

The Awakening

by Lucas

The war is over, and so is Hermione's marriage. An embittered Ron has walked away, leaving her empty and in terrible debt. Draco Malfoy has barely escaped life in Azkaban, and more recently, a torturous marriage to Pansy Parkinson. He, however, feels no pain until his mother is abducted, taking the only person left in his world.

When Draco decides to hire Hermione to help him, they discover a disturbing perversion of nature in fey form, an enraged and envious villain, and something neither of them ever expected—each other.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 18

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Chapter One

"Why can't she just shut the fuck *up*?!" Ron shouted, hurling a nameless bottled potion across the living room. Of course it had to be some sludge that turned red upon impact...just one more thing for Hermione to bitch at him about when she decided to calm down and come back home. Honestly, did she think he would *miss* her and *repent* if she stayed away long enough? Ha! He could finally get some peace and quiet, stuff his face like a real man, and have the entire couch, which was the only piece of furniture remotely comfortable to his long frame. If only he could calm down enough to *enjoy* the silence...

He sat down, pulled off his shoes, flung them across the room (carefully aiming at Hermione's plant shelf), and opened a bottle of firewhiskey. Having no one to notice whether or not he used a glass, he just took a nice, long gulp. Calm began to seep into his limbs almost immediately, so he aimed his wand at a painting on the wall and started "redecorating."

Despite his best efforts, his mind defiantly focused on Hermione. When had things started feeling this way, anyhow? She was one of his two best friends, and they had been through hell and back together. He had always figured he'd end up with Hermione, even if they didn't have what Ginny and

Harry seemed to have. He certainly didn't want anyone else to have her.

Maybe he had rushed things too much. Hermione had been a big part of getting him through those first few months without his brother, and he had hoped his affection for her could grow into love soon enough. He just wanted to get on with things...move out of the Burrow, buy a house, find a real job, and start finding out who he was without a war to fight.

Things started out okay after they married, but their bickering just kept getting worse and worse. As his anger over Fred set in, he had probably become unbearable, and maybe it hadn't helped when he quit his job.

Ron tried to shake off the truth and stay pissed, but he just ended up gulping down more firewhiskey to assuage the guilt. It wasn't long before he was drifting into a drunken stupor.

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Hermione slammed her empty glass on the counter and muttered, "What's wrong with this firewhiskey? I don't feel shit." She nearly slid off the stool and fell on her ass (*Fucking shoes are completely unstable! Have to demand a refund first thing tomorrow...*) in an attempt to snag some purple smoking liquid from the deserted spot next door, and she was, in fact, completely sloshed.

Hermione had been slung over the bar at Madame Rosmerta's for about three hours now. Ron had not had adequate time to suffer, and she'd only had... er... well, not enough to drink. How many times had she been here in the last three weeks anyway? Maybe she just shouldn't go home at all.

Hermione was interrupted from her millionth "How-to-Leave-Ron Brainstorming Session" when an irritatingly familiar drawl whispered in her ear. "The Weasel in someone else's knickers, Granger?" He chuckled softly and sat down next to her as she glared at him and nearly slipped off the stool again.

"What the hell are you talking about, Malfoy? Leave me alone."

"I'm confused. Do you want me to answer your question or leave you alone?" Malfoy asked with a smirk.

"Fuck you."

"*Language*, Granger. You'll lose your prudish reputation, and we wouldn't want that, would we? Don't tell me Potter's Rent-a-Brain found my question indecipherable."

Hermione hesitated, nostrils flaring, and frankly, too drunk to find a decent comeback. "Okay, answer the question and then shut up!"

"Ah, now that's more like it. I like my Mudbloods angry, you know." He winked at her and she scowled. "I was merely making the observation that your little Weasel must not be pleasing you if you are out alone this late on a Saturday night, getting drunk off your arse."

Hermione sighed, trying to calm herself. "Why are you sitting here? You can't possibly want to waste your time taunting me about Ron."

"On the contrary, Granger, I love reminding you of what a pathetic existence you really have. What did you get for your anniversary this year anyway?"

A lollipop from Honeydukes? Bit tacky, but I suppose he could at least enjoy watching you eat it..." Draco turned to the bartender to place his order, leaving Hermione with a satisfying sting on her face.

When he turned back around, he fully expected to find that she had stomped off as usual. Instead, he heard an odd sniffing noise... *What the bloody hell?* "Fuck, Granger..."

He looked around nervously, hoping no one was looking. He and his mother had managed to salvage their reputations enough to keep their place in society, but he knew most people considered Hermione to be some sort of heroine. That was one of many reasons he loved to torture the little priss.

Hermione just rested her head on the bar and began to sob openly. She was too drunk to keep up pretenses, and she didn't even care if Malfoy saw. He couldn't have known how close he was to the truth, could he? She finally lifted her head to look into some seriously shocked grey eyes.

Malfoy knew he should go for the kill while she was so broken, but the material just wasn't coming. For some reason, he could never seem to finish her when she wasn't able to fight back, ever since the Cruciatus party at the Manor...

However, his curiosity was killing him. Before he could stop himself, he asked, "What the hell is the matter with you? You're making a scene."

"Then go away!"

That wasn't what he was hoping for. He tried again. "Granger, you're spewing snot everywhere! What did the Weasel do to you...cheat, hit you, fail to put his skiddy underwear in the basket?"

"You wish! He just... he just..." Why was she telling *Malfoy* this? Oh, well, she was too drunk to care, and Draco's eyes... had they always been such a magnetic shade of grey?

Okay, she really *was* drunk. "Ron and I are just fighting, that's all."

Malfoy just stared as though expecting her to continue... or hoping she would continue. Hermione knew she should be walking away, but her attempts to see reason were just too exhausting at the moment. *Oh, what the hell.*

"We actually fight most every day, so that probably pleases you." She sniffed and wiped her nose on the wet napkin which had been under her firewhiskey. Malfoy just made a disgusted grunt, so she went on. "Ron has to find a job, but all he wants to do is sit around the house moping about

it. We're about to lose everything, but of course nothing is good enough for him." She rolled her eyes, letting a few more tears escape.

Draco wondered how this revelation had come as such a shock to her. How had she mistaken Ron for someone who would actually work? For some unfathomable reason, he actually felt a little sorry for her. One thing he could understand was being unable to live without money, and Mudbloods were at least *part* human....

To be honest, his hatred for them had ebbed a bit after watching Voldemort torture them ruthlessly in his own living room. "Listen... Granger? Um, why don't you just leave? I mean, not that I care about *your* happiness, but you don't seem like the kind of person to put up with a lazy slug using you."

Well, apparently he had struck another nerve, because she suddenly shouted, "He's not! I'm not! We are perfectly happy, for your information."

Okay, time to go. He wasn't *that* curious. "Whatever you say, Granger." Draco slammed his Scotch down in one gulp, winked at her, and got up. He strutted out like a peacock, and Hermione was left feeling absolutely ridiculous for confiding in such an insufferable prick.

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Later that night, Draco sat alone...again...on his leather couch. It was funny. He would never have guessed that Frizzy Fuckface and her Weasel Wanker were anything but perfect for each other. He was a git, and she was a bitch. Simple as that. Still... she was obviously miserable. Why did she just take it? Really, she could do much better. Despite her Muggle background, bitchy disposition, and uncontrollable hair, she did have a decent rack and was definitely clever. Not that he'd ever admit that to anyone.

He knew he was sure managing better on *his* own. What in the hell had he been thinking, marrying someone who prattled endlessly and had the I.Q. of an ant? Well, ants were actually fairly smart...how about a gnat? At the time it had seemed worth the agony. He had a need, and she had filled it perfectly.

After Voldemort was finally gone, any remaining Death Eaters were sent to Azkaban once they'd had all their assets seized to pay the families of their victims. Luckily, Draco's name had been cleared when his father testified that he had been forced to take the Dark Mark against his will. Because Perfect Potter vouched for the claim, everyone believed it.

Lucius had fucked up royally, though, so Draco and Narcissa rushed to juggle all of the Malfoy accounts before everything was confiscated. It had been a rather close call, and Draco scrambled to find a way to sustain himself and his mother while their money remained hidden.

The answer had come quickly in the form of the slinky and snooty Pansy Parkinson. Somehow she was too stupid to realize he was indefinitely destitute, and she had nearly thrown herself at him. She was probably as desperate for company as he was, he guessed. Not many people willingly associated with the likes of Pansy after the war.

At first, Draco tried to peel her off, but then he found out that her father had suddenly inherited the other two-thirds of his company from his Death Eater partners. Mr. Parkinson had always been smart enough to play along with the Dark Lord, but he had never taken the Mark. He had hardly even been investigated.

Draco and his mother decided that a fast marriage was in order, so he pretended he could stomach Pansy and proposed. If he had known what a nightmare the next year would be, he would have strangled the bitch on the first night.

Two months ago, he finally reached the end of his Pansy rope. His mother had been slowly moving the Malfoy money into her own accounts and Draco's, so he didn't need Pansy anyway. He had nearly run away screaming. Or laughing. He couldn't remember which.

Draco decided to bring his mind back to the present. Thinking of Pansy never lightened his mood.

As usual, the silence was golden. He kicked off his shoes and socks and stretched out, ready to relax and read. He had his Scotch in his favorite crystal tumbler, sitting on a glass coffee table that made a surprisingly comfortable ottoman when needed. He had bewitched it to become fluid at his use of the Liquidus spell. The dark gray walls kept the light to a minimum, and tonight, the flames in his dark granite fireplace provided all the light he required.

Just as he was settling into the first paragraph of *The Missing Elements of Noetic Science*, he heard a tapping at the window. He groaned but got up, trudging slowly to the south wall. Becoming impatient, the owl began tapping harder until Draco finally opened the window, so he opted to grab the letter off the filthy creature's leg and slam the glass back down...no treat.

The owl then opted to start tapping again rather forcefully, throwing in a shrill screech for emphasis. Draco yelled, "All right, then!" and threw the window back up to fling a treat in the owl's face. "Stupid barn owl..." he muttered, slamming the window down again. He plodded across the dark hardwood floor and plopped back down on the sofa to break the seal, mumbling something like "this damned well better be important..."

As he glanced down and unfolded the parchment, his insides plummeted. Frozen like a statue, his brain tried to process what his eyes were seeing. Once they did, he instantly boiled with rage, feeling himself vault from his seat to bash his table to shards with his bare foot, screaming venom at the empty space. He was barely able to keep himself from foolishly crumpling the message, and it was several minutes before his violent shaking

subsided enough for him to gather his broken thoughts.

It was a picture, and yes, it was damned important. His mother was unconscious, floating near the ceiling of some dark room, surrounded in a white sheen which he didn't recognize. She looked peaceful, but he got the message. The only person left in his world had been taken, and he had to meet some bastard's demands if he wanted her back alive.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 18

Ron and Hermione duke it out, and Draco has an interesting proposition for Hermione.

Once again, all belongs to JKR. I also want to profusely thank my beta, AmyLouise!

Chapter Two

Ron was snoring loudly when Hermione finally trudged in the door. Unfortunately, all of the calm she had managed on her walk home evaporated within seconds. Glancing around the room, she realized there was barely even a place to put her handbag!

An empty firewhiskey bottle, today's Daily Prophet (splattered with some sort of sauce), dirty socks, a package that just mere hours ago had contained thirty cookies, a half-eaten bag of salt and vinegar potato chips, and a remote covered in grease littered the floor, and the potion Ginny had made for her insomnia was splattered all over the wall. *That's it!* She grabbed the first thing she saw, which happened to be a book, and hurled it at Ron's crotch.

"What the FUCK?!" Ron snarled, jumping awkwardly to his feet and whipping his head around to find the culprit. He stumbled over his pile of garbage, barely able to see straight, and hurled a curse at his complete nutter of a wife. Luckily, he hadn't thought to use his wand. Hermione, however, had hers out of her purse before he even saw her, and she was pointing it straight at his chest.

"Get. out. of. my. HOUSE!"

"Your house?!" he spluttered, taking away some of the intended effect. "Why don't you get out of *my* house?!"

"I don't *know*, Ron. Maybe because this house is more mine than yours after you've let me pay all the bills for months!"

"Not that bullshit again! Jesus, Hermione, I told you what it was like working with George! The git was either sulking or slamming things around every day, and we were running a joke shop!" Somewhere under the alcoholic haze, he knew she had a point, but he wasn't quite ready to concede. The bloody bitch had nearly taken his balls off!

"Ron, don't even start down that road. That was months ago, and you haven't even applied anywhere else. How many times do we have to have this fight? All I do is clean up after you, watch you eat, and listen to you gripe. I supported you when you walked out of that shop, but it's like you never walked any further. I can't live like this anymore!"

Ron sagged on the couch, cradling his pounding head in his hands. He had known things couldn't go on like this but hadn't had the guts to do anything about it. He kept thinking he would wake up one morning ready to snap out of it, but it just hadn't happened. How long could he keep justifying stealing Hermione's life away? Maybe it was time to come clean. He took a deep breath and slurred, "Hermione, we have to talk."

"No shit!"

"No, I mean, *I* need to talk." He took another deep breath to steady himself. This was going to be ugly. He slugged another shot of firewhiskey before looking up into her irritated expression, which, oddly, gave him a bit of resolve.

"I've been using you, Hermione. I'm a selfish asshole, and I know there is nothing I can say," he blurted, looking back at his knees as he saw her turning to stone.

Hermione was frozen to the plush beige carpet, feeling an empty dread begin to creep through her body. *Using her?*

"Um, maybe you should sit down or something." He saw Hermione float to the armchair in a daze and sit gingerly, making him lose his nerve for a split second, and he almost decided to chicken out and blame the firewhiskey for what he'd said so far. Even drunk, though, he knew he had to get this over with sometime. Finally, he just continued and hoped for the best.

"When the war was over, the pain of losing Fred nearly killed me. I had to find a way to survive. You were the closest friend I had, and I knew you

loved me, so I chose you." He looked up carefully, expecting to see steam coming out of her ears, but she just stared straight ahead as though she wasn't hearing a word. *Oh, shit... shit.* This was definitely worse than a hundred screaming Hermiones, but that just told him what a complete asshole he'd really been for keeping on this long. He had to finish.

"At first, I tried to convince myself that I *wanted* our friendship to become more, but deep down I knew I just needed you, and you would leave if I didn't love you back. All this time I've tried to make myself feel something, I really have. I just can't." He lifted his eyes slightly, flinching at the dizziness, but she wasn't moving. When was she going to start giving him a beating, for Christ's sake? He had no idea what to do with a hurt Hermione instead of an angry one.

Hermione was a statue for what seemed like hours, but tears finally started rolling down her cheeks. *Ron never loved me? He never loved me?* She just shook her head slowly, trying to believe it. Trying to believe that she hadn't just wasted over a year of her life with someone who merely needed her to take care of him.

How could she have been so stupid? Suddenly she felt a burning rage roiling in her blood, seeping through her veins. All she could think to do was scream, but nothing would even come out. Abruptly, she felt sick and had to run to the bathroom.

After she had thrown up every possible molecule of food in her body, she just slumped to the floor. She curled up, hugging her knees, and stared at the ironically cheerful yellow walls for what seemed like hours. She just breathed.

A while later when she came back out, Ron was gone.

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The next morning, she hit the pub early. It was Saturday, and she couldn't sit in that house. Too much thinking. She hadn't really expected him to leave...

"Bit early to be getting sloshed, Granger."

No. I can't do this right now.

She turned to face the object of her hottest hatred. "Look, Malfoy, I'm not in the mood, okay?"

He lifted his hands in surrender and said, "Easy there, Raging Bull. I was merely greeting you like the polite gentleman I am. What the hell is the matter with you?"

Normally, Hermione just would have told him to fuck off, but there was something different in his eyes today. Was it fear...pain? Somehow she knew he was suffering, too. "I, uh, well... Ron left me last night." She lowered her eyes, not wanting to see if he was sadistically gleeful to see her hurt.

His reply was more than a little shocking.

"Er... I'm sorry, Granger." He couldn't believe he wasn't finding some nasty retort about the Weasel weaseling out of his slippery marriage, but he just didn't have it in him with the weight he was carrying, and she looked so pathetic he really did feel sorry for her. For a second, anyway. Not that Granger's troubles were his problem...

"I think this might just be worthy of the front page of the Prophet...Draco Malfoy just apologized to a filthy Muggleborn friend of the despicable Potter!"

"Never mind, Granger. I have a meeting anyway." Cursing himself for appearing too nice, he proceeded to walk across Madame Rosmerta's and sit at a table for two.

Hermione wondered what he was doing and then chastised herself for caring. When she left the pub an hour later, she saw Malfoy heatedly arguing with some man she didn't recognize. She was pretty sure she wouldn't *want* to recognize him, either.

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"How can you have no idea who is behind this? It's been nearly ten hours! Shall we just wait and see if they send her home in a nice package with an apology?"

"Mr. Malfoy, I'm sure we both want your mother safe, but you must see reason. You cannot possibly expect these people to be found easily, and it is highly likely that they will contact us first. We need to calm down and spend our time coming up with some sort of strategy and a list of possible suspects. Even though you and your mother have been cleared of any charges from the war, there are still those who do not believe you and could be seeking revenge. Do you know which victims were your father's?"

Draco sighed and rushed his hand through his hair. This was too much. He had just assumed that someone was after money, but what if they did want revenge? He glanced back up at the rather large dark-eyed man before him, whose thick black brows were creased with intensity. Charles Pendington had been the Malfoy's investigative connection at the Ministry since Draco had been small. He maintained a position in the Magical Evidence department there, but he had attended to any personal investigations for the Malfoys on the side. Draco trusted him implicitly.

"Charles, I can't believe there is a motive other than money. Why would someone send me a picture if they weren't going to follow it with demands?"

"I'm not sure, but my fear is that they are trying to lure you so they can be rid of any remaining Malfoys at once."

"Shit. Why couldn't they have taken Pansy? Hardly anyone knows we've split, and I could have happily left her for dead."

"Wait. If hardly anyone knows, then why wasn't she taken? Why would someone not think she was the most important person in your life? Who all knows about the separation? Our list should start there."

"Well, there's her family, of course." Draco strained to think if he had spoken to anyone about her at all. He didn't think he had. "I can't think of anyone else."

"So, we check out her father to start with, and we go from there. Meanwhile, let's hope someone comes to us."

As Draco walked out of the pub, his mind was racing in a million directions. One thing he knew was that he'd be hitting the library tonight to try and figure out what substance was surrounding her, and although he tried to clamp it down, he found himself ever so slightly hoping that a certain very irritating know-it-all might happen to be there.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 18

This is one of my favorite scenes. It takes place at the library in Hogsmeade, and Draco and Hermione give us a humorous conversation.

I am making no money from this story; all belongs to JKR. Thank you to my beta, AmyLouise!

Chapter Three

It had been hours, but Hermione still could not stomach heading home. She just meandered through Hogsmeade aimlessly, walking in and out of shops and trying not to think. As the sky began to turn purple with twilight, she found herself standing in front of the library. She really didn't have any research to do, but she always felt safe here. There were endless ways to distract oneself from grim reality. She pulled the door open, sighed, and walked in.

The library in Hogsmeade was fairly new, but it still had that old and delicious book smell. The carpets were a multicolored shag, and rich wood paneling lined the walls. The librarian, Emma, had taken great care to procure antique oil paintings and as many old books as possible so she could add to the well-used and romantic feel. The mahogany bookshelves which lined either side of the middle aisle were carved with intricate designs depicting magical history, and Hermione always grinned when she walked by the "H" shelf and saw Harry brandishing a wand against a basilisk. The tables were made from a variety of woods, all bulky, with large cushioned chairs. She walked straight to the back of the room, looking for her favorite red armchair next to her favorite genre...anything that had been in the Restricted section at Hogwarts.

Tonight she planned to delve into a volume about faeries which she had seen last week. Just the shimmer of the cover was enough to draw her to the shelf, but the pictures inside were indescribable. She wasn't sure if she believed in nature faeries yet, but the first section of the book was filled with compelling evidence that she certainly hadn't seen in her Magical History class with Professor Binns.

As she reached the glimmering shelf, something caught her eye, deflating her anticipation and turning her right back around. A certain white-blond arsehole was sitting right in her chair, and she wasn't about to have two conversations with him in the same day!

Draco looked up from the volume he was reading just in time to see Hermione scurrying away. "Hey, Granger! What are you running from? Your face is *far* more terrifying than mine."

Hermione slowly swiveled back around, planning to flip him off and continue on her way out. Once she faced him, though, she was surprised to see that he had gotten up and was walking toward her. "What do you want, Malfoy?"

"Nothing. I just... I'm doing some research."

"On a Saturday night? I would think you and your dragon queen would be having a nice, romantic holiday slithering all over each other. What, is she too icy even for you?"

Draco did his best to ignore the comment and not reveal how right she truly was. The last thing he needed was for one of Potter's Pups to have proof that his marriage was complete bullshit. They had enough to throw at him as it was. "Listen, Granger, I need to talk to you."

"What, you just expected me to be here?" He gave her a clear affirmative with his knowing smirk. "Never mind. What do you want?" "Can we go sit

back there? I don't want anyone else to hear us."

Hermione was suffering from Malfoy shock for the second time today. What secret on earth would he want to talk to *her* about? After all she'd seen during sixth year and the following war, she really did believe that Malfoy hadn't wanted to hurt anyone, and even if he was prejudiced, it was only enough to make him an insufferable prat. However, having a civilized conversation with him? It was hard to believe at best.

Then again, her curiosity might kill her if she didn't hear him out. "Er... okay. But if you even come close to insulting or annoying me, I'm out of here."

He turned and walked back to *her* chair, of course, and sat, leaning back, putting his hands behind his head. She gave him a nasty look which he mistook for her usual gnarled expressions around him, and sat in the *green* armchair, which was much less poofy. "All right, what do you want?" she spat out.

He shifted nervously, leaning forward and folding his fingers together. Hermione hadn't seen him fidget this way since he had been secretly working on that blasted Vanishing Cabinet, and she had absolutely no idea what would have him so unnerved that he would show it in front of her.

"Listen, Granger... well, we both know we always held the top two averages in school." Oh, he hated this conversation already. She looked at him skeptically, obviously wondering why he finally wanted to acknowledge this. He decided to skip the intro.

"Okay, I have a situation of serious gravity, and I cannot trust anyone around me. Anyone I know could be responsible. Normally, I wouldn't care about being or working alone...it's not like I haven't done it before...but I literally have never seen, done, or heard anything which can give me a lead on this. As much as I enjoy torturing you at every opportunity (he gave her a small smirk), I am at least man enough to admit that your research skills are unmatched. I... I, uh... I need your help. I can pay you well for your work." He looked down at his knees, clearly believing she would refuse.

Hermione just sat in stunned silence. She had no idea what to say. He could never resist being hateful to her whenever he saw her, he had certainly never called her anything close to clever, and she had absolutely never seen him come out and ask for help. She couldn't decide whether she was angry at him or sorry for him. In the end, her desperation to pay the bills she had been racking up with one income prevailed.

"Of course I'll help you, but I am not subjecting myself to being called a Mudblood or enduring your cruelty. This is strictly business."

"Strictly. Don't think I care what some Mud...er, Muggleborn thinks, but I'll control myself." He couldn't help but add, "It won't be easy."

Hermione just rolled her eyes. If it weren't for the money, she'd throw the nearest book at his face and leave. "Okay, what do you want? I want to get this over with before my hand acts on its own and stabs you with my quill."

As if I wouldn't break your arm first "To begin, you must swear to secrecy. You and my private investigation team will be the only people who know what is happening, and it is

imperative that we keep it that way."

"All right, I swear, Mr. Dramatic."

"I assure you, this is no exaggeration, Granger. My mother has been abducted, and I have no idea why or by whom. The only clue I have is the picture which was delivered to my home last night." He took it out of his pocket, carefully scanning the room before turning it over.

Hermione looked down and gasped. "What is that stuff?!"

"Quiet, Granger!" Draco whispered angrily.

"I'm sorry. I just...I've never seen anything like that, not even in the Department of Mysteries. I feel cold all over." She shivered slightly, wondering why the white sheen around Mrs. Malfoy would make her feel any different than chains or a cell. It certainly did, though. It was as if the substance were alive and evil.

"So, you have no idea what it could be?"

"Not a clue, so we'd better get started on our research. Something tells me we need to hurry."

"I agree. I have pulled a few books on potions, magical captivity, and curses." He gestured to the table in the corner, and Hermione had to let a little grin slip at the huge stack of books. Emma was always getting irked with her for pulling so many books and then leaving at the last second. Hermione told her several times that she would stay after and help her reshelve, but Emma did not trust anyone, even a bibliophile like Hermione, to reshelve books. Typical librarian.

"Well, I think we should start with curses. Should we each take a book and then let each other know if we find something?"

"That's why I put the curse books on top. I figured that would be the most likely match." He got up, walked to the table, plucked two volumes from the top, and returned to his chair. He handed one to her. She was almost surprised he was capable of even a slight gentlemanly gesture.

She took the book and saw that it was entitled *Magical Enslavement Curses*. Creepy. As Draco settled further into his chair and started flipping pages, she did the same. She was sure it would be a long night, and she sighed, knowing there could be many more before they unlocked this

mystery.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 18

Harry and Ginny have just a little fun, and Ron barges in for some comfort. Meanwhile, Draco continues his search for his mum.

All the glory belongs to JKR, Warner Bros., Scholastic, and my beta, AmyLouise.

Chapter Four

Harry and Ginny were snuggled up on the couch in front of a warm fire, and they were rather busy. Harry was brushing his lips along Ginny's neck, ending right behind her ear. As expected, she wriggled under him, wanting to hurry him, but he just smiled. He loved driving her crazy and, after three years, he could still play her body like an instrument, manipulating it and pleasing it perfectly.

Ginny grabbed at his belt, pulling, but he gently moved her hand away, smiling as he sucked and gnawed on her earlobe. "Harry, please..." she whispered. He brought his face close to hers so he could look into her eyes, and he shook his head teasingly.

Suddenly, he felt himself being flipped over and straddled by a woman who knew exactly how to play him, too. She leaned down to kiss him, and just as her tongue slid out to brush his, they heard a knock at the door. She flopped her head down and groaned into Harry's neck. "Who the hell could that be at this hour?"

Harry gently moved his wife's leg aside and slid off the couch. *Damn*. He was as hard as a rock and knew he was going to be very uncomfortable in a few minutes. *This had better be enormously fucking important*. As he always did, Harry grabbed his wand before heading to the door. Ginny gave herself a quick tidy and sat up.

When Harry pulled the door open, he found his best friend, shoulders sagging with pain. "Ron, what the hell—what happened?" asked Harry. Ginny jumped up and ran to the door, pulling her distraught brother inside. He just allowed himself to be tugged along, too upset to speak just yet, so she led him quickly to the couch and sat him in the middle. She and Harry eased down on either side of him.

"Ron, what is it? Are Mum and Dad okay? Where's Hermione?" Ginny knew her brother had been a mess for months, but he looked different tonight—almost panicked.

"I... I... broke..." His words were cut off by a harsh sob, and he just couldn't say it. He sucked in a breath, determined not to get emotional, although he hated himself for this apparently irrepressible habit of letting down the people he loved.

Harry put his hand on Ron's shoulder. "Listen, Ron. We can't help you until you tell us what happened. Try to breathe, okay?"

Ron put his head in his hands, trying hard to calm down but struggling to fight the guilt. Finally, he lifted his face again. "I broke things off with Hermione."

"Ron!" Ginny burst into tears and leaned forward onto her knees. Hermione had become her sister, and although she sensed indifference in Ron sometimes, she had believed they were good for each other. *No more changes... please...* She didn't think she could take losing anyone else, and she knew her parents couldn't.

Harry wasn't quite as shocked. He'd listened to Ron several times lately, griping about yet another fight with Hermione, and whenever he visited, he could feel more vibes of tolerance than love. Ron spent more time drunk than sober, and he knew Hermione wouldn't put up with that behavior forever. He wondered how bad their financial situation had gotten...

"So, Ron, do you want to tell us about it now, or have a drink first?" Harry asked. Ron took a deep breath and swelled with gratitude. Harry had always understood him, and even if he knew Ginny would freak out, he still knew this was the right place to be tonight.

"A firewhisky would be great, thanks." He turned to his sister. "Ginny, I'm sorry. I know you're angry, but I promise this was the right thing to do. If you'll just listen to me, I can explain."

"Explain? Ron, do you even have any idea what this will do to Mum?"

"Um... I think I have a small idea..." Harry couldn't suppress a slight grin. Ron knew as well as he did that Ginny and Molly had identical tempers and tendencies toward rather dramatic reactions.

Ginny kept going as though she didn't hear him. "We have been through enough, Ron! Enough! What were you thinking?"

"Ginny, please just listen to me. You don't understand what it's been like."

Walking over to the kitchen, Harry added, "Gin, just hear him out. You can't change what's happened by yelling at him."

Ginny just glared daggers at him. How could she have just been *kissing* this prick? However, she did stop yelling to listen since she was no less curious than the next person.

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It had been two hours, six books, and pages of notes. Still, they had found nothing which even remotely matched the description of the pearlescent substance surrounding Draco's mother. Emma had started sending pointed looks in their direction, making sure Hermione knew how late it was getting and probably trying to let her know that she'd be here half the night reshelving those damned books.

"Malfoy? We should probably get going. Emma will want to get at least a few hours of sleep tonight."

"All right, Granger, but do you think Emma will let me check out some of these books until tomorrow?"

"I don't know. Restricted books are usually not allowed out of here, but sometimes she lets me take one or two, since I'm here so often, and she knows I would never use them inappropriately."

"Good. Check some out for me then."

"Do not order me around, Malfoy. If I check anything out, it will not be because you commanded me."

"Whatever. Just do it. I don't have time to fuck around." Hermione softened—slightly—when she saw that he had anxiety in his eyes. She guessed she wouldn't be able to take a break, either, if it were her mother.

"All right, but don't stay up all night, or you'll stop comprehending what you're reading." Draco almost laughed out loud, thinking that she had to be the haughtiest know-it-all of the century.

He handed her two books from the table, smirking openly, and she huffed and turned to walk toward the front desk. If only she weren't such a bitch (and a Gryffindor), he might think her ass was pretty cute.

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Fine, then, she was right. Draco was about to go blind trying to sift through this crap. So far, he had found one curse that slopped clear slime all over an enemy and another silly one that caused someone to literally flood snot out of their nostrils. *This child's play was in the restricted section?* He may have been able to use this book in third year, but this was a waste of time. Besides, the letters were starting to jump all over the pages. He grabbed his Scotch and just gulped the lot, wishing he had some other resource aside from crumbling pages of pranks.

He wondered if Granger had seen anything worth looking into. He wondered if she had even tried yet. He left the volume on his glass table, which had luckily been fixed with a quick "Reparo," stood up with a sigh, and started pacing around his living room. Granger said she had felt cold when she saw the substance—could that mean anything? No, of course not. *You can't feel temperatures through paper, Draco.* He really just had no ideas and no leads, and his mother could have any number of days, hours, or minutes left. He had to figure this out. He just had to.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 18

You finally get to meet my nasty death faeries, and Ron faces the music with his family.

I am making no money from this story--all belongs to JKR. Thank you to AmyLouise, my incredibly intelligent and amazing beta!

Chapter Five

Hermione had left the library feeling... well, she wasn't quite sure what she felt. She was certainly depressed. Ron was gone, and she didn't even want to consider the mess which would be waiting in every area of her life at the moment. Sure, she had thought about leaving him numerous times lately, but she was really just angry and wanting to back Ron into a corner in hopes that he might change back to the friend she once knew. The reality of having him gone... and *Ginny*...

Perhaps it was a good thing that Malfoy had hired her. She definitely needed the money, and maybe the distraction would fill the gaping hole in her chest that was slowly but surely opening. She had no idea what to do. Go to Ginny's? No, Ron might be there. Go back to the pub? Honestly, she felt too embarrassed to show up there again so soon.

She decided to finally face the lonely, echoing cavern of her empty house. Maybe just starting to clean up Ron's mess would make her irritated enough not to be sad. Besides, she had research to do as well, and she could not procrastinate. Narcissa may not be her favorite witch this side of Hogwarts, but she could not just let her die. She was a Gryffindor, for Christ's sake. Anyway, her mortgage payment was due on Thursday.

Hermione determined she was too tired to walk home, even if it was better for her figure. She Apparated to her front porch and instantly wished she'd taken the darn walk. Her home was lonely and utterly dark, a ghost of what it used to be. It made her insides churn, making her even more aware of the emptiness in her chest. She slowly lifted her feet, one at a time, ascending the steps. When she reached the door, she took a deep breath. *Gryffindor, Hermione. Come on.*

As her front room illuminated before her, she cringed. The place needed more cleaning than she remembered, and she knew she couldn't study with the house like this. She flicked her wand and immediately started to take the red sludge off the wall, spilling her books onto the couch. She decided humming a tune was in order, lest she go crazy in the silence, and after a few minutes, she was rolling along and successfully ignoring the ache in the pit of her stomach.

As she turned from the now disintegrated Insomnia Potion (which she really could have used tonight) toward the plant shelf...*oh, my poor darlings!*...she saw something flicker behind her and nearly jumped out of her skin. She brandished her wand, stared at the couch for a moment, looked behind it toward the window and door...nothing. Slowly, she twisted back toward her plants, and again, a twinkling of light. *Okay, I'm losing it*

She turned to the couch again, this time taking a couple of steps toward it. Then the sparkle revealed its source...that faerie book. She had only taken it home in case she needed a break from her research, but now she rushed to the volume, opening it hurriedly to see what was shimmering so beautifully. *Well, that was anticlimactic.* Every page was glowing. However, she really felt she had seen something more than the shining pages that attracted her to the book in the first place. She couldn't explain it, but she felt she just had to leaf through this book before she did another thing.

The first few pages were illustrated with flower faeries, some elegant and some rather creepy, depending on the beauty of the flower. She was captivated by the illustrious wings, each mirroring the petals of their corresponding flowers in a small way, but more glorious and intricate. She turned the pages slowly, drinking in a loveliness that nearly took her breath away. There were grass faeries, snow faeries, and even those who assisted with the miracle of each baby which was born to the world. Hermione had never considered that everything natural on the earth had faeries that aided growth, beauty, and function. She still was not quite sure if she believed in these beings, but after all, she had seen pixies. They had always seemed like pests, though, and not something that blanketed her world with life.

She was intoxicated as she continued to read until she turned to the last section and gasped in horror. Death Faeries? Oh, they were horrid! Their bodies were pale, nearly gray, and their skin looked like it would feel rubbery, unhealthy. Their wings were frayed and black, and their faces were hideous as they contorted them into nasty smiles and terror-evoking expressions. Triangular ears stuck out of the sides of their heads, and their mouths were filled with sharp, pointed teeth. Their fingers and toes were knobby and worn, and their black eyes could haunt the bravest soul. What purpose could these creatures possibly serve? Were they similar to the Muggle Grim Reaper legend? Hermione hurried to read the first page, disgusted but compelled.

As death taketh another soul, a body is left behind which returneth unto life's circle. The faeries herein bring decay unto the corpse and spread

it throughout the surrounding earth. Death Faeries are to be disturbed not in their duties lest they be overcome by their anger and consumed by

evil. Any fey who aideth in death committeth terrible acts if deterred or summoned.

Hermione sat stunned, sincerely disturbed that any such thing may possibly exist. As one of the Death Faeries sent her an evil smile and lashed its teeth at her fingers, she slammed the book shut, vowing to herself to return it first thing in the morning.

She marched decidedly back to the plant shelf, willing herself to start humming and repairing again. She planned to research at least a bit more tonight.

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Sunday morning at the Weasley residence was quite a sight to behold. Every member of the family religiously showed up by 10:00 AM to savor yet another breakfast prepared by Molly, and the chaos was unmatched. The ruckus was silenced after Fred's death, but after the first year slipped by, family time began to contain a bit of merriment again.

It was toughest for George, because his practical jokes were now executed alone, but even he knew that Fred would want him to try to enjoy Sunday breakfast. He was still not sure how to manage cheer in the joke shop, but he had promised Fred during a recent graveside visit that he would do his best not to let their dream slip away.

As Ron Apparated to the Burrow, he knew that any emotional progress made over the last year was about to disintegrate, and his guilt weighed on him like an anvil.

When he opened the door, though, he could hear his mum yelling, "Arthur, please! I need you to move the tables together right away!" and Ron's lip quirked upward in a half smile as his father flitted straight into action like a well-trained pet. The amusement was short-lived, however, because as soon as Molly caught sight of her son, she knew something was very wrong. "Ron, dear, what is it? You look as if you haven't slept in a week! Where is Hermione?"

"Er," Ron stammered, "I need to speak to you and Dad in private."

"Dear gods, Ron! Is she okay? Arthur, into the living room immediately!"

Although his parents nearly ran into the front room, Ron lagged behind, unsure how to even begin this conversation. He shuffled through the door, closed it, took a deep breath, and turned to face his parents. They sure weren't making this any easier with the completely panic-stricken looks on their faces. "Listen, uh, you guys should sit down."

Molly's lip started to quiver, and Arthur took her hand to lead her to the couch. She knew this was going to be bad, and she wasn't sure she wanted to hear it.

"Ron? What's happened?" Arthur asked gently. Although Molly wore the pants in the family most of the time, in a situation like this, he knew he had to be the steady one.

"I don't know how to begin." Ron sat fidgeting with his fingers, unable to meet his parents' eyes. *Come on, Ron. Just say it, for Christ's sake.* "Okay, well, first, Hermione is okay. I mean, she's not hurt or anything. It's just... we've... well, we've split up. We are divorcing."

Molly gasped, her hands flying up to cover her face, while Arthur just stared, frozen. Seeing that this was going to be every bit as bad as he'd expected, Ron rushed on to try and explain. "You know I love Hermione and she loves me, but we've never had what you guys have. We've mostly been friends trying to be something more, and it just isn't working any more."

Molly began to glare, and Arthur kept his arm around her, trying to delay the explosion, while Ron continued. "Listen, I never meant for this to happen. I thought I was doing the right thing when I married her, but you have no idea how bad things have gotten. We can't even have a decent conversation anymore!"

"Have you considered, Ronald, that your marriage has been spiraling down the toilet because you have wallowed in self-pity without a job for months, and you can't even function without firewhisky nearby?" Molly shouted, shoving Arthur's arm off of her and rising to her feet. "I am ashamed of you! Your father and I have been through hell after losing Fred, but do you see either of us shutting down and expecting the other to handle it? And what about George? Has he just abandoned the shop? No! I just knew that poor girl would lose her patience with you, Ron, but I hoped to the gods I was wrong."

"Maybe this isn't all about Fred," Ron spat back. "Have you ever considered that? Maybe I also have a problem living a lie. Maybe I am sick and tired of her bitching. Maybe I can't stand one more night of fighting and ripping our relationship into even smaller pieces! If you are so ashamed of me, then why don't you just kick me to the curb and keep her? Maybe then you'll see what I've been dealing with!"

"I am absolutely disgusted with you. Disgusted! Blaming her for bitching and fighting you when you spend half your time drunk! Acting like it's her fault that your relationship is a mess when you won't even contribute! I've had quite enough of this conversation." Molly's tears began to spill as she shoved past her son and out the door. Her angry footsteps could be heard on the stairway, and Ron knew she was heading to her room and most definitely not planning on continuing breakfast.

Arthur stood slowly and said, "Ron, your mother loves you, but this is quite a blow. I'm going to go talk to her, but you had better tell the others that our morning festivities are canceled." With that, he brushed past his son, unable to look him in the eye.

Ron turned and headed for the kitchen, shoulders hunched and hands in his pockets. He knew everyone would want some explanation, but he didn't think he could handle any more of this today. When he looked up, he saw that Charlie, Fleur, Bill, and George were just staring, and they had obviously heard enough to know that the living room conversation hadn't been pleasant.

"What's all this, then?" asked Charlie.

"It's nothing. I mean, I don't feel like talking any more," answered Ron.

"Oh, no, you don't," replied Bill. "We aren't going to listen to yelling and watch Mum sobbing and pounding up the stairs and just let you be off. What have you done?"

Ron was just about to resign to another brow beating when Ginny and Harry pushed through the kitchen door. "Hello, everyone! What's for breakfast?" Harry asked jovially. As he took in the grim faces staring back, however, he looked at Ron. "So, you've told them, then?" he asked softly. Ginny pushed around her husband to join her brothers at the table, not even bothering to look at Ron.

"Not exactly, mate. I mean, I've told Mum and Dad, and I was just about to tell this lot."

"Perfect," muttered Ginny. After Ron's explanation last night, she hadn't felt much sympathy, and she hadn't wanted to come this morning at all. Harry, however, had reminded her that her mum might need her, so she had grudgingly complied.

"What is ze problem, zen?" Fleur inquired, flipping her silvery blonde hair over her shoulder.

Ron reluctantly pulled out a chair and sat, feeling a bit of grateful relief when Harry sat next to him. As his brothers looked on warily, he replayed his story for the third time.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 18

Hermione and Draco progress into more friendly sarcasm...

Sorry so long, everyone! As always, thanks to my beta, AmyLouise, and all \$ belongs to JKR, Scholastic, and WB.

Draco awoke with a jolt, sending a huge book off his lap and onto his mahogany floor. He had been dreaming of Pansy riding him as he struggled and fought to free himself, and as if that wasn't disturbing enough, he had cried out for help and looked up to see her morph into Hermione Granger! Best to delete that one... *Merlin*.

Deciding he most definitely needed a cold shower before breakfast, he headed toward his bathroom. It was all black, gray, and white marble tile with black onyx fixtures that had cost a fortune. He twisted the water on, pulled off his t-shirt, and dropped his drawstring black pants.

After the arctic blast finally calmed his hormones, Draco stepped out of the shower, grabbed his towel, and went into his room. He rifled through his closet, finally deciding on jeans and another t-shirt, and got dressed quickly.

Heading to his living room, he wondered if Granger had found anything yet. He started flipping the pages of *Shadows of Ancient Darkness*, which was supposedly the oldest book of curses in the library. A shiver snaked through Draco's body at the icy coldness of the pages. He was sure it was just his imagination, but this book almost felt... alive. The pictures were extremely graphic, showing how each spell affected the human body and the grotesque expressions of pain and terror erupting on each face. At one time, Draco may have pretended to be amused by these evil illustrations, but in all honesty, he could never have performed any of these curses, even on a Mudblood.

As Draco continued through the book feeling more and more frustrated with the lack of progress, something suddenly stopped his hands, making him gag. The picture was horrid...a naked woman, eyes open and lifeless, being torn apart and eaten by hideous white, rubbery creatures with fangs protruding from their unnaturally wide mouths. He noticed black wings and was almost reminded of faeries, although these monsters were something sinister and evil indeed. The nasty creatures glowed with their glee while feasting on the flesh of the corpse.

Okay, enough of this. Draco closed the book, stood up, and Apparated to Hermione's doorstep. They would just have to meet a bit earlier than planned.

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Hermione was brushing her teeth when she heard a loud knock on her front door. Rolling her eyes and huffing, she spat, rinsed, and ran to the door. She was glad she had finished cleaning the living room last night, although she wished she'd had time just now to tie up her hair.

When she jerked the door open, she couldn't have been more shocked. She and Malfoy were meeting later at the library, but here he stood as if she should be good and ready and it was perfectly natural to be standing on the porch of his worst enemy. She wouldn't have thought he'd ever come near her house, especially not in broad daylight.

Suddenly, she felt very self conscious about being in her pajamas with her hair strewn all over the place. She knew Malfoy would find something to use to torment her, but she didn't like giving him so many options.

Draco just stood there, smirking, so she finally said, "What?"

"That's not much of a greeting, Granger. I guess your manners do seem to match your living conditions, though. Is this all Weasley could do, then?"

"What is it, Malfoy? Did you find something, or are you merely here to annoy me?"

"What is it, Granger? Are you going to invite me in or stand there bitching at me?"

Hermione just turned around and headed into the room, knowing Malfoy would take the hint and follow. She just couldn't bring herself to actually invite him into the place. Malfoy did indeed follow and plopped himself right on the couch, putting his feet up and his hands behind his head. Hermione rolled her eyes but said nothing.

"So?" she spat, sitting in the chair across the room.

"Oh, nothing. I just wondered if you had found anything."

"I thought we agreed to meet at noon, and no, I haven't found anything yet."

"Oh, okay." He put his hands on his knees and leaned over, looking at the floor. Hermione suddenly noticed his slightly rumpled appearance and agitated manner. She felt a bit guilty for being so snappy with someone who was obviously extremely worried and probably just needing to be with someone who understood why he was restless.

"Listen, Malfoy. I'm just going to go change. I'll be right back, okay? Make yourself at home."

Make myself at home? In this hovel? Draco nodded, though.

Hermione walked straight back and to the left, heading through the slight hallway that led to her eat-in kitchen on the left and bedroom and bathroom on the right. She entered the bathroom and looked in the mirror. *Oh, gods, I look dreadful!* She quickly ran a brush through her hair, pulled it into a ponytail, and suddenly decided she needed a bit of lip gloss.

She rushed into her room, chose some jeans and a dark purple tee, and then she looked one last time in the mirror to be sure she looked put together. She refused to believe she cared what Malfoy thought of her appearance, so she opted to believe she was just doing what she would do for any guest. Of course she was.

She hurried back out to find Malfoy standing at her window. He had his hands in his pockets and his head against the glass, and her heart immediately went out to him. She walked over gingerly, not sure if she should try to comfort him or whether he would be disgusted by such a gesture. When she was next to him, though, he turned to look at her, showing no hatred or aversion whatsoever. She found herself reaching out to touch his arm, and his eyes locked with hers. For a moment, she almost forgot that he was a snarling, prejudiced, cruel asshole.

Draco was stunned. When Granger had gone to change, he had made the mistake of letting himself think. It had been a whole day, and they had gotten nowhere. He had no idea if his mother was still alive, or how much time he would get to find her, and he still didn't know what her kidnapers wanted. The hopelessness had begun to overwhelm him, but when Granger came up beside him, when she touched his arm, he felt a warmth he couldn't explain. It was hard for him to look away from her dark brown eyes until he reminded himself that he hated her, she was a Mudblood, and she was only helping him for the money. He abruptly turned, walked back to the couch, and sat.

"Sorry," Hermione muttered.

"Whatever," Draco replied.

The silence was awkward, and Draco found himself looking up to see Hermione's face. He inwardly chastised himself for being utterly insane, telling himself that he only found her attractive right now because of his desperate state. It wouldn't be so weird if he were merely admiring her looks (which he had secretly done plenty of times), but he wasn't. He wanted to pull her into his arms and let her reassure him that everything would be okay.

Revolting.

Hermione was unnerved by Draco's stare and even more unnerved that she liked it. He hated her, didn't he? She headed back to her chair and sat a bit unsteadily, and she looked up to find he hadn't broken his gaze at all. Finally, he said, "I haven't found anything, either, but I didn't go through one of my books yet."

"Did you want to study now, then?"

"Yeah. Um... I guess I left my books on my couch. Do you just want to bring your stuff to my place? I can't stand this scratchy couch, anyway."

Hermione rolled her eyes. He really was ridiculous, wasn't he? She had cleaned her house to perfection, and it wasn't as if her furniture was trash. Maybe it wasn't up to Malfoy standards, but she felt that she had made a rather nice home. The blue on her living room walls was the perfect shade to remind her of the ocean, and she had candles and artwork displayed creatively on antique pieces of eclectic furniture.

"Er... will Mrs. Malfoy be there?"

"What? Mrs?...oh, right. Pansy." He supposed it was a bit silly to worry about Granger knowing his marriage was bullshit. After all, she knew far more important secrets now. "Actually, I left the Ice Bitch a couple of months ago."

"You what? I mean, I thought... Never mind. It's none of my business."

She was staring at him, clearly itching with curiosity. "I never loved her, okay, Granger? Now, are we going to my place or not?"

"I suppose that would be fine," she replied hesitantly. She had not been near a Malfoy residence since her encounter at the manor, and although she knew this visit would be perfectly safe, she couldn't help the cold chill she felt rolling down her spine. She knew she was being a bit silly, though, so she shook off the feeling and gathered her books. To her complete surprise, Malfoy stood up and took them from her, heading out the door. She broke her stare and followed, Apparating with him as soon as she had locked her front door.

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They arrived at a white modern home with dozens of windows, the style reminding Hermione of the Muggle architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. It was truly breathtaking.

Draco caught Hermione staring in awe and smirked to himself. He muttered a quick "Alohamora" and led her into the foyer.

"This place is beautiful," Hermione stated breathlessly. She was drinking in the dark hardwood floors of the open layout, turning to the left to see a kitchen that any chef would kill to have. Did Malfoy cook, or did he just have the best of everything whether he needed it or not? The countertops were solid black granite and sparkled above mahogany cabinets which matched the floors but were stained a bit lighter. Her kitchen was nothing compared to this, with its white tiled countertops, light wood floors, and lilac walls.

"Thank you," Malfoy replied. "Liddy, my house-elf, keeps it immaculate at all times, so the kitchen was my gift to her." *Why did I have to tell her that, for fuck's sake?* He was simply losing his touch and probably his mind. Maybe he liked hearing the awe in her voice, especially because Pansy would have been too spoiled to appreciate what he had helped his designer create.

When he looked over, he saw that Hermione was standing there like an idiot, gaping. She seemed to be staring at the open layout, but then again, her chocolate eyes were oddly blank. Actually, however, she was in utter shock that Malfoy could ever have a kind thought, much less a kind action, toward a house-elf.

"Let's just go in here," he said, walking toward the couch. He flicked his wand toward the fireplace to light it and stacked the books on the coffee table. He sat and gestured for her to do the same.

Hermione hesitated ever so slightly at the idea of sitting right next to Malfoy, despite her new impression of him, but his chairs were too far from the glass table, so she just sat as close to the opposite end of the sofa as she could. She expected the leather to feel hard and cold, but it was surprisingly soft. She rubbed her hand along the arm and heard a chuckle to her left. Malfoy was watching her, amused by her infatuation with his couch. "Er... I guess your couch is less scratchy, after all."

"Just don't get too fresh with it, Granger. It might scream and run from the room, and then where would we sit?"

"Ha, ha," she countered, although she could tell he had actually been kidding for once.

"So, I guess we should just show each other what we've seen so far," Draco said, grabbing the dreaded book which started his day. "I don't think I've found anything which will help us with my mum, but you have to see this." He turned the page to the flesh-eating creatures, and as expected, Granger gasped and her hand flew up to cover her mouth. "I know. Nauseating."

"No, that's not it. I mean, of course they're disgusting, but look..." Hermione grabbed the volume about faeries and turned to the Death Faerie page. She could see Malfoy's eyes widen as he noticed the similarities between the creatures in each book. "My book also says something about summoning these faeries for evil deeds and paying with fresh corpses. Some people must be completely sick, with nothing human left inside of them. I can't imagine dealing with creatures like these."

"You don't know the half of it, Granger."

Hermione was leaning toward Draco, trying to read the caption from his book. "Ew! They glow with excitement when they feed. That is absolutely ghastly."

"Wait! Oh, my gods!" shouted Draco, running to the hallway which led to his room. He ran back seconds later, holding the crumpled picture of Narcissa. "White sheen, Granger! I mean...is it possible?"

Hermione was stricken. Her instincts told her that they may just have found the answer, but it just seemed too easy to find this on the second day. "Of course, anything is possible. Still, it only says they glow when they feed, and your mum is, er, intact in your picture. We should certainly check it out, at any rate." She looked down to see gooseflesh on her arms. "What should we do?"

Just then, there was a tapping at Draco's small fireside window, so he stood up distractedly and hurried to it, opening it absently. The owl really didn't have the patience to wait for him to snap out of his stupor, so it screeched and pecked his hand. "Ouch! Dammit!" Draco grabbed the roll of parchment from the pouch on the bird's leg and sent the owl away with a treat as quickly as possible. He walked back to the couch, sucking his bleeding finger and falling back into thought. "I don't know what we should do, Granger. I thought you were supposed to have all the answers," he snapped sarcastically.

"Don't be a prick, Malfoy. We need to think."

"And the genius dazzles one and all with her profound assessment!"

"Do you want my help or not?"

"Do you want the money or not?"

Hermione just growled and went back to thinking. Draco opened the almost-forgotten note and began to read.

Draco,

I have placed someone in Mr. Parkinson's business to start gathering information. We should meet this afternoon to discuss the details. Will you be available at 4:00?

Charles Pendington

"My detective wants to meet this afternoon." He handed the note to Granger, not really knowing why he did.

"Are the Parkinsons suspects, then?"

"We just figured Pansy's family might be my most obvious enemy at the moment, although I don't think she would be after money. She would just want to hurt me because she knows I used her nasty ass."

Hermione failed to stifle a giggle. Pansy really was a bitch.

"Is there anyone else who might wish you harm?"

"That's what Charles asked, and I honestly can't think of anyone. Wait...are *you* trying to get back at me for pointing out your obvious flaws at every opportunity?" Draco tried to hide the hint of a smile playing at his lips.

"I certainly should! You were cruel. Not that I ever cared what you thought of me."

"Sure you didn't, Granger." Draco smirked. "Besides, I seem to recall plenty of nasty remarks from you as well."

"Oh, did I wound you, Malfoy? I'm dreadfully sorry," Hermione retorted, dripping with sarcasm.

"Don't be ridiculous, Mud...I mean, never mind. Let's focus."

Hermione swallowed the smile and her shock at actually having a semi-friendly conversation with her archenemy. He was almost fun when he wasn't being a sincere asshole.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 18

The secret of the Death Faeries is revealed...

Chapter Seven

Charles was sitting in the pub, getting a bit irritated. He checked his watch...Malfoy was now twenty minutes late. Oh, well. At least he was paying an obscene amount of money for this investigation. As Charles took another swig of his butterbeer, he finally saw a flash of blonde hair coming up the sidewalk.

"Pendington," Draco greeted, holding out his hand when he approached the table.

"Mr. Malfoy."

Sitting at opposite sides of the table, the men looked at one another without a trace of humor.

"Charles, I know you want to fill me in on your plans, but I also have another possible find."

"So do I. Actually it may be unrelated, but it's worth mentioning. Your mother isn't the only person associated with the Death Eaters who has gone missing recently. Another woman's disappearance was reported by her boss over three months ago. She has no family, so the only evidence was the state of her home. Everything had been left behind."

Draco thought for a second, trying to put any pieces together. "I don't see how this is connected, though. That woman had no relatives, and I have been sent evidence which the kidnapper presumes will lure me or coerce me into meeting some sort of demand."

"Like I said, it could mean nothing at all, but if this is about more than money or revenge against you personally, her disappearance could be a clue. All I'm saying is that I will be watching the Missing Witches and Wizards List at the Ministry for any other relations of Death Eaters."

"All right, then. What else do you have for me? I need to fill you in on my new discovery."

"I can keep this brief. I only wanted to meet in person to avoid anyone intercepting our communication. Basically, I have placed a young woman named Wendy as Parkinson's new receptionist. The other one, er, quit suddenly." He paused to smile up at Draco, although he was a little disappointed by the lack of an approving expression. "Er, anyway, I am simply having her observe for now."

"Sounds good. I can't see the Parkinsons being responsible for this, but we need to be sure."

Charles merely nodded. "And the other development?"

"Well, it may be nothing at all, but I have been researching curses which result in a white sheen, and I did find one possibility. Have you ever heard of Death Faeries?"

A bit of color drained from Charles's face, and Draco immediately knew his detective was familiar with the creatures.

"I am not sure Death Faeries even exist, Draco. That is an old legend," Charles quickly replied.

"Then why do you look as if you've seen a ghost? I demand that you tell me what you know."

Charles looked at his hands and sighed. "Please do not make me recount this tale. I do not know if I can bear it."

Draco could see the pain written all over Charles's face, but no sympathy came. If this man knew something that could help his mother, then he had better be out with it.

"Charles, I don't give a damn about anything but my mum. Now, tell me before I hex you!" he whispered harshly.

"Please, Draco..."

"Now!" Draco nearly shouted at full voice.

"Oh, very well." Charles closed his eyes and attempted to calm himself, and then he began. "When I was a young lad, my grandmother was my favorite person in this world. She lived with us and cared for me most of the time, and she would sing to me, read stories, take me to pick berries, and bring me to our lakeside to fish."

Draco nearly exploded with impatience. He had no desire to sit and hear this man's gushy life story, but he knew he had to control himself or risk not finding out what he needed to know.

"I loved her, and I couldn't imagine my world without her. One day when we were playing chase in our back garden, though, she suddenly grabbed her chest and collapsed. I ran to her, but I was too young to know what to do. I just kept screaming her name and shaking her, and by the time my mother was at my side, my grandmother was dead.

"Naturally, I didn't feel I could let her go, so after her funeral, I decided I would sneak out in the middle of the night with my blanket and pillow so I could sleep next to her in our cemetery." Charles paused, taking a shaky breath. Draco found it strange to see such an intimidating man so overcome by fear.

"As soon as my mum put me to bed, I ran to my window, slipped through it, and began climbing down the tree next to my room. A quick "Accio" brought me my pillow and blanket, and I tiptoed in the shadows all the way to her grave."

Charles stopped to take another deep breath, and Draco nearly shouted at him to be on with it.

"You cannot imagine what I saw upon entering our graveyard. Instead of finding a fresh mound of earth scattered with flower petals, I encountered the most terrifying sight of my life. The earth around my grandmother had been peeled back like a sinkhole, and her shroud no longer covered her body. She was hovering a few inches above her grave, and she was surrounded by a shining white mist. I stepped closer, only to find grotesque grayish creatures who...who were feasting on her flesh!" Charles let his head fall forward and rubbed his temples, trying to resume breathing evenly.

Draco had seen plenty of horrifying acts during the time when the Dark Lord occupied Malfoy Manor, but even he nearly gagged at this. He tried to shove the image of his mother being torn apart from his mind as Charles finished his tale.

"I will never be able to describe what I felt in that moment, but I was too stricken to even scream. I finally turned and ran as fast as my legs would carry me, and the next morning, I didn't even want to go with my parents when they went to the cemetery for a visit. When they returned, I knew nothing was amiss because they were behaving normally, but I could not convince myself that what I saw had been a mere nightmare. I spent three hours in our library that day searching for anything I could find about these creatures. For some reason, I felt it might help me retain my sanity if I could just know what had happened. I did not find much, Mr. Malfoy, but in an ancient volume of curses passed through the generations of my family, I found all I will ever need to know. They were Death Faeries, and their purpose was to decay human bodies upon their deaths. They were also evil creatures who could be summoned by black magic to perform heinous tasks."

Charles looked quite relieved to be finished recounting his disturbing memories, but Draco was feeling frustrated. He and Granger had already found all of this. "So, how do we free my mother?"

"Mr. Malfoy, if Death Faeries have been summoned to imprison your mother, we have more than revenge or ransom to fear. Even if we find the culprit and the motive, releasing your mother before she is harmed could be next to impossible."

"That is not acceptable!" shouted Draco, jumping to his feet. "You cannot tell me that there is no hope!"

"Sir, pardon the disrespect, but you need to sit down and be quiet. We do not want anyone listening to this."

Draco took a breath and sat slowly, fuming and dismayed. "All right, but I want it understood by you and your team that we will not be giving up unless she is gone." He felt an intense pang of emptiness in his chest at the thought, but he continued. "Why can't these abominations be destroyed?"

"Oh, they can, Mr. Malfoy, but the moment they are released from their duties, they will begin to feed."

Draco felt himself grabbing the edge of the table to remain steady, but he was beginning to feel panic. "How are they released?"

"They are released by the one who summoned them or by that person's death."

"Well, then, there is plenty of hope. If we can get past the captor without killing him, we can destroy the faeries before their release and take my mother."

"I agree, Mr. Malfoy, but we must also consider that your mother is the payment and may not even be alive at this point. Her kidnappers may be luring you into a trap. Furthermore, they may be planning to simply kill her upon your arrival and release the faeries before you have a chance to find her." He paused, knowing this was a terrible load for Draco to bear. "Even if we get to her, these beings are very powerful. The more evil the humans they consume, the more powerful they are."

"I don't care! There is no choice but to try. How do we destroy them?"

"That is one thing I do not know. I also have no idea what consequences come from removing Death Faeries from their burial grounds."

"We'll simply have to take the chance, Charles."

"Alright, Mr. Malfoy," Charles replied, finally beginning to gain his professional composure, "but first we must find suspects and possible locations. We would also be wise to continue researching curses. Death Faeries may have nothing to do with this at all."

Draco looked at his lap, trying to contain his terror. He knew Charles was right. They really weren't any better off than yesterday. What good would it be to know what would kill his mother if he knew no way to find her and no way to kill the damned things?

"Very well. Thank you, Mr. Pendington."

"Of course."

With that, both men exited the restaurant, heading their separate ways.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 18

A little spark...

Chapter Eight

After their gruesome discovery, Hermione left Malfoy's and went back home. She was in for a long week at the House-Elves Employment Agency, and she needed to get some rest. Malfoy was planning to spend his entire Monday morning at the library, and then she would join him after work to research Death Faeries or anything else they thought made sense. They planned to spend their days that way until they figured out what to do next.

When she walked in her door, she felt a slight jolt of surprise at the relief she felt seeing the place so clean and smelling so fresh. None of Ron's dirty socks, none of his empty firewhisky bottles, and no gripey bastard slung across her couch. She hadn't really wanted to lose her marriage, but she had to admit that it was nice to come home to a place that didn't cause her insides to involuntarily tense for battle.

Of course it was still light out, though, so she wasn't counting her chickens. The emptiness in the pit of her stomach was probably hovering nearby, waiting for the night to begin. She placed her handbag neatly on the secretary in the entryway, and she set her books on the coffee table.

Trodding into the kitchen, Hermione thought about what to make for dinner. Nothing sounded good, but she knew she had to make herself eat something. She opened the pantry, looked, walked to the fridge, looked, walked to the pantry, looked, walked to the fridge, looked. After repeating this about seven times, she decided to eat a bowl of cereal and be done with it.

She spent the next hour soaking in the bathtub. She had to unwind and sort her thoughts so she could function like a human being the next day. She was getting divorced, and the ache in her chest was something that she knew would take a long while to heal. Although she knew she would eventually be happier than she'd been over the last year, she just wished things could be different. Why did Ron have to have the worst possible response to everything? How had she failed to help him through? Had he honestly never loved her at all?

Aside from Ron, this situation with Narcissa was an enormous weight on her shoulders as well. Yes, the Malfoys had hated every cell in her body at one time, but Malfoy really did seem a bit different this weekend, didn't he? She felt like a complete fool believing in him so easily, and she knew what Harry would say, but her intuition told her to go with it. It absolutely had nothing to do with earning some extra Galleons, and it sure as hell had nothing to do with the sudden realization that Malfoy's eyes were like the silvery gray of twilight clouds. Nothing whatsoever.

She immediately pushed down the thought of adding her confused feelings about Malfoy to her list of stressors and focused on the two which she could admit to. She closed her eyes, breathed the scent of lavender deep into her lungs, and imagined the tenseness oozing slowly out of her pores. With only the light of a few flickering candles, she nearly fell asleep after several minutes of true peace.

She practically jumped out of her skin when she heard a pounding on her front door. She scrambled up in her tub, grabbed her wand, and blew out the candles. "*Lumos!*" Once she magicked her overhead light on, she ran into her closet to grab her robe, all the while hearing the impatient pounding in her living room growing louder.

"Coming!" she yelled, running out of her room and into her living room. She wasn't completely barking, so she hurried first to the window to see who was disturbing her this late. She hoped to the gods it wasn't Ron.

Okay, this was worse. It was Malfoy! And she was standing here in her tattered robe with dripping hair and no makeup! What the hell was he doing here again when they were meeting in less than twenty-four hours?!

He pounded again, not knowing she was right there, and she decided there wasn't much else to do but open the door. Besides, why the hell did she care if he saw her like this? It wasn't much worse than this morning anyway.

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Draco was on Granger's stoop again, trying to tell himself that he had good reason to be here. After his meeting, he had gone home to have something to eat, only to pick restlessly at whatever the hell it was that Liddy had made. For all he knew, his house-elf had made his favorite meal, and he had no recollection of it. His mind was literally racing with the conversation between him and Charles, and he inexplicably longed to just be back with Granger.

He had started to pace around the kitchen, fearing that his mother's disappearance had already caused the onset of madness. Maybe he wanted Granger with him because she was the only person he could trust right now, or maybe he was so scared for his mother that he wanted to get straight back to work at every possible opportunity. Right. That sounded good.

After trying to read, taking another shower, pacing the living room for fifteen minutes, and trying unsuccessfully to eat again, he snapped an audible "fuck it" and Apparated.

While pounding on Granger's door the third time, it occurred to him that she might not even be home, or worse, she could already be asleep. Besides, what was he supposed to say? *I need you, Granger?* That would go over well. They were supposed to meet after she worked tomorrow, so he had no reason to be standing here.

He was about to turn on his heel when the door was flung open to reveal a dark living room behind a sopping wet Hermione. *Oh, shit.* He had interrupted her shower, hadn't he?

Wait a minute. *Oh. Shit.* She was standing there in a light blue, soft terry cloth robe which came about halfway down her thighs. Her legs were fucking perfect. And her little bare feet. And her hair was all over the place, which was just flat-out sexy.

Merlin, what the fuck is wrong with me today? Draco realized he had been standing there gaping for about twenty seconds before he finally mumbled something like, "Hi. I just...I can come back tomorrow. I just thought of some new thoughts." *Well, that sounded brilliant.*

"Oh, um... okay. Come on in."

"No, really, I don't know what I was thinking. I guess I was just going stir crazy or something and forgot the time."

"No, it's fine. Really. It's not like I'm getting back into the tub anyway. I'll just go get dressed."

She turned around, expecting him to follow, so he did. He was utterly ogling her now, imagining what she might look like under that robe, and his body started feeling things

it was not supposed to feel around Hermione Granger. He knew he had to be losing it, but he no longer seemed to care. Before he knew what he was doing, he grabbed her arm, jerked her around, and pulled her face to his. He kissed her more fiercely than he had meant to, but a fire had lit him from head to toe.

He kicked the door shut behind him, at least coherent enough to realize they were in plain view doing something neither of them was technically supposed to be doing. He turned her against the door, breaking her lips harshly with his tongue, and he suddenly realized she wasn't fighting him. In fact, she had grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling him as close as she could, and was kissing him back.

When they finally broke the kiss, he just stared into her eyes, breathing hard and trying to figure out what the hell just happened. He had to say something before she had time to start thinking.

"I hate you," he whispered. He really did. He really didn't. He had no idea how to explain himself. If she knew he was "confused" about her, she would probably use it to humiliate him. He decided to go the sexist route. "You shouldn't be answering the door in that getup."

"I hardly think my clothing choices coerced you into kissing me!"

"You mean your lack of clothing! You're practically naked!"

"Oh, and you're a bloke, right, so I should mind my manners?"

"Exactly."

"I thought you hated me. Why weren't you just all the more disgusted by my *nakedness*?"

Well, this wasn't working.

"Let's just stay focused. I'll forget the whole thing. Be on time tomorrow!"

Hermione shouted, "I hate you, too!" just as Draco started to vanish.

Immediately after Apparating home, he asked Liddy for some coffee and went to work, distracting himself from his and Granger's little "incident" with a little more research.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 18

Ron's life takes an unexpected turn...

Thanks to my beta, AmyLouise, and the credit goes to JKR, WB, and Scholastic.

Chapter Nine

Ron woke up Monday morning completely bewildered. Where the fuck was he, anyway? *Oh, yeah.* After a few seconds, the previous day came back in an ugly rush. Having Harry present while he told the rest of his family the big news had been the only reason he survived until noon.

Fleur had stood and left the room, crying. He knew she and Hermione got on well, but he wasn't expecting the dramatic "girl" display. Bill proceeded to give Ron a look he never wanted to see again, and then he followed his wife. Charlie and George were the ones to pick up the yelling where his mum had left off, and Ginny jumped right in. Harry just kept saying things like, "But...", "I understand your feelings...", "Let's all just calm down," or "Ginny, no hitting!"

It was a nightmare, but by lunchtime, everyone had thrown whatever darts they could throw. When his mum and dad came back downstairs, it was agreed that Ron would stay at the Burrow until things were sorted out. His mum made it quite clear that he would be actively seeking employment as of this morning, and his dad mumbled something about maybe being able to patch things with Hermione. *No pressure.* He guessed he should be grateful he had a place to go, even if the terms were irksome.

He eased up slowly from his bed, putting his feet on the floor and cradling his head in his hands. He would have lain right back down, really, but his stomach was rumbling and his mum was probably already on the "low growl" setting. If he didn't get off his ass and start looking for a job today, she would hit "lethal roar" by evening and possibly attempt to skin him with her potato peeler.

He trudged into the bathroom, turned on the shower, and hit the toilet. It was going to be a long day.

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Mr. Parkinson had left for the office early, as he did every day. A home with Pansy was no sanctuary, and the hours between his late dinner and early coffee were plenty enough for him. It wasn't as if he didn't love his daughter. He just didn't like her.

Between her spoiled demands and angry tantrums, he had always anxiously awaited her return to Hogwarts each fall. After thinking his reprieve was over, he had been absolutely overjoyed about her engagement to Draco and the fact that she would be moving out permanently. He should have known he couldn't be that lucky.

Thomas had just gotten rolling on a new account when he looked up to find Ronald Weasley entering his reception area. That was certainly a shock, but not as surprising as overhearing him tell the receptionist, Wendy, that he wanted to "see Mr. Parkinson, please."

Well, isn't this curious? When Wendy came through his door to ask if he could see a client, Thomas immediately acquiesced. He had to know what in the world would bring the likes of Weasley into his domain.

"Hello, sir," Ron stated, walking into the office and extending his hand. "I appreciate your willingness to see me without prior notice."

"Of course, Mr. Weasley. I don't mind in the slightest. Please have a seat here." He gave a sarcastic smile, motioning to a rich brown leather chair which was probably worth three Burrows by itself.

Ron sat stiffly, knowing that he was about to humiliate himself. He tried to look confident as he faced this tall, broad-shouldered man with black hair and nearly black eyes. His hands looked like they could crush a cat in one swift move. Not intimidating at all.

Noticing and slightly enjoying Ronald's discomfort, Thomas asked, "Would you like a brandy, Weasley? Wendy, get this lad a brandy."

"Oh, uh, thanks...thank you. I could probably use a drink about now." Ron chuckled nervously, immediately realizing he probably shouldn't say that to a prospective employer.

"So, out with it. What brings you into my realm today?"

"Well," Ron stammered, "I am actually looking for a position."

"A position? As in, a job?"

Ron's insides began to squirm, thinking of the entertaining story this would be at Mr. Parkinson's next big bash. "Yes, sir."

Thomas couldn't help revealing a condescending smile, but he didn't want to dismiss Ronald straight away. He must actually have his own set of balls after all, entering the business of a known supporter of the Dark Lord. He kept the smile in place, remembering an old saying about keeping friends close and enemies closer. Whatever this boy wanted to do, it might be wise to let him do it, at least for a while. Not only would it inflate his shady reputation, but the gutsy kid might actually make him some money on the side. Brothers and Brooms had lost quite a few clients after the war.

"What is it that you do, Ronald?"

Ron's mind nearly went completely blank. Those black eyes were an unreadable abyss, and Ron had no idea if Mr. Parkinson was just toying with his little mouse before eating him or actually giving his employment serious consideration.

Gathering himself together as best he could, Ron managed, "Well, uh, Mr. Parkinson, my experience is in sales. I helped my brother, George, oversee Weasley's Wizard Wheezes after finishing at Hogwarts. We were the only shop in Diagon Alley which was making a profit there for a while."

Yes, Thomas knew that shop well. It was the only place which seemed to ignore the presence of the Death Eaters during the war, and he had been quite offended by the disrespect to the Dark Lord, even if he never offered his own full allegiance.

When an awkward silence prevailed, Ron went on. "I believe that a sales position in any company would highlight my skills, and I happen to know quite a bit about your brooms since I played Quidditch for Gryffindor. I believe I can help earn a profit for Brothers and Brooms, and I think I would especially enjoy making sales with professional Quidditch teams."

Thomas pretended to think about this, rubbing his chin and giving the impression of a probable refusal. He had been thinking of expanding into professional Quidditch, oddly enough, so there was no reason to feign deep contemplation. He just enjoyed intimidating people. He quickly realized, though, that if Weasley felt welcomed, he would drop his guard and be more likely to reconstruct the reputation of the Parkinson family and Brothers and Brooms.

"Ronald, it so happens that Brothers and Brooms is designing a position which would be in sales, working the European region to market professional Quidditch brooms. I have not yet posted the position in the *Prophet*, but I intended to offer a salary of 15,000 Galleons per year plus a commission of 10%. If you accept the job, you save me an immense amount of time and effort, so I am prepared to make an official offer here and now."

Oh. My. Gods. Fifteen thousand galleons. This could not possibly be happening. After walking into about every business in the wizarding world and talking to owners or filling out applications, Ron had honestly only come in here so that he could tell his mother he had searched every possible place of employment. He never even expected to be admitted.

Sure, Mr. Parkinson was supposedly reformed and had never become a Death Eater, but who was he kidding? Just from listening to Pansy talk in class, he knew this man hated wizards who associated with Muggleborns. Weasleys were notorious for their Muggleborn loyalty, so this whole meeting made no sense.

Can I seriously work for this guy? Will my mom be more pissed about my refusing an opportunity or my working for a Parkinson? Good gods, he had no idea. He had to admit that selling brooms to Quidditch teams and earning such a salary was a dream for most young wizards, even if he had to work for the scariest-looking man aside from Voldemort. He could always quit if things went awry...

"Sir, I will gladly accept the position. When do you wish for me to start?"

"How about right now? Hard-working employees are eager starters, yes?" He hid his grin, knowing that any other wizard would give a new employee at least a week to prepare. However, Parkinson firmly believed in maintaining strict control, even if he planned to go easy on the Weasel.

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 18

Time to turn up the heat!

Thanks to my beta, AmyLouise, and the credit is JKR's, WB's, and Scholastic's.

Chapter Ten

Hermione stood on Malfoy's porch, trying to come up with any excuse to leave which wouldn't make her feel like a murderer. She couldn't very well abandon Mrs. Malfoy now, but the thought of facing *him* after *the incident* last night made her Gryffindor bravery meow like a kitten. She had no idea what to s...

The door flew open, luckily revealing Liddy, the house-elf. "Greetings, Miss Granger. I is walking you to Master Malfoy's room, Miss, since he is telling me to bring you right away."

"Oh. Well, okay. He won't just come out to the couch?"

"No, Miss. I is not even seeing him drink his coffee today."

"Oh." Hermione followed as Liddy hastily flitted toward the hallway. *Isn't there a more awkward way to do this?* she thought sarcastically.

Just as Liddy had barely begun to rap on the door, Malfoy flung it open breathlessly, grabbing Hermione's arm and dragging her through the door before she had time to realize what was happening. As he slammed the door, he remarkably remembered to give Liddy a nod of thanks.

He turned to face Hermione, threading his hands together nervously on top of his head. "Er... sit down."

"Malfoy? What? I mean, you look like you've seen..."

"I have! I have seen a ghost, for Merlin's sake!"

"Okay. Okay, just calm down." She gently grabbed his arm and led him over to the bed, sitting them both on the end. "What happened?"

"It was just...it was just a nightmare, really, but you know how once you're awake for a bit you realize how silly you were to be scared?" Hermione nodded. "Well, it's been four hours! I can't even drink my fucking coffee!"

"Maybe you should tell me, and then we can try to figure it out." She spoke to him as if he were a small child, sensing that her usual "Malfoy Tone" might not be the best idea just now.

Malfoy flopped his elbows onto his knees, grabbing at his hair again. "I'm sorry. I must seem completely crazy, but it was just *so real!*" He looked up, hoping for some reassurance that he wasn't being a complete Hufflepuff. He took Hermione's attentiveness as a good sign and went on.

"I was heading through a wood at night, foolishly ambling along without the slightest clue that it probably isn't the best idea to be meandering through woods at night in the first place, let alone without even paying attention. Before I knew it, I came upon this creepy old chapel...you know, the kind made from white stone all scrawled with those snakey viney designs and dirty with black dust?"

Hermione nodded, so he kept going. "It had no windows or anything, but I could see this faint light under the door, so my stupid dream self decided to open the damned thing."

Malfoy's forehead started to shine with sweat, and Hermione started to feel honestly scared. He never got this flustered by creepy things. He was a Slytherin, for crying out loud! She almost didn't want to know what was behind the door, but she braced herself.

"When I started to push the door, it was so heavy it was like it was moving in slow motion, but I heard this horrid giggle and pushed with all my might. For fuck's sake...you'd think I'd be smart enough to know that one doesn't try to find the source of evil laughter in a random old chapel in a dark wood! I just kept shoving like a damned Gryffindor!" Hermione rolled her eyes a little, although he didn't notice.

"Inch by inch, the door opened, and my eyes darted upward when I realized the light was coming from the ceiling." He looked at Hermione, a little embarrassed by his terror, but she looked rather intense herself. "Granger, it was a fucking white sheen. The wider the door opened, I began to realize my mother was hovering in there! I tried to scream, but I noticed someone else was in the room. When I looked down, some lunatic she-devil was staring at me with this crazed evil glee.

"I screamed like a girl until I heard all these high-pitched squeals of laughter from above my head. I looked up to see fucking thousands of those mother-fucking Death Faeries staring down at me, laughing and pointing. As they started flying at me, I woke up. I wish I hadn't, though, because every cell in my body feels like I should be looking for that place. I think I'm losing my fucking mind. My brain just won't see reason and stop thinking that place is out there somewhere."

Hermione didn't even care anymore about what had happened last night. In fact, she felt a bit silly for thinking it was important at all. She just put her arms around Malfoy's shaking form and pulled him close. He just breathed while she stroked his back. After a few moments, they both seemed to realize what they were doing at the same time, and they each pulled away a bit awkwardly. Without looking at her, Malfoy asked, "So, what do you think? Why would I feel like going there?"

"I don't know, Malfoy, but Harry used to have dreams like that, and sometimes they were important. Maybe we should talk to him."

"Er... I hate to break it to you, Granger, but Potter bloody hates me."

"No, he doesn't. Why would he have saved the life of someone he hates, especially when he could have easily died in that Fiendfyre? I'm pretty sure he doesn't like you any more than I do...well, did...but he would help if he could."

Hermione could see a cocky grin playing at the corners of Malfoy's mouth, and if he hadn't said anything, she would never have guessed why.

"You like me? I thought you said last night that you still hated me."

"Wha...well, I don't really...you said you hated me!"

"I only said that because I didn't want you to think... anything."

"What do you mean, 'think anything'? I *think* you kissed me, and I *think* you felt disgusted because you *think* I'm nothing more than scum under your privileged shoe."

"Well, that's...I mean, for as clever a witch...that wasn't it at all! I just..."

"You just what? Don't know how to do something other than hate me? Don't want to admit that you don't really care about my blood anymore? Don't think we would work out? What?"

"Er... pretty much all of the above." Draco managed a weak smile.

"Oh." She paused sheepishly, not really expecting an honest or civil answer. "I guess... I can understand that. I mean, how would everyone take it, right?" She looked up shyly, wondering if he wanted to kiss her again.

He looked back, trying to steel himself against the monumentally stupid idea of just shoving her on her back and hoping for the best. She was right. It could really never work between them, maybe even as friends. "So... you think Potter would seriously talk to me?"

Granger sat and stared at him for a moment, almost as if she hadn't heard his blatant attempt at a subject change. She definitely wasn't thinking about Potter. In fact, she looked like she was thinking what he was thinking.

Fuck it. Draco pushed her down barbarically by the shoulders as he crashed his lips onto hers, forcing himself on top of her. Like last night, she wasn't fighting him (not that he had planned to stop if she was), so he moved his lips boldly, tasting hers, uselessly wishing he could be smoother.

He had never felt this kind of explosive attraction to anyone, and he just didn't have the will to slow down. Somehow he knew gentleness wasn't what she was looking for, anyway, and when he felt her open her lips, he groaned with hunger, ready to thrust his tongue inside of her at the invitation. She wasn't waiting for him to lead, though, and shocked him by pushing her tongue into his mouth, grabbing the back of his shirt and pulling it out of his jeans.

He knew in that moment that there was no stopping this. Last night he had been too surprised at himself and unsure of her reaction to lose control, but now he knew they both wanted this. He had always taken Granger for the conservative type who would make a poor bloke wait, but by the way she was tonguing him and pushing her fingers into the back of his jeans, he knew he had been dead wrong. She was no goody two shoes, this one.

When her palms slipped into his underwear and over his buttocks, his cock finished hardening to the point of pain. He immediately grabbed handfuls of her rippling hair, bringing her face closer to his, thrusting his tongue in time with hers, relishing the feeling of her fingers sliding back up his arse and under his shirt. He lifted slightly, moving his hands roughly over her arms and down to her hips, pushing them back up under her shirt to rub the soft skin of her belly.

When he felt her hands move to his chest to start ripping his buttons free, he could see that they both wanted to dominate, and it turned him on even more. Keeping himself in the competition, he flipped them both over so she was on top, grabbing the bottom of her t-shirt and shoving it up and over her head.

Fucking hell... He never would have expected Granger to be wearing a see-through black lace bra, but fuck if she wasn't. Too bad it wouldn't be staying on for long. He reached around her back, and since he was practically a professional fuck, he had it unhooked and off in less than two seconds.

She arched back, breathing hard, wordlessly begging him to touch her dark pink, fully hardened nipples. He wasn't about to disappoint. He lifted his head, latching his mouth onto one perfect breast, suckling her nipple whilst caressing her other breast with his palm. He smiled against her as he heard her gasp for air, grabbing onto the back of his head to keep him there.

She was in ecstasy. No one had ever taken her like this, recklessly, almost painfully, and she found that it was making her lose any will to be logical or cautious. She wanted Malfoy, every part of him. She wanted him to keep caressing and biting at her nipples, and then she wanted him to do anything and everything else.

She was starting to rock her hips against his gloriously excruciating erection, and he started to grab at the waistline of her pants, wanting to get to the naked part as soon as possible. He knew she felt his hardness, too, because she moaned and rocked harder, rubbing him until he had to stop her. This time, she smiled down at him knowingly, obviously enjoying regaining the upper hand.

She was equally motivated to keep him from coming too soon, though, so she slid her hips down his legs and expertly began to loosen his belt and open his pants. He let out a harsh breath he didn't realize he was holding, and she yanked the jeans and his underwear down to his knees in one flash, obviously leaving them there to trap his legs, bowing him to her will. She looked down at his cock and feverishly back at his face, biting her lower lip, and he nearly came with the realization that she liked what she saw.

When Hermione noticed that his face hadn't relaxed in the slightest, she knew she had better slow things down much more, so she paused and just looked at him. He had to be the hottest, sexiest thing she'd ever seen, from his steel gray eyes to his perfectly toned chest and abdomen to his almost frighteningly large cock. Oh, she couldn't wait to have it inside her, driving her apart.

Finally, she bent her head down, arching her back like a cat, her buttocks in the air, him wishing again that they were already naked. He watched her hair fall on his stomach, hiding her face from view, and he could hardly stand waiting for her next touch. His breath caught and he stiffened when he suddenly felt her sliding her tongue down his abdomen, stopping when she reached his navel. He had known she would torture him whilst he couldn't move, but he didn't care. She could do anything she wanted as far as he was concerned.

As she lingered over his lower abdomen, she looked up into his eyes, teasing him for a few seconds. Then without warning, she whipped her face down to his cock, licking it up and down, kissing it like she was already fantasizing about what it would do to her. He just hoped he could keep himself from coming before he had the chance to do it.

At last her warm, wet mouth took him in, moving up and down his length slowly, making him moan with agony since he was unable to rock his hips while trapped in his *fucking* jeans. It was bloody amazing. As she licked and sucked, his legs started to tremble, and he knew he was getting dangerously close once again. Out of breath, he barely managed to gasp out, "You better stop."

She let him slide out of her mouth, grinning up at him, definitely getting a kick out of her ultimate power over him. "Okay," she replied coyly.

She slid off of him, standing up so she could pull his jeans completely off, one leg at a time. *Thank the gods.* Before he had a chance to make the next move, though, she shackled him by starting to unbutton her own pants, unzipping the fly in an agonizingly lazy motion, knowing he was entering a place beyond coherent thought by the hungry look in his eyes. He was mesmerized.

After what seemed like a week, she finally started to pull at the waistline. He was frozen with anticipation, wanting desperately to spring off the bed and strip her down before she knew what happened, but he somehow managed to hold himself back with miraculous will. She was killing him, and he wanted her to keep doing it.

She actually smirked at him as she threw her pants across the room and grabbed the waist of her underwear. She apparently knew she was handily winning the war for dominance at the moment, but it couldn't be helped. Thank Merlin her underwear wasn't see-through, too, or he would have been undone. Oh, *gods*, he couldn't wait to see what was under that lace.

She pulled gently, looking him right in the eye. *Oh, fuck...* He could see some soft brown curls peeking over before she cruelly let go of the band, winking at him. He couldn't help it...he groaned with impatience. She just smiled and started pulling again, and he had never wanted to see a naked body more in his life.

Finally, he could see the curls again, and she pulled a little lower until the top of her slit started to show. She paused, and he didn't even try to hold back the whimper. He could see glistening moisture beginning to soak the waistline of her knickers and, as she kept pulling down, he got the full view he was waiting for. She was bloody gorgeous...spectacular, really...and when she finally had her underwear at the top of her thighs, he let himself lose control.

He was on his knees, grabbing and ripping at those fucking panties, making her cry out as he thrust his tongue roughly right between her legs, grabbing her tight buttocks and kneading them with his hands. He licked back and forth, up and down over her swollen clit, devouring her scent and her taste, and she grabbed fistfuls of his hair to bring his face closer and brace herself. Within seconds she was moaning and rocking her hips again, moving in time with his tongue. She thought she might incinerate right there and miss the finale. "Oh... oh, gods... Draco..." She panted harder and harder as he lapped at her sex, until he could feel her thigh muscles tightening. He knew she was close, so he pulled away with a slow suck, getting her back for torturing him by looking up at her with an evil smirk.

She looked absolutely murderous at the prospect of not being satisfied, and he was loving gaining the upper hand, watching her breaking for him. "Please, Draco, for fuck's sake..." she hissed, pulling at his hair and trying to force him back between her legs.

His Seeker hands were too fast for her, though, and he grabbed her wrists, bringing his face down to the bottom of her right thigh. She moaned and threw her head back, trying to free her hands as he licked his way slowly back to her sex. She was soaking wet, and he knew it wouldn't take much effort to bring her over the edge. He smiled and flicked his tongue over her clit lightly, then stopped to look up at her. "Draco! Oh, gods! Please!"

At that moment he shoved his fingers inside of her, sucking her clit between his lips as he pumped his fingers in and out. She came hard, screaming out his name again, shaking as the waves clutched at his still moving fingers.

When she started to relax her legs, he stood up, looking right into her chocolate brown eyes. They just stood there, trying to catch their breath, locked in a stare neither of them understood. He had to be inside of her...now.

Judging by her handling of him, she wasn't into gentle, so he pulled her around so she was closest to the bed, turned her, and bent her over. She caught on quickly, and rather than shying away, she got on all fours and looked back at him with pure lust, daring him to pound into her. She didn't have to ask twice. He shoved his cock into her hard, and he didn't even attempt to control his pace. He thrust in and out of her fully, maybe even hurting her, but she was definitely not complaining. "Hermione...oh, fuck!" He felt his balls tighten and crashed deep inside her, having the orgasm of his life.

He had had many an incredible fuck since losing his virginity in 4th year, but he had never experienced anything like this. She actually matched him, even controlled him, not intimidated in the slightest. When his pulses finally began to die down, he collapsed onto her back, catching his breath. "Fucking amazing..."

She was panting hard, too, but she managed to gasp out, "You, too..."

When he was able, he lifted off of her, crawled onto his bed, and pulled her on to him. It didn't occur to him to feel awkward about holding her. He latched the covers onto one foot and yanked them up until he could reach with his hand and pull them the rest of the way, and they just lay there peacefully, her breathing against his chest.

"You called me Hermione."

He sure had. "You called me Draco," he countered with a smile.

He wasn't sure what conversation he wanted to have here. He wasn't sure what had just happened, really, except that it was the fuck of a lifetime. Could they really do this? He didn't know. A few days ago, they were still in the hateful, taunting phase they had been in since first year. Even going through a war and coming out basically on the same side hadn't changed that. Something powerful had just overtaken them, though, and there was no denying that he wanted more. He had second-guessed himself last night, but he was absolutely sure now that she wanted more, too. This was just plain fucking confusing. It might also be the best thing that ever happened to him.

Hermione lay there, feeling like jelly, wondering with amusement who the fuck she was. Last night, she had clearly returned Draco's kiss, and despite the fact that his explanation of his actions had stung her, she had hurried at work today to get here by lunch. Sure, she had nearly lost her nerve and left as soon as she arrived, but she had obsessed all morning about whether or not he really meant what he had said.

And what the fuck had just come over her?! One minute she's feeling humiliated about last night, the next she's lowering herself to completely forgiving him without even expecting an apology, and the next she's sexually attacking him as though it were the most natural thing in the world. She had never made love to Ron with that kind of brazen fearlessness. Come to think of it, she didn't think she had ever kissed Ron the way she kissed Draco. She had to bite her cheek to keep from laughing out loud when she realized that Draco had brought out the true Bedroom Gryffindor in her today. She rather liked her.

The true reason for her bliss, though, was the fact that when they were passionately out of control, they had both used each other's names for the first time. In their most basic state, they felt safe with each other. Something had happened in the last couple of days which had erased the malice of the past, and because he had said her name, she knew she could trust it. She nuzzled closer so she could just lie there and listen to his heartbeat.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 18

Harry and Draco? We'll see!

Hugs to AmyLouise, my beta! All money goes to JKR, WB, and Scholastic.

Chapter Eleven

If someone had told Draco two weeks ago that he would be standing in his fireplace with a handful of Floo powder ready to yell, "Harry Potter's flat!", he would have hexed the daft dolt. He couldn't believe he'd let Granger talk him into this, but his mum was worth whatever he had to endure.

As he felt the tickling pull start to suck him through the network, he tried to prepare for what was sure to be the most humiliating hour of his life. Well, except for sitting in the corner of the Great Hall after Potter finally ended the war, feeling the hatred or pity in every eye glancing his way.

Suddenly, they were there, and Hermione stepped out of the fireplace, running up to Ginny and Harry for heartfelt hugs. Absolutely disgusting. Draco lagged behind, not really sure what to do. He took the opportunity to look at Hermione's perfect body from behind and then around the flat. Small, clean, and cozy. He knew Potter could afford more, but he was always so sickeningly content. He probably gave most of his money away, the saintly git.

All too soon, the lovefest broke apart, and everyone turned to look at Draco. Everything sort of froze for a second, but then Potter smiled and walked up to Draco with his hand outstretched. "Come on in, Malfoy."

"Thank you." Draco shook Potter's hand and stepped inside, and he noticed Hermione's annoyingly satisfied grin.

"Hey, Draco," greeted Ginny, gesturing to the couch. "Come sit. Can I get you guys anything to drink? We were just having some spiked pumpkin juice ourselves," she said, flashing Harry a wicked smile.

Draco was game for anything which included spiking at the moment, so he answered with, "That sounds great, thanks."

Hermione added, "Extra spikes in mine, please." She walked over to the couch, grabbing Draco's arm and dragging him along. He tried to ignore the subtle tingle running up his arm and how it spread throughout his body and into his penis when she sat closer to him than he would have thought she'd dare in front of her friends.

"So, Malfoy, I hear you didn't exactly have sweet dreams last night." Potter was sitting in the chair adjacent to the couch, looking at him with what seemed like actual concern. How fucking annoying.

Hermione noticed him scowling and hesitating to answer, so she gave him a pointed look which obviously meant, "Don't be a prick and do start talking."

"Uh, yeah. You could say that."

"Here's the magic pumpkin juice." Ginny walked in, handing over the drinks and perching on the arm of Potter's burgundy upholstered chair, which was oversized and puffy just like the matching couch. Studying her guests, she cocked her head a little, shifting her eyes back and forth. She definitely noticed the proximity. Hermione downed her drink, getting a look of bewilderment from Ginny, and Draco started to drink up, too. Maybe he would feel a bit less awkward about Weasel Woman's line of thought with some alcohol in his veins.

"Before you tell me about the dream, Malfoy, I just want you to know that Hermione made it clear that you wish for your situation to remain private. We have no intention of repeating anything you say," Potter stated, putting his hand on Ginny's knee.

Potter's nobility nearly made Draco sick, but he was relieved that Hermione hadn't forgotten that detail when she was Flooing back and forth, trying to straighten things with Ginny (who apparently blamed Ron for everything, which showed she must have taken after some rogue un-Weasleyish person in her ancestry).

Apparently the she-weasel had also been shocked that Hermione was under the same roof as Pansy Malfoy, and rather indignant that Draco's wife was such a bitch that

he would need to hire someone to help him with whatever his emergency happened to be. Obviously, he had given Hermione permission to let the Potters know about his divorce. Draco knew he could trust Potter, even if he couldn't stand him.

"I appreciate the discretion. My mother's safety is at stake here, so I have to make sure I don't make any damning moves."

"Your mum is in danger?" Ginny asked, looking at him with the sincere concern of a true Gryffindor. Something in him finally noticed he shouldn't be irked by this. Maybe it was that the concern was directed at his mother instead of him.

Draco let out a shaky breath. "I hope you have time for a long story."

He proceeded to tell them about the picture, hiring Pendington, and the research he and Hermione had done so far. As he described the Death Faeries, he could see the Potters visibly pale, Ginny sprouting a disconcerting pallor.

When he began to relay his most recent meeting with Charles, he realized the "kissing incident" had kept him from telling Hermione, so she was hearing this for the first time, too. For the only time in his life, he actually cared that she was about to be upset.

As he came near the end of Pendington's story about his grandmother, Hermione predictably gasped, covering her mouth with a trembling hand. Draco almost forgot himself and put his hand on her leg to comfort her, but he caught himself just in time. He just glanced into her eyes and hoped she could see that he wanted to soothe her.

No one voiced a word for several seconds, and, despite this afternoon's pleasant distractions, the panic of his mother's situation flooded through Draco's defenses again. He suddenly felt disgusted with himself, guilty at having lost focus even for a few hours. Potter's stunned silence scared him even more, and the intensity in the room was enough to make Draco despair.

Ginny suddenly rose up, collected the glasses, and marched straight to the kitchen to pour another round of drinks. She obviously needed a moment.

After chugging a second calming draught, he finally began to impart his nightmare. When Draco confessed his frantic need to find this cursed place, Potter's whole demeanor changed. It was apparent that he was taking this very seriously, and he didn't think Draco was crazy at all. He furrowed his brows for a second, as if he were morphing into Harry the Hero. If the situation weren't so grave, it would have been comical. Compassion from Potter was just another reason for Draco to want to bolt from the room, but since some of the compassion was about his mum, he restrained himself and tried to remain open to the help.

If Harry hadn't been observing Malfoy himself, he would have advised Hermione to do anything but trust him. However, he found himself oddly connected to Malfoy, both sharing the trauma of facing seemingly impossible obstacles but feeling compelled nonetheless by honor or love.

"I can't tell you that I know the answer, Malfoy, but Ginny and I will do anything we can to help. From my experience, dreams that mimic the feel of reality should not be ignored, so I think we should start searching for that chapel...now. Did you recognize anything about the place or the girl?"

"That's just it. Her expressions reminded me of the worst people I've known, but I didn't recognize her at all. The place just seemed completely random, except that we know it's in a wood. So... you think my feelings are seriously a sign?"

"It can't hurt for us to overreact. Even if it was just a nightmare, there's no harm in searching."

"What about the severe waste of time? There must be millions of wooded areas in the wizarding world alone, and we cannot assume this location is anywhere in the vicinity. What if I am being sent on an endless chase just to crush any possibility of rescue?"

"I know what you mean, but I have a feeling this person wants you to find her. Why would she have sent the picture if she didn't want to lure you into something? To be safe, though, we should at least try to narrow down some possible sites."

"How can we possibly know how to narrow sites, Harry? There is nothing recognizable about anything in Draco's dream."

Ginny jerked slightly at hearing Hermione use Draco's name, but she didn't have time to dwell on it.

"Maybe we don't try to match places with the visual descriptions of the dream. Maybe we try to figure out the locations of burial grounds used by witches and wizards. That still leaves us with thousands of possibilities, but not all cemeteries are nestled in woods."

"Brilliant, Gin!" praised Harry enthusiastically. Draco thought his celebration a bit premature, but at least they were getting somewhere.

"It's a clever start, at any rate," added Hermione.

"I say we get to the library right away, then. Once we have a list of areas to search, we could split up and use our Patronuses to keep each other informed. It will be twice as fast that way."

There was an immediate springing into action, Hermione walking to the fireplace and Harry and Ginny grabbing their wands, some parchment, and a quill.

Draco almost started squirming with awkward feelings. He knew Potter had no reason to care about him or his mother, but he was willing to put his life on the line once again, even though he had obviously been shaken by the idea of Death Faeries. Up to now, Potter's compassion pretty much pissed him off, and he had hated Potter for coming off as some sort of selfless savior while he enjoyed accolades and near worship. However, there was no glory in this for Potter since no one else was going to know about it. He was just as confusing as Hermione.

Draco knew deep down that maybe he had really just been jealous and seeing Potter through his Slytherin eyes all this time, expecting him to love glory and fame like Draco would. He had to shake this line of thought before he actually admitted to himself that Potter might not be the attention-seeking bastard Draco thought he was. Luckily, a rap at the window interrupted his inner counseling session.

Ginny handed the materials to Harry and went to the window, lifting up the sash to greet the tawny owl. She untied the rolled parchment and sent the bird on his way with a treat. When she turned around, Draco noticed that the parchment bore the official seal of the Ministry of Magic.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 18

The Weasleys are in for a bit of a shock...

Thanks to my beta, AmyLouise! All \$ goes to JKR, WB, and Scholastic.

Chapter Twelve

Harry thought it odd when he saw the Ministry's seal on correspondence so late in the evening. Of course he received mail from them regularly, but it was usually in his office. He didn't have the best feeling about this, and, unlike Trelawney, most of his hunches were dead-on. When Ginny looked back at him, he knew she felt it, too.

"Want me to open it, Gin?" he asked, even though he knew she rarely accepted his protection.

"I got it." She tore the seal and opened it, walking toward the fireplace. As soon as she started to read, though, Harry had to bolt three feet to catch her. And she let him, a look of frozen shock on her face.

"Ginny, what the hell is going on?" Hermione asked, shakily, grabbing the parchment. She didn't look at it, though, until she was back next to Draco. If this was going to be bad, she didn't want to read it without him.

While Harry was trying to hang on to a now sobbing and convulsing Ginny, Draco and Hermione looked at each other and then at the letter. Before Draco had finished the first two sentences, he wished he had insisted on reading first. Hermione was already screaming, though, and neither of them cared that Harry and Ginny could eventually notice Draco holding onto her with his face in her hair, kissing her head and trying to tell her that it would be okay.

"Ginny, please tell me what is going on!" shouted Harry, the only one left who had no idea what that bloody parchment said. Draco just handed it to him so he could read for himself, Harry not even noticing that his arms were wrapped around Hermione.

Harry,

There has been an attack, and the Aurors are being summoned immediately to the Ministry. Brothers and Brooms has been decimated by explosions which could not have been accidental, and we do not know yet if there are any survivors. There is no easy way to tell you this, but according to a receptionist who was on her lunch hour during the attack, Ron Weasley started working for Mr. Parkinson today. You are obviously encouraged to remain with your family. We are all here for you and will do everything in our power to punish those responsible for this atrocity, and we share your hope that Ron is alive. We will send messages by owl or Patronus as we learn more.

Kingsley Shacklebolt

At first, Harry just stood there blankly, and then his arms limply dropped. He stepped backwards into his chair and sat, just staring forward. Having lost her support, Ginny looked up at him, her eyes so red they looked like they were bleeding.

She walked carefully to him and knelt, not sure if she should even touch him. She risked whispering a shaky "Harry?" Suddenly he sucked in a sharp breath, clutching his stomach. He just sat there breathing hard, in and out, in and out, holding his arms tightly around himself as if he were trying to hold in his last bit of sanity. Ginny could only bend her head to cry into his knee.

Draco did feel grave concern for his former father-in-law, but he was far more troubled with trying to keep Hermione from falling to pieces. He knew Pansy and Lilius would be devastated, but he had to wonder if Pansy would secretly hope to receive her inheritance early. Perhaps that was a cruel thought.

On that note, he sent a quick Patronus to let Shacklebolt know that Pansy had been with her mother today. He supposed a message probably awaited him at home, informing "Mrs. Malfoy" about her father since only one well-paid witch at the Ministry knew about his quiet divorce.

As he turned back to put his arms around Hermione again, he realized that the selfish Slytherin in him was also beginning to worry that his new relationship was already over. Sometimes near tragedies caused reunions, and if Ron was still alive, he knew he could lose Hermione as fast as he had found her. He might be on his own with his mother now, too.

The pit of his stomach was suddenly beginning to tighten with panic, but he knew he had to bury his fears for the moment. Hermione needed to be held, and he would hold her until she told him to let go.

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Before they even flooed into the Burrow's entrance, Hermione could hear Molly's wailing. She didn't have any idea how to face Mrs. Weasley, knowing that she may have lost another child, and knowing that she probably hated Hermione now despite Ginny's assurances to the contrary. Come to think of it, they probably all hated her. As soon as George spotted her, though, he rushed to her for an emotional hug.

"Hermione." It was a simple greeting, but contained messages of anguish, wishing, and comfort. "Are you okay?"

"I wasn't, but I've decided to keep hoping that we find him."

"Me, too. I can't do this again..."

"I know, George."

"We were all bloody fucking pissed at him for leaving you, but it seems colossally stupid now to have reacted without even bothering..." He couldn't finish, but she understood. The torture of having your possible last conversation with a loved one be negative... she knew the feeling.

At that moment, George seemed to realize for the first time that Draco was standing there. His face faltered a bit, not having any clue why Malfoy would show up. "Uh... hi, mate..."

"Hi, George. Er... I hope this turns out well." It sounded lame, but that was the best he could do. Hermione had begged him to come along, and he honestly couldn't believe he had given in to such an awkward intrusion of the Weasleys' privacy.

It was only when Potter sided with her that he had finally conceded. Harry thought they should all stay together considering the connection between Draco and Mr. Parkinson and the fact that they still had a search to conduct when they could. Now he wished he could crawl out of his skin and hide in the fireplace.

Just then, Mrs. Weasley looked up and saw him. Apparently Ginny had walked straight over to her mum and dad upon arriving and had eventually pointed out that he and Hermione had come along. As Mrs. Weasley's eyes found his, all he could think of was that bloody Howler during second year, and he braced himself to be unmercifully booted out. To his utter astonishment, she stood up and ran over to them, arms outstretched.

He didn't think he had ever been hugged before. In fact, he was sure of it. His family was far too formal, and fucking girls didn't quite count as huggish. She unashamedly squeezed him with all her might, though, and he literally had no idea how to react. He had practically been bred on hatred of Weasleys, and although he had placed that aside for most members of their family, he didn't exactly consider them to be friends. She hugged on, though, until she was good and ready to let go.

"Oh, Draco! Thank you so much for coming! You must be beside yourself about Mr. Parkinson...I'm so sorry, dear. Do make yourself at home." He wasn't exactly sure how to do that without touching anything. The place was truly just... an abomination. Nevertheless, he nodded to her in thanks. He had no idea what Ginny had said to her parents, but it must have convinced them that his presence wasn't completely perplexing. Hopefully word would reach Percy and Bill across the room before their glaring daggers impaled him.

As soon as she'd finished with Draco, Mrs. Weasley turned to Hermione, pulling her into a tearful hug. "This is all my fault, Hermione! How will I... what will I do if..."

Hermione's tears were overflowing again as she replied, "No, Molly, this is my fault. I pushed him too hard...I didn't give him enough time. I..."

"Let's go sit down, dear." She put her arm through Hermione's and motioned for Draco to follow. Most of the family was around the kitchen table, just sitting... just... waiting. It was more depressing than the Manor.

Mrs. Weasley pulled Hermione into a chair next to hers, and Draco hung back awkwardly. "Hermione, you won't believe what I've done. I was so furious with Ron for leaving you, for losing you, really. I knew how things had been for you both... all I could do was yell at him, in truth, or stay in my room, fuming. This morning..." She started to choke on her words, and Hermione took her hand.

After a few seconds, Molly continued, "This morning, I forced him to go out and look for a job... oh, Hermione! I didn't even know he had found something! I was ranting and raving around the kitchen this evening about how he must have failed to find anything and couldn't manage to be a grownup and face me, and then we received our owl from the Ministry. I just can't bear it if the last thing..." At this, she began to wail again, and Arthur pulled her up into his arms to try and comfort her.

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It seemed like hours had passed, and they had all spent the time leaning on shoulders, wiping tears and exhausting the firewhiskey supply. Draco remained in his position, leaning against a wall, although he did accept the whiskey.

At long last, someone besides him was going stir crazy, and Harry motioned for Draco and Hermione to join him and Ginny in the library. Or, as Draco could immediately clarify, the rundown, dusty chamber of mismatched wooden shelves with a couple of worn couches and a severely gouged desk. Maybe that was the Weasley version of ornate carvings?

They all sat gratefully on the fluffy couches, Draco having stood too long to care if they were contaminated. As Ginny leaned into Harry, Hermione absently leaned into Draco, and he wondered if he should clear his throat or something to remind her that they were in front of people who still considered her to be married to Ron and had no clue how much his and Hermione's relationship had... progressed. She snuggled up too quickly, though, and he chanced a look at Ginny to see if any fireworks were about to go off. She was looking, all right, but she just had a curious expression on her face, as if wondering why he wasn't attempting to crawl away.

He noticed Potter looking, too, and he apparently couldn't overcome his curiosity because he asked, "So... when did you two become... friends? I thought...I mean, you said this afternoon that Malfoy had hired you, but..." He was looking at Hermione, clearly presuming he had a right to some answers.

"Potter, I hardly think this is any of your business, and she's obviously in no condition to field your accusations just now." Draco's surge of protectiveness felt foreign to him, but he was surprised to find that he didn't mind. He had become a comforter and protector to his nemesis in the scope of one day, but it felt like second nature, as if he had played the role his whole life.

Harry was already lifting off the edge of his seat, and Hermione knew she had to jump in before Harry and Draco faced off over her. "Harry, you don't have to do the big brother thing. It's okay...really. As you said, Malfoy and I are... friends."

Ginny raised an eyebrow, but she remained quiet.

"Er... okay. Sorry then..." Harry looked baffled, but he scooted back, pulling Ginny's head back onto his shoulder. He couldn't fit in his confusion about this new connection between his worst enemy and best friend with all the rest of today's events anyway.

"So, what did you want then, Potter?" Draco asked, trying to control his voice and get back to being civil. He didn't want Hermione any more upset than she already was, and he didn't want to be a complete arse to someone who was on his side right now.

"Well, I don't know about you lot, but I can't sit in silence doing nothing but worrying for too long," Harry replied, also making an effort to regain composure. "We can't do anything but wait for news, so we might as well use our time to strategize our response to the Death Faeries."

He is such an Auror Draco never failed to be amused by Potter's gung ho hero talk. It was a good idea, however, so he started glancing around for some parchment and a quill. Spying some on that pitiful pine desk behind the opposite couch, he asked, "Ginny, do you think anyone will mind if we use that parchment?"

"No, of course not. That's a good idea." Good gods. A compliment from the she-weasel. This whole thing was spiraling out of control.

They spent the next hour talking about the characteristics of the Death Faeries and trying to find some kind of chink in their armor. Pendington's certainty that there was no way to stop them was daunting, but there just had to be a way.

"What about trying to provoke them into attacking one of us so the others have time to rescue Mrs. Malfoy?"

"Yeah, Gin, if we could find a way to have some sort of shield of protection around that person, it might work," Hermione encouraged.

Harry furrowed his brow. "What could possibly be impervious to those teeth, though?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves here. Do we even know the conjuror couldn't override the distractions? It won't help to lure the creatures if someone merely has to command them back to attention. Besides, what could divert them?"

Draco had a point, but Hermione was convinced that no creatures could be invincible. "Wait a second. Harry, you are an expert at expelling wands from the villains, right?" He blushed a little and Draco could not help but roll his eyes. "Maybe you could handle the person on the bench while another of us distracts the beasts, however we decide to do that. Then there will be two people left to see to Mrs. Malfoy, and there will be no one calling the Death Faeries back to task."

"I don't think we should assume that there is only one person in that chapel, or that it's even going to be a chapel. Remember how Voldemort gave Harry that vision of torturing Sirius? Harry only saw what Voldemort wanted him to see, and we went in there blind. If we expect to be surprised this time, maybe we'll be more prepared."

Ginny was right. They were assuming an awful lot, based on a dream, but they really didn't have anything else to go on. "I'm not sure what we can do about that, though, aside from being ready to deal with more than one person," Harry responded.

"Still, love, we might also be lured into a venue with plenty of protective or offensive spells in place, and we have to be ready to disarm wards and traps. I just think it would be prudent to review some of our best hexes and spells from the war is all."

Just then, screaming erupted from the kitchen, so the four of them bolted from their comfy spots, Draco stuffing their notes in his pocket.

"St. Mungo's! Now!" shouted Arthur as they ran in, and no one bothered to ask questions. One by one, they each flooded immediately to the healing facility's reception area, out of breath with adrenaline and making record time.

"Would anyone mind telling us what is going on?" spat Ginny, hurrying with the group to the front desk.

"It's Ron, obviously," George managed a bit breathlessly. "They found him in the wreckage at Brothers and Brooms, but we have no idea what condition he's in, of course." George tried to soften his words a bit at the end, but he was terrified with hope and therefore a bit abrupt.

Harry and Hermione took in George's news silently as they followed, but Draco knew they must be paralyzed with emotion. He sure could relate, knowing his mum might

still be alive, but not knowing if he could have her back.

As Molly began to hurry from the desk toward the lift, it was apparent that she had received the needed information. Compacting their entire group into one cubicle was a bit challenging, but no one, not even Draco, was willing to wait for the next ride. The silence was broken often by nervous breathing, but the whole party remained uncharacteristically wordless until they reached the sixth floor, Critical Care. Hermione wasn't alone in sucking in a small gasp upon reading the disquieting sign.

Arthur led the way down the corridor, Molly's arm intertwined with his, Arthur with a serious expression, Molly with wide-eyed panic. The Healers' Station attendant raised her eyebrows when she saw the size of the entourage, but Draco cast a quick Confundus charm to keep them moving. They may not have a moment to lose, and although a plethora of selfish thoughts were racing in his mind right now, he knew the Weasel was important to Hermione, divorce pending or not. He just hoped the divorce pending part didn't change.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 18

What news of Ron?

Thank you to my beta, AmyLouise, and all money goes to JKR, WB, and Scholastic.

Chapter Thirteen

Draco had been watching Hermione intently for an hour, which under different circumstances would have been impossible, since he probably would have ripped her clothes off within the first five minutes. Tonight, however, he was analyzing every grimace, every frown, and even the smiles, which he noted were fleeting and didn't reach her eyes. He was in dread fear of what might happen when she was finally invited into Ron's room, and he just wanted to glue her to her spot on the floor next to him, even if he couldn't touch her in present company.

He wondered if he would ever be able to touch her in present company. He felt a bit less aversion to the Weasel family at the moment than even mere hours ago, but despite Mrs. Weasley's fierce hug of greeting, he had no idea how they honestly felt about him. She was rather desperate when he arrived at the Burrow, after all, and considering that she still fancied that Ron and Hermione would be married and was under the disgusting impression that he and Pansy still had a relationship, any kindness she felt for him could incinerate within her famous fury if she found out what had happened earlier today. He suddenly realized that he and Hermione were probably having passionate sex while Ron was being blown out of a building, and he hoped this hadn't occurred to Hermione.

His desperation to cling to her scared him. Looking around the hallway at her loved ones should have forced his brain back to reality, which was that this relationship could never last. Hell, the relationship would probably disintegrate if they were alone on an island. But he couldn't be rational, and this was the polar opposite of his usual calculating coldness and logic. Did this mean he loved her, then? Or was his loneliness starting to claw its way to the surface? All he knew was that the very thought of saying goodbye to her felt like a bludge to the stomach, and a fatal hit at that.

How had this happened, anyway? He had hired a woman who had grated on his nerves since first year, they had done some research, and then one glance at her in a bathrobe and he was mutated for life. Had he always had some sort of attraction to her? Had his obsession with tormenting her been his way of shoving forbidden feelings into the recesses of his mind?

Thinking back, sixth year and the following war had gotten darkly serious, and when the moment of truth came in his own father's living room, he could barely endure watching Hermione being harmed. It was in that moment that he had realized he was not a follower of the Dark Lord or Lucius Malfoy, and it had taken him until this very second to realize Hermione Granger had saved him. He had always thought it was Potter, but that night in the Room of Requirement wasn't the beginning of his transformation.

Suddenly, his resentment at owing Harry Potter began to dissipate and float away, and gratitude to Hermione took its place. Funny how it was harder to resent someone's help after you had seen her naked and flushed with desire underneath you... and almost admitted to yourself that you loved her.

Across the corridor, Harry and George were updating Charlie on everything they knew so far, which wasn't much. He had just arrived from Romania after being retrieved by Percy, so Percy was also listening intently for anything new.

Molly and Arthur had been in Ron's room for an hour, and no one had so much as stepped out to tell them if he was going to live. Perhaps they didn't know, or maybe they figured everyone would assume the lack of screaming indicated that Ron had a chance. In any event, they were all trapped in limbo, interrupted by a snuffle from Hermione now and then.

Down the corridor some way, Ginny, Bill, and Fleur were whispering coincidentally about the very same subject occupying Malfoy's mind. They had opted to keep from brooding while they waited, knowing it was futile to be too emotional at this point.

"Anyone else notice how Malfoy has been staring at Hermione all night? I mean, I know he can't stand her, but I would think he could ignore that for one night considering that her *husband* is in critical condition and *his wife* has lost her father. Has he even owled her to explain why he's staying with us? Bloody fucker infuriates me...fucking selfish git."

"Er... Bill... I should probably fill you in on a few things..."

Bill just stared at Ginny, wondering what defense Malfoy could possibly have and intrigued by the fact that Ginny would be the one voicing it. Wasn't she the one always calling Malfoy a ferret?

"Zer is no excuze for heez coldness, my seester," Fleur chimed in, flipping her silvery blonde hair over her shoulder with a perfectly manicured hand. She had no patience for any man who could resist fawning over his wife.

"Actually, I think you would both be surprised by some... developments Harry and I have observed just tonight." Bill and Fleur were suddenly riveted, Fleur because she would drop anything for juicy gossip, and Bill because he couldn't imagine any redeeming qualities belonging to a Malfoy and was primed to shoot down whatever ridiculous bullshit Ginny was about to spew.

"I am not at liberty to tell you why, but Malfoy was at our flat earlier in the evening." Fleur audibly gasped at this, but Ginny continued. "He is going through a crisis and actually hired Hermione to help him research his options." Another gasp. "I would have thought they would have clawed each other's faces off within hours, but instead, they seem to have formed some sort of... friendship. Hermione Flooed us earlier today and begged us to help him interpret a dream."

"Gin, that still doesn't explain why he is pretending he has no wife mourning a father. Maybe he's buried the hatchet temporarily to use Hermione, but he's still an asshole."

"That's just it, Bill. He isn't married to Pansy anymore. She wasn't just visiting her mum today." Big gasp from Fleur, and Ginny noticed Malfoy glance their way for a moment. She glared a warning at her flighty sister-in-law. "They broke up quite a while ago actually, and according to Hermione, Malfoy had a terribly difficult time enduring her for as long as he did."

"Well, that's bloody shocking." Bill had to admit his prejudiced mind was opening, though.

"When we heard about Ron, Malfoy was with us, and Hermione fiercely insisted on him coming with us to the Burrow. He tried to decline out of respect for our privacy, but when she started crying, *he gave in to her*. He tried to pretend it was Harry's agreement with the idea, but the ruse was pretty transparent. Harry and I were shocked, to say the least, but we thought it was just some sort of friendship until she cuddled up to him on the couch in our library. They had seemed to be sitting a bit close at our flat, too, but she literally curled into him and laid her head on his shoulder without thinking."

Bill's eyes had steadily grown wider with Ginny's every word, and Fleur had resorted to clasping her hands over her mouth to keep from crying out. "So you sink zey are an item?" Fleur dived in and asked the ill-mannered question bluntly, of course.

"Well, I don't know, but considering the look on his face right now, I'd say Malfoy has at least decided he doesn't share his father's views where Hermione is concerned. I'm thinking it is much more than a general change of heart, though."

"What about Ron?" Although he knew Ron had chosen to end his marriage, Bill still felt that he had to voice some sort of loyalty as his big brother. "I wouldn't have believed Hermione to be so flippant as to forget him within a couple of days. What if he decides he wants her back? Has she really felt so little for him lately?"

"Bill, you seem to be forgetting your declaration on their wedding day that the whole thing was doomed. As much as we all love Hermione, we knew we were grasping at straws to believe their relationship was more than familial. Frankly, I'm glad they finally admitted it. I was pissed as hell at Ron at first because I thought Hermione and Mum would go berserk and I didn't want to lose Hermione as a sister, but when I talked to Hermione today and found that she seemed freed from a gloomy prison, I knew I was being selfish. With what has happened to Ron, I doubt Mum will even notice Hermione or Draco fully for a while, so I've decided to put off my worries in that department as well. We can't seem to avoid changes in this family no matter what we do anyway."

Bill couldn't stifle a bit of laughter, and Ginny was completely confused. "What the hell is so funny?"

"It's just the idea of Hermione and Malfoy. It's even more nutters than Hermione and Ron! They'll kill each other, for fuck's sake!"

Just then, Arthur stepped slowly into the hallway and lifted his hollow eyes to his family.

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Everyone was holding a collective breath. Arthur looked totally defeated, which could not mean anything but awful news.

"Ron is... badly burned." His words were coming out as a breathy whisper as that was all Mr. Weasley could manage.

Before Arthur could utter another word, devastated reactions were circulating the group, Ginny clinging to Harry with fresh sobs, George gasping, Bill muttering, "Merlin..." under his breath, grabbing a shaking Fleur around the waist, and Charlie simply closing his eyes. Harry and Percy were stoic, but their eyes revealed a deep pain that was more transparent in Hermione. Her head had collapsed into her hands at the news with a moan of, "Oh, Ron... oh gods..." At that, Draco stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her, not giving the smallest fuck what anyone thought.

"How bad is it, Dad?" Percy finally ventured.

"He was found underneath an outer wall of bricks which had collapsed during the explosion, and the healers think he must have been directly touched by whatever was detonated. His body is just..." He struggled to keep speaking, but he knew his wife would never be able to do even this much and there was no one else to inform the family. He didn't want some stranger doing it.

"He hasn't regained consciousness yet, but when he does, they will be able to tell more about whether or not he has sustained brain damage, but as it is, he has several broken bones and his right leg is crushed."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut in agony for his friend, bowing his head. "Can we see him?" Ginny asked tearfully.

"You can see him, but you need to prepare yourselves..." No one needed to hear any more. They looked around at each other, building an aura of support and strength for their brother.

The healer had insisted that no more than two enter the room at a time, so Hermione opted to wait for the last shift and go it alone. She may be Ron's wife, but considering the last conversation she had with him, she wasn't sure if she wanted anyone observing her reaction. Perhaps she was just scared of what she would find, or worse, what she would feel. She could sense the warmth flowing from Draco's strong arms, and she wanted it to last as long as possible.

After sitting and waiting for at least forty-five minutes, she leaned her head back on Draco's shoulder and sighed, and he threaded his fingers through hers. "I'm right here, Granger," he whispered gently, and she melted into his safety while she could. He began to turn her around carefully, wanting to hold her, and caressing a hand under her chin, he leaned in for a kiss that warmed both of their shadowed hearts.

Hermione's guilt was prowling around her, threatening to steal any joy from her grasp. There was guilt for the feelings growing inside of her for Draco, guilt for her failures with Ron, guilt for what had happened to him today, and guilt for the diversion from Mrs. Malfoy when she needed their full attention. Hermione fought with all her might to keep from punishing herself when there was no way to change what was, but she was losing. All she do to brush aside her pain was to lift into Draco's lips again and stay there until she was forced to pull away. As it happened, that was only about fifteen minutes later.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 18

How will Hermione react to Ron's state, and what will be the next step in the search for Narcissa?

Chapter Fourteen

The wheezing, rattling breaths were audible as Hermione crept into the room, which was enough to shoot down any nerve she had gained from Draco in the hallway. She immediately dropped her face, her eyes firmly glued to her feet, and she studied the minute cracks in the leather as she shuffled forward toward the bedside. She knew she had to look sometime, but after standing there trembling for five minutes, she turned around and bolted toward the door.

"Draco, could you please come here?" she asked before she lost her nerve. She could feel the eyes of every Weasley on her, and she could sense the shift as Draco stood from the bench outside Ron's door to make his way to Hermione. The shock was nearly tangible, although she hoped that most of the family was thinking in the "friends" category.

Draco pulled the door shut behind him, grabbing Hermione's hand. He tried to meet her eyes, but she seemed intensely interested in her shoes at the moment.

"Hermione, you don't have to do this."

"Draco, you know that's not true," she croaked. "I have to let him know I'm still his friend..."

When they finally reached the bed, Draco could hear Hermione's deep breath and prepared himself to catch her. He realized he hadn't looked yet, either, and he told himself it was because he was focused on her. They both seemed to find their resolve at once, and as their heads lifted, even Draco gasped.

"Merlin's fucking wand..." Ron was covered in places with some sort of green goo, but Draco could see the blackened skin beneath the patches, and Ron's leg was still flattened with the crushed bone, although he could see movement underneath the skin, much like an animal moving right near the surface of the ground. It was truly sickening, and it took Draco a few seconds to realize that he hadn't caught Hermione in his arms.

She was completely frozen, a stone statue with tears streaming down her face. Her first sound was a choke, and Draco didn't know what to do. Should he put his arms around her? He felt like she would crumble if he moved a muscle.

Finally, she turned her shaking head to look at Draco, and the agony in her eyes gave him no choice but to surround her with his arms and try to keep the pieces of her body on their wobbling frame. At the touch, Hermione let go and sobbed, and after what seemed like several minutes, she lifted her grief-stricken eyes to Draco's again.

"Why? Why would someone do this? Who would hurt people this way?"

"I know plenty of people who hurt people this way," Draco replied quietly. "And I don't believe they are misunderstood or that they've had such terrible lives that they couldn't help themselves. I've seen the most privileged witches and wizards become monsters just for the fun of it, and I don't think there is ever an acceptable reason to do something like this."

It was the first time Hermione had heard Draco go this far with the criticism of his father. Her tears kept spilling, and she just leaned into his solid chest. "I'm sorry."

He didn't say a word, but the way he held her told her he was crushed by the reality of what the majority of the adults in his life had done over and over. People he had respected and tried to emulate.

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When Draco half-carried Hermione from Ron's room, he nearly stumbled over the Minister of Magic. He had once considered Shackbolt a traitor for joining the Order, but surprisingly, the venom which used to slosh into his brain upon sight of the Minister had turned to great respect. Maintaining a position at the Ministry while working for the Order had been more than dangerous because of the Dark Lord's skills as a Legilimens, so Shackbolt must not only be brave, but he must be quite the accomplished Occlumens as well.

"Mr. Malfoy... I wasn't expecting to see you here. Good evening," Kingsley greeted, making no effort to hide his perplexed stare at a wilting Hermione in the arms of her nemesis.

"Good evening, sir. I wish we were meeting under better circumstances," replied Draco, maneuvering Hermione so that he could offer his hand to Shackbolt. At this, the Minister's eyebrows went up another notch. He clasped Draco's hand, though, and looked him in the eye.

"After an associate of mine visited the Parkinson home, I must admit I had you on my list of suspects. I didn't realize you and Pansy had separated. However, Harry has vouched for your whereabouts this afternoon, and, as it turns out, we have evidence connecting the crime to someone else. I apologize if any of this offends you. May I assume we can count on you for help during the investigation?"

Draco hesitated for a split second, but he supposed he couldn't blame Shackbolt for his initial thoughts. After all, he should be a natural suspect under the circumstances. "I will do anything I possibly can, sir."

Another raising of the eyebrows from the Minister. For one, he actually believed Draco was on his side this time and, for another, he was more than slightly surprised that the present company showed no apparent signs of discomfort. It was as if Draco Malfoy had always been a friend to Harry rather than an enemy. Draco also seemed to be very sensitive to Hermione Granger's pain at the moment, and there was simply no explanation for that. Seeing as there was no protest from Hermione, though, Kingsley decided not to become concerned. He had bigger fish to fry.

Just then, Arthur walked up, holding a bit of parchment. "We have no idea who this could be, Kingsley. It looks, however, like this photograph was taken at the Death Eaters' cemetery. I recognize a few family names from Voldemort's inner circle."

Shackbolt explained that the picture had been found on the front lawn of Brothers and Brooms.

Draco and Hermione both peered over at the photo, and Draco had to bite his tongue to keep from crying out. He had been in that place twice as a young child, and he knew Arthur was quite right about the location. That, however, was not what had startled him.

The cemetery's photograph was filled with gravestones, some blackened and crumbling with age, and some gleaming with newness. The woman was attempting to capture most of the grounds so that anyone with a brain would know where she had been. Unfortunately for her, she was standing in front of a black marble stone, and her reflection had been captured in its surface.

This jolted Draco for two reasons. One was that the woman was definitely the deranged lunatic from his nightmare. The second was that the background contained a mausoleum, and that mausoleum was his chapel. He was sure of it.

He realized he was frozen and imperceptibly shaking, partly because he could not have had a luckier break than this, since it would save everyone hours of searching, and partly because he knew he was about to embark on the most dangerous mission of his life. He pulled his face upward and turned to notice Hermione staring at him, silently questioning. She obviously saw what he saw, and he could not have been more grateful for her restraint. She hadn't gasped, cried out, or chosen for him. She would let him decide if he wanted to share his situation with the Ministry.

Hermione wasn't the only one who noticed something, though. Neither Arthur nor Kingsley, being seasoned members of the Order, could have missed the look of enraged adrenaline on Draco's face.

"Draco, is there something you wish to tell us?" Arthur inquired gently.

Draco jerked his head a bit too quickly to feign ignorance, so he attempted to cover himself. "No, sir, except that you are correct. That is the Death Eaters' cemetery. The

reflection is hard to make out, though."

"Thank you, Draco, for the confirmation. At least we can assume the murderer is likely this female, and it seems she wants us to connect this crime with the Death Eaters. I highly doubt she would send a photo of her current position. Besides, she surely knows we have no idea where this cemetery is located." Kingsley looked pointedly at Draco, obviously hoping he would reveal that information, but Draco immediately guarded his mind. Although he had been to the cemetery and could probably guess how to breach the magical barriers, there was no way he was disclosing the location before his mother was safe. If an army of Ministry personnel invaded the place, Narcissa's chances of survival would be hopeless.

"I wish I could be of more help, sir." It wasn't a lie, and it had the desired effect. Shackbolt obviously believed Draco had no further information because he turned to the group as a whole, all of them gathering from their scattered positions in the corridor.

"Once again, I am truly sorry about what has happened, although I rejoice that Ron is alive. We intend to make short order of finding this woman who caused him harm. The presentation of this photograph tells me that the murderer wishes to convey a message. Perhaps she resents the fact that Parkinson and some others retained their freedom by refusing a public alliance to Voldemort. Maybe she just hated the Parkinsons. Revenge is the probable motive at any rate, and I intend to have my best witches and wizards deciphering the evidence until we can identify this woman and apprehend her."

After a few questions, the group began to disburse again, knowing there was nothing to be done but wait. Only Arthur remained, proposing an idea to check the Missing Witches and Wizards List at the Ministry to see if anyone could have any connection to the Death Eaters. All those found guilty were in Azkaban, but it stood to reason that a few not-so-innocent folks had managed to wriggle out of deserved consequences through a lack of proof.

Wait a minute. Missing Witches and Wizards.

In a sudden stroke of genius, Draco asked, "May I see the photo again, sir?"

Shackbolt handed Draco the photo, and then continued to discuss the plan of action with Mr. Weasley. Draco took his opportunity. "*Simulo*," he whispered while barely flicking his wand, and a copy of the photo appeared on top of its twin.

"Brilliant!" Hermione whispered. She slid the copy off Draco's hand and into his pocket. Draco, faking a look of continued confusion, turned and handed the original back to the Minister, who took it absently. When he lifted his eyes again, he saw Harry staring back at him, expressionless. He and Ginny had obviously had a look at the photo before, and Draco knew the Spinach-Eyed Savior was ready to go Gryffindor. He was surprised the Auror in him had allowed Draco to take the lead on whether or not to reveal their related plight to the Ministry. Draco shifted his eyes slightly to the left, indicating that he wanted Harry to follow.

"I'll be right back, Hermione. Nature calls."

Harry waited a few minutes, then turned to where Ginny, Bill, and Fleur were sitting. "Hey, love, I need to go to the loo." Ginny scowled, not liking to be left out of the action. Harry just grinned and shook his head. Bill gave him a bit of a funny look but didn't say anything.

When Harry reached the bathroom, Draco was standing at the sink waiting for him, hands holding the sides of the porcelain. He had a momentary flash of a time long past in which he had seen Draco in this same position, when Harry had committed a violent act for which he would never forgive himself.

"Okay, what's the plan?"

Draco still couldn't believe how readily the Potters were willing to support him. Their saintliness was a bit less annoying now, although he still couldn't fathom their motivation. He was so used to the Slytherin idea that you owed a favor to anyone who helped you that he felt compelled to repay them somehow.

Far more disturbing was the fact that he had a feeling he would end up being friends with this man he'd hated since first year.

"I'm going to Floo Charles Pendington. When the Head Weasel...I mean, Mr. Weasley...mentioned the Missing Witches and Wizards List, something occurred to me. As we were discussing possible suspects for my mother's abduction, Charles had mentioned a woman going missing some time ago, who had been associated with the Death Eaters. He thought maybe the same person might have taken both that woman and my mother, but at the time, I couldn't see any connection. She had no family looking for her, and there had been no demand for a ransom or a favor. Now that we know today's events and my mother's disappearance are connected, though, it hit me that the missing woman could be the criminal here. I thought we should at least obtain her name."

"Okay, I'll go down to the lobby with you. Let's hope he's home."

Hurrying to the lift and setting it to the task of hauling them downstairs with a tumultuous squeak, both men were breathing hard with the adrenaline of a new lead. Within seconds, they were bursting forth onto the lobby floor and moving toward the line of fireplaces across the way.

"This should only take a moment if he's in," said Draco, and Harry responded with a trusting nod.

While Harry exercised his patience, his eyes meandered the room absently, thinking once again about how much he hoped Ron and Mrs. Malfoy would be safe. Funny how the two hopes were becoming equal in size.

Just then, Draco's feet hit the fireplace floor, green sparks shimmering all around him. As the flames cleared, Harry could see that not only were Draco's lips pressed into a thin line, but he also seemed completely ashen, as if the news were personal.

"Millicent is missing. Millicent Bulstrode."

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 18

Hermione and Draco have a passionate goodbye.

Chapter Fifteen

When Draco heard Millicent's name, his stomach plummeted to Middle Earth. He knew her father had been one of the owners of Brothers and Brooms, and Mr. Bulstrode was rotting in Azkaban like Draco's own father. She obviously had to be the one responsible for the explosions, and because of his dream and the photograph, he knew she

was also holding his mother hostage at the Death Eaters' Cemetery. Honestly, he didn't know how he had been so stupid as to not recognize her. When he studied the photo, the manic distortion of her features had made her unfamiliar, but now that he knew the truth, the girl definitely resembled a filthy and unkempt Millicent.

It was absolute torture trying not to be obvious. In order to carry out their plan, Harry and Draco had to hang around St. Mungo's long enough to look natural, and they had to leave at different times. They couldn't afford to have anyone suspect that they were going after the criminal unless they wanted to risk offers of help. They knew they had to do this alone or it could never work. Even Pendington could not be told the significance of his news.

First it would be Draco, since it would seem less odd for him to take his leave early. He did have to agree to a few Aurors guarding the outside of his property, since he was connected to both Parkinson and the Freed Death Eaters Club. If Harry had insisted that he come to the Weasleys' and then to St. Mungo's for protection, it would solicit suspicion to suddenly be fine with him going home alone. Besides, the Aurors would never know if he Flooed somewhere.

The only positive about having to wait to go after Millicent was that Hermione would show up at Draco's house about twenty minutes after him. It would be forty-five minutes before they were to meet at the Potters' house, so he had plans.

The moment he heard the crack outside his door, he rushed to throw it open and pulled her roughly into his arms. Slamming the door with his foot, he kissed her with a passion that had nothing to do with lust. Well, maybe a little something.

After a surprised yelp, Hermione gave in and kissed him back, sliding her right leg up his side and around his bum, fisting the front of his shirt to pull herself as close as possible. They both knew this could be the last time they ever touched each other like this, and the intensity was overwhelming.

When Draco pulled his lips away, he smiled just a bit at Hermione's disappointed gasp. Her sparkling brown eyes met his with slight indignation and definite hope, wanting him every bit as much as he wanted her. The unfairness of it nearly broke him. Why had it taken this long to realize whom he would love? What if this really was the last time they would be alone?

He would fucking make the best of it, that's what.

He pulled her other leg up around his waist, finding her lips again, moving out of the entryway. Draco had never really taken this slowly with anyone before, but when he moved them onto the bed, he felt a foreign need to explore every inch of Hermione's body. He needed to know her, even if it was only for a few more hours. He just bent his head down and kissed her, feeling her tongue caressing his, grazing his lips down her jaw line to her neck to softly kiss her there, too. She sighed, and he knew she wanted to savor this like he did.

After tasting every last millimeter of her neck, ears, and face, he slid his hands down her sides and found the bottom of her shirt. Pulling up, he noticed her hardened nipples through the fabric of her bra, and if he hadn't already been rock solid, he certainly was now. He smiled as she lifted her arms above her head, helping him remove her pullover and get started on the bra itself. Before maneuvering his hands around to the hook, however, he bent down to lick and suck her nipples through the lace, eliciting a tiny moan of pleasure. "Draco..." she whispered, sending a surge through him that he knew had something to do with love.

They spent the next few moments slowly removing anything in the way of feeling the warmth of each others' skin. As he embraced her breasts against his chest, peace flooded Draco's heart, and he had to pause to look into Hermione's eyes. Their intensity and depth overwhelmed him, but the feeling wasn't negative. He could look at her like this for centuries, and from what he could tell, she would be looking back. He should never have doubted that her relationship with Ron could only ever be a friendship at this point. Something had permanently shifted this afternoon, and the past could never pull them from each others' grasp.

Hermione caressed Draco's back with her fingers, feeling his muscles flex as they held him above her, and she had to fight a depth of despair that threatened to take this beautiful moment away. She didn't want her fear of losing Draco to interfere with making this perfect memory, the only time in her life when she wanted to feel every cell of someone's being fusing with hers, forming a bond which could never be broken. She loved him so much it hurt, and she couldn't bear the thought of any sort of separation. She needed to feel the rest of his soft skin touching hers.

She slid her fingers around to his waist, and his breath caught when she went to loosen his belt. She wasn't rough, but she wasn't slow in unbuttoning his pants, unzipping the zipper, and sliding them over his perfectly toned arse. He lifted it slightly to help her move his pants and boxers down his legs, she pushing them to the floor with her feet and then pulling her toes along his calves, sending shivers up his spine.

Hermione could feel Draco's glorious erection against her belly, and she let herself smile when he starting working the waist of her pants apart so he could pull them down her legs along with her knickers. He moved his head down with the trousers, skipping over her throbbing center, grazing his lips down the inside of her left leg as he went. She was writhing with crazed desire, but he would make this worth her wait. As the pants fell to the floor, he fell to his knees, ready to kiss her sex.

The light flicking of his tongue made Hermione gasp aloud, and he paused to look at her flushed and lovely face, watching him slide his tongue back to her center for another taste. He swirled his tongue in a spiral around her clit, over and over, causing her legs to tremble with her building need for release. He was unmerciful, continuing the motion until he could hear her begin to pant in between gasps and moans of pleasure.

"Draco, oh... Don't stop... Oh, gods, you are so good at this..."

He loved hearing it. Starting to lap at her nub, he whispered her name, whispered how beautiful she was, whispered how he loved tasting her and kissing her like this. Soon, her leg muscles began to tighten and she was hunching into his mouth, almost whimpering in disoriented bliss.

Within seconds, the explosion of her orgasm crashed her hips up into his face, and he sucked at her, drinking her in and making the waves of pleasure last as long as he could. When he finally lifted his head, she was staring into his eyes and moving her hand under his chin, gently pulling so he would know that she wanted him above her.

Once his face was over hers, she marveled for a few seconds at how beautiful his gray and stormy eyes really were, and she hoped with every fiber of her being that she would be looking into those eyes for a long, long time to come. Moving her fingers lightly up and down his chest and abdominal muscles, she lifted her face to his.

First, she took her time with his mouth, rubbing her lips against his, licking them, sucking them. She could tell she was driving him mad by the increased passion of his kisses, mouths wide, allowing her to suck his tongue into her mouth. He groaned at the erotic friction, hardly able to keep breathing.

His control nearly unraveled when she moved her lips down to his neck and began to kiss and lick him behind his ear. He had no idea how sensitive that area would be since he'd never taken the time to do much more than slam himself hard into whomever he was using at the moment. He started writhing over Hermione's body, absently hunching his hardness into her stomach, desperate to be inside her.

She wasn't done tormenting him, though. She began to slowly kiss a path to his chest, and he sucked in a breath of excited shock when she started sucking and biting at his nipples. He hadn't realized how much he might like that, either. His experiences had all been merely fucking, but there was something to this lovemaking thing after all.

At long last, she looked back to his face and reached down between their bodies to gently grasp his shaft, holding his eyes, and he dropped his head into her chest with a gasp, moving his hips in time with her hand. She realized he had exercised amazing restraint thus far, and his need was spiraling out of control. She didn't want him to come this way, so she moved her hand down to his balls, barely touching, almost tickling them. His response was to rake his teeth across her chest in an ever-increasing lack of control, and she knew she couldn't drag this out any longer.

Guiding his cock to her opening, she braced her feet against his calves and thrust upward. He screamed, "Hermione! Oh, fuck. Oh, *fuck*," and she found it made her pussy clench around him with new desire. His hard and fast thrusts were welcome, and they both cried out with every breath, trying to make it last, knowing it wouldn't. In a matter of seconds, they each reached their climax, crashing into each other wildly. Draco bit into Hermione's neck with a moan as she grasped at his hair, feeling a depth of emotion she had never felt in her life.

"I love you, Draco," she whispered into his ear, kissing it and nuzzling into his neck.

He whipped his head up fast, locking his wide eyes with hers, but the fear and vulnerability he saw staring back immediately chased his panic away. He had to reassure her. What was he so afraid of, anyway? Well, he could think of quite a few things, actually, but the idea of losing her scared him more than anything on that list.

"I love you, Hermione," he gasped, letting out a quiet laugh. "I can't believe I just said that. I've never said it before."

"What? Not even to your mum?" Hermione realized too late that she shouldn't have asked such a question. It was sure to stab his heart with guilt. "Oh, fuck, I'm sorry. Of course you didn't. I'm sure none of you felt it was proper."

He just breathed, holding her close, wondering how anyone could love someone like him, so cold and heartless, so lacking in the knowledge of how to show love. He hoped that if they made it through this night, she would be patient with him. He hoped what they felt was real and her love wasn't something manufactured from the emotions one feels in crisis. Her feelings would have to be rock solid if she had any chance of putting up with him long enough for him to be the man she needed him to be.

"Draco?"

"Yeah?"

"Your mother knows you love her, just like you know she loves you."

He just sighed. How could she know what he was thinking? He moved his face above hers again for one last passionate kiss.

It wasn't long before Hermione's charm sent the shimmer above their heads which signaled that it was time to go. Suddenly, Hermione threw her arms around Draco, unable to stifle a sob. "Draco, please be careful tonight. Please. I need us to be okay."

"Me, too. Me, too, love," Draco responded softly. "Don't do anything rash, for Christ's sake. You fucking Gryffindors can really be fucking barking, you know?" He attempted a smirk, but it wasn't very convincing.

Hermione sniffed, still flooded with a worry she knew she would have to shut off quickly. If they were going to make it through this night alive, everyone needed a clear head and absolute resolve. "We should go."

When they arrived at the Potters' flat minutes later, no one said a word. They were in battle mode, and each of them was hardening a shell for war. After checking that they had what they needed, Draco revealed the location of the cemetery, and they each turned on the spot, ready to face Millicent Bulstrode and her Death Faeries.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 18

Draco...

Chapter Sixteen

The sound of Hermione's breathing was echoing off the walls of the cold stone room, and she just knew she was about to blow the entire operation. *Tell yourself the truth, Hermione. Come on.* She knew she had to bloody calm down before she ignited a frenzy of faeries by passing out and pulling Harry's cloak off all of them. Logically, there was no way her breathing was escaping the fabric, but the huffing was so loud in her ears that she could hardly concentrate.

Feeling Hermione's fear, Draco reached for her hand. He needed hers as much as she needed his anyway. Apparently, the heroic bravery he felt while steeling himself for this mission was sucked right out of him the second he actually had to go through with it.

The four of them stood in the mausoleum's entry, fitting under the cloak together because of an engorgement charm Harry couldn't believe he'd never used, trying to silently determine which door to breach. They had fully expected to be thrust into battle upon opening the main entrance, so being able to remain hidden until they had their bearings was an advantage they had never dreamed of having. They now had time to creep out about the fact that they were breathing the dank air of rotting bones, before having to experience the terror of Death Faeries and a raving Millicent Bulstrode. The only glaring negative about the unfolding scenario was that choosing the wrong tomb would alert Millicent to their presence and give her the chance to have the faeries devour Narcissa before anyone could so much as scream.

The room was shaped like an octagon, with seven thick oak doors aside from the limestone one in front, and each presumably led to the crypt of a dark wizard's clan. Stone walls were blackened in places with the filth of age, and the air seemed to be alive with the evil deeds of those in repose. A graphic mural of torture and death hung from the ceiling, an afterlife of mouths wide open in tormented screams and bodies writhing in agony.

Despite the flickering red sconces between each doorway, no room showed any signs of occupancy—that is, of the living variety. Only the subtle movement of more candle flames could be seen under each door, and Hermione had a fleeting thought about how lucky they were not to have to light their wands.

After about five minutes of stillness, Draco felt Harry jerk to attention next to him. He turned his head slightly to meet the emerald green eyes which then glanced to the third door from the right. Draco squeezed Hermione's hand so she would see where they were looking, and at first, Draco could not figure what Harry had seen. When Ginny's eyes seemed to catch on, he felt a bit foolish, until finally he saw it—a slight shimmer which didn't perfectly match the motion of a candle's flame. This was it. He turned to Hermione again, and she nodded.

It was time to bury their fears and carry out their plans. They began to edge toward the sinister threshold. Harry reached under the cloak to touch the iron door handle, praying to anything out there that Millicent did not notice the door slowly opening. As soon as the gap was wide enough, he peeked into the room, immediately thankful that his eyes were the first to greet the sight. No way Draco could see this and remain silent.

To start, the tiny room was made entirely of limestone, ornately carved with coiled or slithering serpents whose eyes roamed with perverted life. Cubicles had been carved into the walls, each containing skeletons which had presumably been stripped clean of flesh by the Death Faeries presiding over the Death Eaters' cemetery. The candles along the walls were trapped in the mouths of sconces in shapes of various beasts, and in each ceiling corner, a bejeweled silver dragon guarded all.

Most disturbing, however, was a figure sitting cross-legged on the curved bench in the center of the room, giggling maniacally under her breath and rocking back and forth. Even from behind, Millicent's bedraggled appearance was sickening, her gray dress in tatters and smudged with filth, her black hair matted and standing on end in some places. She was focused on the ceiling, where Narcissa Malfoy indeed floated on a bed of Death Faeries, who now, resembled more of a swarm of evil than a mere sheen of white. Their individual faces were visible, black pointed teeth poised to devour the fresh kill, eyes wide with fiendish anticipation.

When Harry turned his stricken face toward his comrades, Draco widened his eyes questioningly. Harry knew there was no shielding Malfoy from this, so he readied himself to disarm Millicent from behind. At least this part would be much simpler than anticipated.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry shouted, forcing Millicent's wand into the wall with a crack. She jumped from her seat and turned into a crouch, eyes deranged with fear. She whipped her head from side to side, trying to locate the enemy which had entered her lair.

"Where are you, you fuck?" Her voice echoed in the empty space, and she began to cackle wildly. "Come on then. Too much of a pussy to finish me off?"

Draco squeezed Hermione's hand and nodded at Harry and Ginny. It was time. All at once, they threw off the cloak and shoved the door the rest of the way open with a roar. Just as Hermione was yelling "*Incarcerous!*" however, the room began to quake, sending all of them off balance. Millicent leaped onto the bench with glee, obviously expecting a grand show indeed. Her screeches of laughter were only overpowered by another metallic screeching, and Hermione noticed the source first. "The snakes!" she shouted in horror, steadying herself for attack. The serpents were slithering off the walls with alarming speed, surrounding them, straightening for their kill. Hermione, Draco, Ginny, and Harry naturally rotated so they were back to back, facing outward in a circle.

For the next several minutes, the only sounds which could be heard were shouts of "*Ustulo!*" or "*Stupefy!*" peppered with Millicent's sadistic laughter and the hissing of angry snakes. In the end, though, every last stone serpent was shattered on the floor, and Millicent was left whipping her head around and trying to hide her outrage. She was disarmed and surrounded, and she could not activate the Death Faeries without her wand.

"You fucking bitch!" Draco's infuriated scream echoed around the room. "Get my mum the fuck down before I peel the skin off your body and pour salt into your flesh."

"I could always count on you to take the bait," Millicent laughed. "No wonder you were the Dark Lord's favorite plaything. All pissed off, are we?"

"*Adrado!*" Draco began to peel back the skin from Millicent's upper arm, causing her to scream, eyes going wide with terror. "You thought I was bluffing? You have my fucking mother, you deranged cunt!"

Millicent merely looked back at him and smiled, trying to hide her fear. "You can peel me like an orange, Draco, but you can't save her. My summons cannot be reversed unless I do it myself with my own wand. Once Death Faeries have tasted someone's blood, their instincts cannot be countered until they have been satiated. The first thing I did after the summons was whet their appetites with a few drops of blood from the noble house of Black. Why else would they stay here so long?"

"Why are you doing this?" shouted Hermione angrily.

"Wouldn't you like to know, you filthy-blooded whore?" She turned back to Draco. "Why am I not surprised you are allied with the Mudblood?"

"Mil, what the fuck happened to you? Do you even know you've killed your best friend's father? Merlin!"

Millicent's eyes flashed dangerously. "Best friend?! That spoiled little bitch deserved what she got! Her slithering father, off scot free, while mine is rotting in Azkaban! And you, you rotten traitor! Living the high life because your daddy claimed your innocence! Do you have any idea where I've had to live the last two years? Out of the lot of us, I seem to be the only one to escape prison *and* have nothing left."

"What are you talking about, Mil? Why aren't you living at home?"

"You see?! You were married to Pansy, and you don't even know what happened to me! Do you not recall that my father owned a third of Brothers and Brooms?"

Harry and Ginny exchanged an intense look. They did know, but they didn't realize Millicent had been left alone.

"Remember the little consequence of his giving all he owned to filthy blood traitors?! Your precious Shackbolt left me on the street outside my gates with nothing! Nothing!"

"But why punish your friends? Why not make Shackbolt pay for this?" asked Harry.

Millicent took time to glare at him before answering, willing him to realize what a blithering fool he was. "Because *Potter*, I expected as much from fucking Shackbolt. My best friend and her *husband*, however, completely forgot I existed. Never even looked for me!"

"Why this? Why not just ask us for help? I would have done anything for you, even if Pansy didn't."

"That's just the point, though, isn't it, Draco? I shouldn't have had to ask." She hesitated for effect. "No matter now. All of my true friends are waiting in Gringott's under your name, and you are about to sign your fortune over to me."

"Go fuck yourself! You already said I can't save my mum without arming a lunatic. Why the fuck would I give a damn thing to you?! *Incarcerous!*"

As the thin golden cords wove around her, Millicent just laughed. "You can take me away, Draco, but you still can't save her, you know. Until they have her blood, they will never leave."

"I have a better idea."

Draco glanced at Hermione, already having decided what he would have to do. He obviously couldn't allow Millicent to be trusted with her wand. Far too many ways for her to regain the upper hand, and he would never forgive himself if Hermione were hurt. Perhaps he could use the Imperius Curse, but then he would end up in Azkaban, breaking Hermione's heart and leaving his mother alone. There was simply no other way. If the Death Faeries wanted Narcissa Malfoy's blood, they would get it. As he looked into Hermione's eyes for the last time, he pleaded silently for her to understand.

Pointing his wand toward his heart, he shouted, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 18

What happened to Narcissa?

Thank you to AmyLouise, my amazing beta! All belongs to JKR, Scholastic, and WB...

Chapter Seventeen

Harry was waking, aware that his body was trying to rouse from a thick fog. He sputtered and coughed in a cloud of dust, instinctively clutching the back of his head, which was throbbing with pain. *Where am I? What the bloody hell...*

Then it all came crashing back, and he scrambled to his feet. "Ginny!" He tried to make out images through the thick dust, hoping someone could hear him over the screeching noises to his left. Slumped near him lay Hermione, unconscious on top of Draco. Thankfully, Ginny was stirring in her position against the wall.

Trying to ignore the shrill riot next to him, Harry leaped over the now demolished bench to his friends. Terrified of what was waiting, he pulled Hermione onto her back. To his immense relief, she shifted and moaned, reaching upward toward him.

Suddenly she sat up, wailing, "Draco! Draco, no..." Her body shook with sobs, and she fell into Harry. She tried not to look at Draco, but her eyes were stubbornly drawn to his sprawled, lifeless form. Even through the dust, she could see that his eyes were closed, and her chance to look into them was at a viciously abrupt end, bloodthirsty reality raging back after such a short reprieve. Within the span of a week, she had lost, loved, and lost once again. Why was she being forced to live?

Ginny made her way over, tears now spilling from her eyes, and put her arms around her friend, who had dragged herself over to lie on her side facing Draco. As Hermione stroked Draco's arm, Harry stroked Hermione's hair, having no words. If it had been Ginny...

After several minutes, Hermione seemed to remember how this had happened and bolted to her feet, brandishing her wand in the dissipating dust. "Where are you, you fucking bitch! I'll kill you! I'll fucking shred you!" She whipped around, looking for the murderer who took her love away. Harry and Ginny made absolutely no move to stop her. Instead, they jumped to her side and prepared to help her take Millicent down.

When the dust finally settled, their eyes landed on Bulstrode, and they finally registered the foreign screeching. It was something out of the worst imaginable nightmare, something just as sickening as watching Voldemort's body reform in a cauldron, just as horrifying as facing a basilisk or dementor. The screaming hysterics of three young heroes were not enough to drown out the awful noise.

Millicent was being mercilessly shredded, but not by any person. The Death Faeries were ripping her apart limb from limb, screaming with wicked glee as they devoured her to the bone, flinging bits of flesh in their wild frenzy. No one had any idea what had killed her, and although she probably deserved whatever it had been, they couldn't help but be shaken to the core by such an obscene aftermath. Hermione slumped over the bench, vomiting hard, frantic with hysteria, and Harry's curses took turns with Ginny's screams. This was something that was supposed to happen after burial, something never to be witnessed or imagined. Fate had to be sadistic to place them all in a crypt at the moment of someone's death, conveniently formulating the immediate burial.

Harry, Ginny, and Hermione screamed themselves into exhaustion and dark stillness. At some point, the faeries began to slow their screams and flit away, gliding back into the night through the stone walls as if they had not just committed an unnatural atrocity which would traumatize these witnesses for the rest of their lives.

It was then that Harry realized something was completely off. "Wait..." How was Draco lying dead on the floor, completely untouched by the faeries? Where was Mrs. Malfoy? She had obviously been ignored as well, considering the lack of a skeleton.

"What is it, Harry?" Hermione croaked from the bench.

Suddenly Harry started to remember. Did he make it to Draco in time after all? He had seen Draco point the wand at his heart, and he had dived with all his strength to stop him, or at least he thought that's what had happened. The bump to his head made him second-guess, but there was only one way to tell. He rushed over to Draco, shaking him, afraid to hope that he could actually be alive.

Harry nearly jumped back when Draco stirred, moving his head from side to side, trying to open his eyelids.

"Hermione! Hermione! Get over here!"

She could only manage a crawl, wondering why in bloody hell Harry wanted her to return to the source of the torn-out hole in her chest. She was dead already. Why move? Why even breathe?

"Her...m..."

Oh, that's why! "Draco! Draco! Oh, my gods!" She scrambled to him, thinking she had to be losing her mind, but begging for the voice to have been his. When she reached him, Harry backed away, smiling with welling eyes and clasping Ginny around the waist. Hermione could think of nothing to do other than to cover Draco's face with kisses, desperately trying to hold him to the mortal world.

Finally, he let out a weak chuckle, wrapping his arms around her. "What the bloody hell happened? Is this Heaven, then?"

"You're alive! I don't know how, but you're alive!" It was impossible, wasn't it? He had used the killing curse on his own heart.

He lifted his head, looking around to be sure. "Yes, I suppose I am. This eyesore is most definitely not Heaven... aside from your presence, that is," he cheekily added. She honestly looked shattered. Actually, she really looked like Hell incarnate.

Suddenly Draco realized his joy was premature. "Wait! Where is my mum? Where's Mil?"

Harry gently placed his hand on Hermione's arm, indicating that he would take this one. "Millicent is... gone. I'm not sure what happened, but when I came to, the Death Faeries were well on their way to finishing her off." Draco gagged, grabbing his temples. Harry knew the feeling. "As for your mum, she seems to have vanished. Considering that Millicent's, er, skeleton is still here and your mum's isn't, I have to assume she might possibly be okay."

At that, Draco jumped up, accidentally pushing Hermione back onto her bum. He ran for the door, scanning every inch of the room, quickly turning his head away when he saw the bones of his lost friend. There was nothing...not a trace of his mother anywhere. He ran out into the entryway...same thing. He bolted outside, searching around gravestones, running into the trees. A part of him was aware that Hermione, Ginny, and Harry were running after him, shouting for him to wait and let them help. Didn't they understand that he hadn't a second to lose?

Suddenly there was a crack behind him, and when he whipped around, his mother was standing two feet away. "Draco! Oh, Darling, you are okay!" She threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around him like a vise, somehow still managing to convey the deepest love.

Kingsley Shacklebolt was with her, along with two healers from St. Mungo's. Draco knew because of the uniforms. Seeing the question in her son's eyes, Narcissa began to explain. "When I awoke, I was on the floor in a storm of dust. It took some time to rise to my feet, but I almost wished I hadn't. I was overwhelmed... it was a nightmare. It was..."

Taking a calming breath, she steeled herself to finish the tale. She was a Malfoy and would maintain her composure if it killed her. "Something had been bashing around the room like a tornado."

Harry knew that made perfect sense. If he had, in fact, redirected the curse at Millicent, the faeries would have exploded into uncontrollable action at the release of their master's orders. That was probably how he and the others had all been thrown around the room, rendering them unconscious.

Narcissa continued. "Millicent Bulstrode was surrounded by a shining cloud, and you were crumpled on the floor with Hermione Granger and Harry and Ginny Potter. When

I couldn't shake anyone awake, I began to panic. I grabbed the first wand I saw, but I could do nothing for Millicent. I knew I had to get help, so I Apparated straight to the Ministry. Where is Mil?" She could see the others standing awkwardly, so she began to dread what she was about to hear.

"Mum, Mil is gone."

"Oh, gods. Oh, no. That poor, poor girl," Narcissa whispered, tears beginning to flow down her cheeks.

Draco just hugged her, knowing a long story lay ahead tonight.

XXXXX

Kingsley Shacklebolt, Narcissa Malfoy, a few Aurors, Pendington's team, and the Weasleys were among those present in the St. Mungo's waiting room, everyone having decided to debrief there so the four heroes and Narcissa could be checked by healers and so that everyone could remain by Ron's side. His condition hadn't changed at all, so despite all of the joy at seeing Mrs. Malfoy safely returned, the somber mood of worry yet prevailed.

After a long session of retelling and analysis, it was agreed that everyone would take a few days to rest, some to visit frequently with Ron, and then they would all join the Weasley family for Sunday breakfast during the coming weekend. Both Narcissa and Draco felt a little queasy at the idea of actually eating food at the Burrow, but they knew it would be cruel and ridiculous to air their reservations. It was high time they befriended the people who had shown them more loyalty than any Death Eater ever could. Perhaps it wouldn't be such an ordeal anyway. Molly was apparently famous among her friends for her cooking, and they had never tasted food which hadn't been prepared by house-elves.

Over the next few days, frequent owls, Patronuses, and Flooing occupied everyone's time, and it was determined that Ron would make a full recovery, aside from scarring that simply could not be completely removed. His burns had been so severe that he had suffered through several treatments which merely knitted his healthy patches of skin together over his gaping wounds. The healers had passed their wands innumerable times over the scarred areas, and they had managed to at least make his face look close to what it used to be. His hair had been fully regrown, and his leg bone was finally finished forming. The green goo, which was actually used to prevent infection, was no longer necessary. In essence, it was actually possible that Ron could be home for breakfast on Sunday. He would not be back to his old self by any means, but he would at least be safe and conscious.

Hermione had been to see Ron twice, although Draco had not accompanied her out of concern for Ron. He knew someone in the Weasel's condition should not be agitated, and it was going to take a little explaining before the carthead could possibly understand the new relationship between his ex-wife and his former enemy. Draco still had a silly bit of fear left about a reunion, but considering the nearly constant sexual activity between him and Hermione over the last few days, he knew he was being immature. He didn't even let the slightest worried expression cross his face in front of her, wanting to show that he trusted her.

Their tea with his mum a couple of days ago had been no less than completely hilarious, Mrs. Malfoy almost visibly torn between the propriety which forced her to be completely calm and collected in her reaction to her son's new relationship and her total shock and possible dismay at the revelation. Nonetheless, she did see the advantages to the probable union, so the propriety won out in the end. Draco hoped that one day his mother's acceptance of Hermione would be sincere.

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 18

Happy ending?

Thank you one last time to my perfect beta, AmyLouise! All belongs to JKR, WB, and Scholastic.

Chapter Eighteen

Sunday morning dawned after an eventful night which had left both Draco and Hermione completely drained, but as usual, their energy seemed to have bounced back, ready for another go. Hermione got a real kick out of finally understanding the gushy can't-keep-their-hands-off-each-other thing Harry and Ginny had gone through for a while. Sometimes, they still seemed to be going through it, truth be told. Now Hermione's annoyance with their public displays of affection turned to knowing kinship. She had joined the club. She planned to hang off of Draco's lips as much as possible, whether they were alone or in front of the entire wizarding world.

As the shimmering alarm floated above them, the couple couldn't stand the idea of not being satiated at least once before leaving for breakfast.

They had no time to waste with gentleness, so Draco just shoved Hermione back onto his mattress, eliciting a gasp from her that finished hardening his dick, making it strain beneath his boxers with a fury that was only increased a hundred fold by his feelings for her. She looked up at him with a hunger that mirrored his own, and she grabbed his boxer band and pulled him onto her, giving him barely enough time to stop himself from crushing her by throwing his hands on either side.

Hermione couldn't believe how uninhibited she felt with Draco. Part of it was that they obviously had similar "preferences," but she knew most of it was that she truly trusted him. She looked into his captivating steel eyes for a second. Oh, hell, why not admit it? She was thoroughly in love with him, too.

She could feel his hardness, and she literally felt her mouth begin to water. Enough staring. She brought her face to his again, grabbing at his blonde hair, shoving her tongue through his teeth so it could find his. He groaned into her mouth with pleasant surprise, although he should have known she would take whatever she wanted however she wanted it. She was an animal, this one. A lioness, in fact.

The wetness between Hermione's legs began to throb more painfully beneath her knickers with every one of Draco's moans. She wanted him as close to her as humanly possible. She pushed her sex against his, making sure he knew she wanted him inside of her, just in case he couldn't tell.

He was busy trying not to come from just the idea of being inside her again, so when she started rubbing herself against him, he dragged his hand between them, holding her down by her upper thigh. She tried to push upward, clearly getting pissed off at being controlled, and he couldn't help letting a little chuckle slip between their mouths.

She pulled her face from his with sucking pop. "Malfoy, what the fuck?"

It was so funny Draco laughed out loud, and to his utter shock, she smacked him! She actually smacked his face. "Granger, Jesus!" Maybe he should have been angry, but he nearly came all over himself inside his boxers. Her frustration was hotter than Hell, and that smack made him want to tear the fabric from her little pussy without restraint.

Instead, he bit into her neck, eliciting a scream of pain, but she urged him on by moving her face further out of the way. He chewed at the skin, finally tearing at her tiny t-shirt, pulling it up over her head to reveal possibly the most perfect breasts in England. She started moving her hips again, roughly grazing her pussy against his hardness,

making him cry out and bite into her neck again.

When her panties were nearly soaked, she decided he'd had control long enough. The pressure between her legs was almost too much to bear, and somewhere underneath it all, her feelings for Draco made her throbbing even more intense. She needed him. Now. She shoved her hands between them, pushing his off her thigh and grabbing at his boxers. He was too blindsided to catch her wrist before she had them partway down, and he just lifted his ass a little to give her more room. Meanwhile he directed his attention to her breasts, lapping at her left nipple, even biting it gently. She was panting with pleasure, and he realized he was, too. By the time she had his underwear down to his knees, he was suckling her right breast.

"Oh... Draco...shit. Oh, fuck." She had bent her head down to look between them, and the sight of his cock had obviously pleased her. Without warning, she wrapped her fingers around it roughly, moving her body downward, making him release her nipple with a painful smack.

"Hermione... Jesus. What are you...oh, bloody *hell*." Her warm mouth was already around him, her tongue rubbing around the head of his dick while she moved her mouth down his shaft. His hips began to thrust involuntarily, and once again, he feared he would release before he could feel the clinging walls of her pussy massaging him with their slick wetness.

Oh, shit. Quidditch, Draco. Quidditch.

He tried...he really did...but Quidditch just wasn't going to distract him. He pulled himself from her mouth, moving down her body to the waistline of her knickers before she could protest. He wanted to taste her, and he wasn't letting anything stop him from the diversion. He ripped the blue fabric of the poor panties apart, and her soft, brown curls came up to meet his mouth, already parted slightly, showing him just the place where his tongue needed to go. He thrust it in, lapping at the sensitive nub, making her cry out and begin thrusting at him. He licked in rhythm, moving his tongue in circles, swallowing her tangy taste with relish. He could do this forever.

He reached his hands around to her buttocks, grasping them to pull her hips closer. His tongue moved her pussy lips apart further, and he began thrusting his tongue inside of her, nearly making her scream. "Draco! Oh, *fuck*." He could feel her arse tightening in his hands and he knew she was ready to come for him. He brought his tongue back up to her clit and began to suck, making her scream out his name...his first name...as she convulsed with orgasm.

She didn't stay where she was long. The second her shaking subsided, she pushed him off, flipping him on his back, straddling him with astonishing agility. She wasted no time in shoving herself down on him, making his cock thrust hard into her dripping wetness, almost making him come immediately. "Hermione! Oh, gods! You have to slow down or I'm..."

She started sliding herself up and down, having him trapped once again, which she clearly enjoyed. His little sadist. She leaned forward and looked into his eyes, and then she suddenly burrowed into his neck and bit it hard. Draco screamed in pain, but the kind of pain he'd like to be feeling every day for the rest of his life. She pounded down on him hard, still biting, and in a matter of seconds he thrust up into her all the way, exploding inside her, feeling the walls of her pussy contracting around him as she cried out in a second orgasm.

He felt like he released forever before he finally relaxed his muscles and let his hips fall back down on the bed, still inside of her. She collapsed on him, burying her face in his neck, just breathing this time. He unconsciously moved his arms around her. He wanted to do this...be this...with her for the rest of his life. He knew it was crazy, but all they had been through in the past weeks made him look at the truth...no games, no lies. Why did people play and go through silly rituals, working up to an "acceptable time" to admit the inevitable fact that they would marry?

"I love you, Granger... I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too, Malfoy. I don't know what the fuck happened to us, but I love you." Her voice broke a little on her last word, and he just pulled her back into his arms, holding her for the last minutes before they had to drag themselves into the shower.

XXXXX

"What in bloody fucking hell..." questioned Ron the second Draco and Hermione flooed into the Weasley hearth. They were closely followed by Narcissa, whom they had collected on their way. Ron thought for a moment that he might be hallucinating again, but then he vaguely remembered something about some breakfast his mum had informed him about through his medicated fog. He sure as hell didn't remember any Malfoys having permission to hold Hermione's hand, though.

"What in *bloody fucking* hell?" questioned Ron yet again when he saw his best friend jump up to greet the Faggoty Ferret. What was this? Had Voldemort risen from the dead? Was Hermione under the Imperius Curse?

Ron felt George's hand patting his shoulder. "Calm down there, mate. We have loads to tell you when you're ready, but for now, just enjoy your juice." George was chuckling irritatingly, and Ron's scowl drew snickers from more than one of his other siblings. They could always count on Ron to overreact every bit as much as Molly or Ginny, and everyone could see this would be one entertaining family gathering.

"What in *bloody fucking hell*!?"

At that, everyone just burst out laughing. Even Narcissa lost her composure a bit. This new awakening of Malfoy, Potter, and Weasley friendship was something no one could ever have predicted, but she had a feeling she would never have a dull moment in this life again.