miss that part of the bigger picture?

Blaise is alive. Lucretia is alive. *We're* alive, damn it! And did I mention how I saved the freaking day? The highlight, of course, being Potter's nowhere-in-sightedness. It's a bloody miracle is what it is. No, I will not stop sulking. I've had the worst forty-eight hours, possibly in the history of ever. So how's about before the next Dark wizard pops in and shuffles me off this mortal coil, you let me know if this is another night I'm going to wish had passed me by.

Look at me. I thought you lot had cornered the market on unflinching truths. Lay it on me. It's not like this day could get any worse. You made me fall for you, my friend turned into a psycho murderer, and we both escaped our untimely deaths by the skin of our teeth. Maybe that's just a stroll and picnic for you war hero and wunderkind types, but I'm still a bit fresh to this lifesaving, Dark wizard-stopping business, thanks. There you go: I knew you were capable of more facial expressions than mad and glare. What are you waiting for? Tarry off back to Weasley already. No, I don't care that you're not actually seeing him. Stop raining on my rant with *facts*.

Still not gone? Okay, I'll tell you what...save you the trouble of letting me down easy...I'm tired, Granger. I need somewhere new to begin. I can't keep wandering around, waiting for everyone I know to discard me like so much rubbish just so I'll be free; that's nothing but a husk of living. Look, we had a jolly good time, I'll admit it. We wandered across an empty land, and maybe that was part of the illusion...just you and me and the earth beneath our feet...and we even sat by a bleeding river, and for a mesmerizing second, I felt complete. No. Wait. That didn't come out right. You do not make me complete. At all.

Do *not* give me that dewy-eyed look. I can only tolerate it on newborn puppies and the occasional squalling baby. Very. Occasional. I don't even know why you're here, Granger. You couldn't have acted more like I was the next Dark nutbar if I *were* the next Dark nutbar. You flung me at the Aurors and then fled like hellhounds were yapping at your heels. They, of course, dutifully packed me off to St. Mungo's where...wait for it...you were nowhere to be found. No, I will not sober up. I've been pints past shitfaced since hours before you tripped over me in the stairwell yammering on about, *totally irresponsible* and *how dare you check yourself out*

The bottom line is I slipped up, and you're back to hating me again. Great. Fine. Well, I'm telling you this is the end. Of everything. Last stop, throw away your tickets, time to disembark for a new town, new destination. I'm sick of all the places I've been, all the watering holes that are second homes to drunken losers. I gave it my best, tried to let you in and for all your forbearing smiles, I know it wasn't enough. What? Speak up, Granger. I can't hear you over this crowd of gibbering drunks. Must be Thursday. Listen, tosspot, that's my hand, not a drink coaster. Bugger off!

There, that's better. Now, what in God's name were you saying?

*"If you have a minute, why don't we go talk about it somewhere only we know?"*

*Fin.*