

Neither For Nor Against

by Savva

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love. Epilogue ignored.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 18

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Chapter 1

Noon, Friday, June 10, 2005.

Hermione was sitting in her office at the Ministry, futilely attempting to work. She did not feel well; something was significantly off, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. From the moment she had kissed Ron good-bye in the morning before he left to work, a dull ache had planted itself deeply in Hermione's heart. By noon, it was obvious that the ache was not going to leave anytime soon. At first, Hermione thought that perhaps she hadn't gotten enough sleep or that she was overworked and stressed, but as the day progressed, waves of unexplained anxiety combined with the ache in her heart and became almost unbearable.

I need to find out what's wrong; something must have triggered this reaction in me, thought Hermione.

All of a sudden, the door to her office flew open, and Harry appeared at the door. He stood there in silence for a few seconds, just watching her with peculiar, glistening eyes.

"Harry, wh—what is it? You startled me!" rasped Hermione, surprised by the hard lump in her throat that seemed to have come from nowhere but now was obstructing her breathing.

"Hermione, there was an attack." Harry's voice was as raspy as Hermione's.

"They—they... It was unexpected. He... she... we didn't know. He sent a patronus for backup, but we were late..." mumbled Harry. Then he abruptly stopped, drew a deep breath, and looked Hermione directly in the eyes. "It's Ron, Hermione."

"What are you saying, Harry? I don't understand. I don't hear you..." Hermione couldn't make sense of what Harry was saying. Her heart was pumping outrageously loudly and her temples were threatening to explode any minute.

At that moment, an owl loudly knocked the window open and dropped something on Hermione's desk. She focused on the dropped object. It was a special issue of the *Daily Prophet*. The letters were jumping up and down in front of her eyes, but eventually she was able to read the heading:

Breaking News: Vicious Deadly Attack of Alleged Death Eaters. Two Dead.

Hermione's vision blurred and she couldn't read anymore. She locked her eyes with Harry's again and opened her mouth, trying to utter something, but she was interrupted by two loud Apparition pops. Lucius and Draco Malfoy forcefully burst into Hermione's office. In a blink of an eye, Lucius pinned Harry against the wall, holding him by the throat. He looked wild. His platinum locks were in a horrible state of dishevelment. Hermione never had seen Malfoy's face such an angry, flushed-red colour.

"You! Bastard! I will smother you! I won't even waste magic on you. I'll just kill you with my bare hands!" yelled Lucius.

"Father, father—let him go. Calm down, please!" Draco was unsuccessfully trying to reason with his father.

Lucius just shook him off with one intense movement of his shoulders. Draco groaned in frustration, but stood back.

"Malfoy," Harry's voice was muffled as he tried to fight his way out of Malfoy's hands.

"You and your damn Aurors were supposed to protect her, and now she is dead! Dead! Do you understand that? You worthless bastard! My wife is dead!" With this desperate cry, he loosened his deadly grip on Harry's throat, and Harry was able to breathe again. Lucius's hands left angry red marks on his neck.

"So is my best friend!" Harry yelled back at him.

Hermione let out an audible sigh.

For a short while, their laboured breathing was the only sound in the room.

"I am very sorry for your loss, Mr. Malfoy. I lost my best friend today and Hermione lost her husband. I promise you—we will find them. I will do everything humanly possible to find these bastards and lock them in Azkaban for the rest of their lives."

Hermione was quietly watching the shocking scene play out in front of her, but when she heard Harry's last words, she felt her senses slowly vacate her body. The last thing that had registered in Hermione's mind before unconsciousness engulfed her was a piercing, heart-wrenching roar.

Lucius Malfoy had cried out like a deadly, wounded animal: "She's dead, Potter!"

Then, total darkness and silence surrounded Hermione. Harry launched to catch her, and together they slowly slumped on the floor.

The first thing Hermione saw when she opened her eyes again was Ginny's red hair. She slowly looked around. She was still in her office, lying on a small sofa. Harry and Draco were sitting at her desk, quietly discussing something. Lucius was gone.

"Welcome back," said Ginny softly.

"Ginny," whispered Hermione and sat up to hug her friend. They looked at each other; no words were spoken (nor were they needed), but tears were silently streaming down their faces. In a few minutes, Harry also joined them in an embrace.

Later that evening, all of London's Wizarding community read about the event in the *Evening Prophet*:

Deadly Death Eaters Attack

A vicious, brutal, and cowardly attack took place today just before ten o'clock in the morning. Five Death Eaters attacked Narcissa Malfoy while the victim was running errands beyond the territory of the Malfoy Manor and, therefore, was vulnerable.

Earlier this year, after the Malfoy Family received a number of threatening letters, Narcissa Malfoy had been placed under the Auror protection program.

Auror Ronald Weasley was on duty today and heroically fought to protect Narcissa Malfoy. During the fight, in which Weasley was unfairly disadvantaged, he managed to kill three Death Eaters and seriously injure a fourth. However, as the attack was sudden and unexpected, he was unable to send a patronus for backup immediately. Therefore, grievously, we report that Ronald Weasley and Narcissa Malfoy were killed by the time the Aurors arrived on the scene. Aurors took into custody the wounded attacker but another attacker was able to flee before they arrived.

The Department of Magical Law Enforcement has opened an emergency investigation under the supervision of Harry Potter. Lucius Malfoy has vowed to support the investigation every step of the way. The attackers were likely part of a group called "The Dark Lord's Heirs." As of now, The Department of Magical Law Enforcement does not have reliable information about the group; however, with one member of the alleged group in the custody, they hope to have some information soon.

It is a tragedy that today, seven years after the war, ghosts from the past brutally took from us vital and dearly beloved members of our community. They will not be forgotten.

We are sending our deepest condolences to the Malfoy and Weasley families.

—Daily Prophet Staff

Chapter 2

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love. Epilogue ignored.

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Chapter 2

The next week went by in a blur. Hermione stayed at Harry's house...it was easier there than returning to her own home. Two-year-old James never failed to distract her from the dreadful apathy into which she was steadily slipping. He was the only person who could make her smile.

Ron was buried that Thursday morning, right beside Fred. Narcissa Malfoy was buried on Friday in the Malfoy family tomb.

On Saturday morning, Hermione decided that she was ready to go home. Harry, of course, tried to convince her to stay longer. But, eventually, he gave up, but not before she promised that she would owl them if she needed anything and would let him or Ginny check on her now and then.

This first weekend at home was extremely difficult for Hermione to endure. Everything reminded her of Ron, taunting her with their unfulfilled dreams and the future that was not destined to be. Yet, by Sunday night, she had gotten a hold of herself. She was Hermione Granger after all...a Gryffindor, a fighter, brave and strong.

On Monday morning, she was ready for work, focused and composed. Heartache and emptiness were hidden deeply within. While she was hurrying to her office through the Ministry corridors, she bumped into an agitated looking Harry.

"Hermione, I can't believe it...that stinking scum!"

"Harry, what?"

"Last night, Jugson managed to kill himself in Azkaban. Remember, the wounded attacker we've taken into custody? Malfoy recognized him. Ron had wounded him quite badly, and he was too weak for interrogation. He gained consciousness only two days ago, and I was going to interrogate him today. We needed this information so badly. Malfoy will kill me. Or, even better, I'll just gnaw myself alive!"

Hermione could see how the dark aura of guilt was poisoning her friend. This setback saddened her as well, but sensing Harry's great need of reassurance, she said, "Don't worry, we will get them. All of them. I have faith in you, Harry."

Harry let out a heavy sigh, gave Hermione a hug, and left.

Somewhere after lunch that day, in the same corridor, she had an encounter with Lucius Malfoy. The blond wizard was impeccably dressed and groomed. Not at all the dishevelled, wild man, trying to strangle Harry in his blind rage after the attack, Hermione could so vividly remember. Lucius held himself with his customary proud arrogance and greeted her in a habitual cold tone, "Mrs. Weasley," followed by a slight nod. Still, something odd in his appearance had caught Hermione's attention. His eyes had betrayed him. For once, they reflected his true feelings rather than his usual controlled indifference. The extent of boisterous, raw fury that raged in his pavement-grey eyes startled the young witch.

Later, when she was thinking about their encounter at home, surprisingly, she felt a slight degree of compassion towards him. Somehow, they were together in this. Both were victims of fate's cruel joke.

The evenings at home were lonely. Still, Hermione preferred being home rather than at the Potters or the Burrow. With Molly and Arthur's grieving, it was hard to bear the atmosphere in the Burrow. Plus, with Ginny pregnant again, Hermione intuitively stirred from Harry's house, as well. Hence, she decided that the time had come to take look into the original manuscript of "The Tales of Beedle the Bard". This task filled her evenings and her mind, providing a needed outlet.

In the course of the following few days, Harry visited Hermione's office every evening. He gave her a painstakingly thorough report of the investigation's progress, if any. By the end of the week, it was obvious that the investigation was utterly stuck, and without further evidence, it would not move forward at all. It was indeed very disappointing. By the end of the week, Hermione's fury had begun to resemble the fury she had seen earlier in the eyes of Lucius Malfoy rather closely.

On Thursday morning, Hermione walked in her office and was extremely surprised to find Lucius Malfoy, leisurely sitting on a chair in front of her desk. Evidently, he was waiting for her.

"Malfoy, what are you doing here?" In her surprise, Hermione didn't think about proprieties.

Malfoy looked at her silently, as if awaiting an appropriate greeting. There was something deeply disconcerting in his presence in her office. The arrogant way he was looking at her without saying a word angered her. "Oh, sod it!" muttered Hermione.

"Is there something you need from me, Mr. Malfoy? Or did you just come round to resemble an immovable, odd-looking monument?"

Lucius arched a single, blond brow and drawled, "Good morning, Mrs. Weasley. Hasty today, are we not?"

Hermione huffed with annoyance. Troubled with the strangeness of her reactions, she decided to start over. "Good morning, Mr. Malfoy. What can I do for you today?" Hermione flashed a fake smile, looking straight into his eyes.

Lucius straightened himself, locked his eyes with Hermione's, and with an identical, artificial smile answered, "I have a proposition for you, Mrs. Weasley."

Hermione was genuinely intrigued. *What could Lucius Malfoy possibly propose to her?* "Since when do you make propositions to my sort, Mr. Malfoy?"

Immediately, his demeanour changed. His smile disappeared; trained coldness replaced it. "Since that infamous Friday, Mrs. Weasley. Or, in more precise terms, since your dear friend and beloved husband failed their duty," hissed Malfoy with menace in his voice.

Hermione sprang up. Her hand automatically reached for the wand. Lucius was on his feet at the same moment, his face still wearing the same cold, menacing mask. They looked at each other for a few long moments, contemplating the next move.

However, after a deep (calming?) sigh, Malfoy smirked.

"There, there. We 'don't need any more drama. We have quite enough of it already, and it has indeed been a very trying a couple of weeks for us all. Please, Mrs. Weasley, sit down and hear me out. I am sure you will find my proposition quite interesting."

Moody prick, thought Hermione and sat down. She was still full of anger, and yet, once again, intrigued. "All right, I am listening. You have three minutes, Mr. Malfoy."

Malfoy made himself comfortable once more in the chair and began. "I think you are as aware as I am that the investigation...which has been so brilliantly lead by our famous Harry Potter...has come to a hopelessly dead end. Quite frankly, this situation does not please me. I assume that you have found yourself in the same predicament. Is that correct?"

He waited patiently for Hermione's response. When she didn't react in any way, he decided to continue.

"I know how the minds of those villains work: right now they are looking for the next victim. You see, they are not strong enough to achieve anything substantially impressive. Hence, they are searching for someone vulnerable and symbolic. Do you understand?"

This time Hermione nodded.

"Who do you think might be next?" Lucius looked straight in Hermione's eyes.

"Draco," breathed out Hermione.

"Well, not exactly, but close. Draco could not be considered a vulnerable target. In addition, they lost too many members already. Astoria, however, is a perfect target, especially now, when she is expecting."

The familiar fiery rage came back into Lucius's eyes.

"That would be the end of Malfoys. Can you imagine? That is precisely why I have sent them both to a secure location. They will stay there until this rampage is over."

"So, what do you want from me?" asked Hermione.

"Patience and you will find out soon enough, Mrs. Weasley. Now, with my son and his wife out of the picture, who do you think could be their number one?"

Horrible suspicion momentarily knocked all the air out of Hermione's lungs and rasped, "Ginny."

"Exactly. Bravo, Mrs. Weasley! Of course, Mr. Potter's wife is not easy to get, but it is possible. With patience and persuasion, they will eventually find her vulnerable moments and strike. Coincidentally, Mrs. Potter is also expecting, if I am properly informed, isn't she?"

Hermione nodded again.

"A-ha! Finally, we arrived at the core of my proposition. Mrs. Weasley, did I assume correctly that you do not want anything even remotely dangerous lurking around Mrs. Potter?"

"Of course," said Hermione.

"I've thought so. Tell me, would you like to have the murderer of your husband at the point of your wand?"

She gave him a glare full of fire. A minute later, understanding dawned on her.

"You want to use me as bait!"

Lucius grinned and muttered, "Clever girl." Then, he stood up.

"Thank you for your time and attention, Mrs. Weasley. I'll now leave you to your matters at hand. Please, give my proposition a good thinking over and inform me of your decision. Goodbye." He turned on his heel, ready to leave.

Hermione understood damn well that he had manipulated her and had, perhaps, seriously misrepresented the facts. She was certain that he didn't give a shit about Ginny's, Harry's, or her well being. It was obvious that his only concern was his revenge. Still, instantly, she knew that she was in.

"I'll do it," said Hermione. Malfoy turned back to look at her. Something had flickered in his eyes for a moment.

"Very well, Mrs. Weasley. Please come to the Manor on Sunday at noon. We have many details to discuss. I'll keep the Floo open for you."

Please review. Thank you.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 18

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Chapter 3

The old clock chimed eleven times.

The girl will come in an hour, thought Lucius Malfoy. The Floo was open. Lucius was dressed and had just finished breakfast. In other words, he was ready for her.

On Friday, when Lucius had visited the cemetery, he had spoken to Narcissa again. The first time he had done so, he felt awkward and pathetic, sitting in front of a granite plate and talking. But the need to talk to someone, to be able to get it all off his chest, overshadowed everything else. Lucius Malfoy was lonely...

Now he was doing it regularly. He told her about Draco and Astoria, about the investigation, and about his plan with the girl.

The girl, Hermione Weasley...what an unusual creature she was. Lucius knew that if he emphasized the facts in the right way, it would force her to cooperate with him. However, when she simply said, "I'll do it," he had felt a tingle of admiration.

It didn't matter what made her say it. A concern for her friend's safety, a foolish bravado, thirst for revenge, or just the habit of fighting for what she thought right...it was

probably the combination of all these things. The manner in which she reached the decision in a matter of seconds was remarkable to Lucius.

He couldn't help but wonder what Narcissa would have done in the reverse situation. Would she accept? Probably not. His wife would calculate and recalculate, think and rethink, and eventually (Lucius was almost sure of it), would let others handle it, setting all feelings aside.

That's right, *'the feelings'*. The feelings were the main difference between the girl and his wife (or his immediate circle, for that matter). Narcissa never showed feelings; they weren't appropriate. He knew she loved Draco, but he never knew if she had ever truly loved him. Or, if he had loved her. They were perfect companions. They did share the moments of passion, of course, they respected each other, and they loved and nurtured their son. But never, not even once during their marriage, did they discuss love.

Surely, the girl's marriage had been all about love and feelings. That's where the fire in her eyes had come from. She had lost the man she loved; he could see that much.

His own fire stemmed from that purity of purpose. Lucius needed a vendetta; he needed to punish those who dared to destroy something he owned. Most of all, he needed to channel the guilt that was slowly tearing him apart.

In public, it was easy to blame Potter or Weasley. To fool everybody and make it look like the Aurors were at fault. However, when he was alone, it was an altogether different story. Lucius couldn't easily fool himself. His former fellows had killed his wife and the Weasley boy...Lucius knew that. However, the worst part about this situation was that Draco knew it as well. He clearly saw it in Draco's eyes during the funeral; his own son blamed him. The only escape from guilt that Lucius could think of was to make the bastards pay. And for that, he needed all the help he could get, even if it was the help of Hermione Weasley (oh, the irony!).

The clock chimed again, and precisely on the twelfth beat, Hermione stepped out of the fireplace. Lucius looked at her for a moment, taking in her wild chestnut curls and simple summer dress.

Does not she have something more elaborate to wear besides two pieces of flimsy fabric sewn together? Cissa was always so well-dressed.

"Mrs. Weasley, punctual as usual." He nodded to Hermione. "Please, follow me." He led the girl to the library. She silently followed him.

Once there, they settled in armchairs beside the coffee table. Lucius saw a hint of discomfort in the girl's features, and he remembered that her last visit to the Manor had been rather unpleasant. Memories from the past flooded his mind. Now, looking back, all the facts seemed to be surreal. However, they had brought frightfully real and dramatic consequences to the present.

Would the girl trust a Malfoy?

"So, Mrs. Weasley, how are you?"

"I don't think it's relevant how I am, Mr. Malfoy. Please, don't feel obligated to make a small talk. Let us discuss the matter, so that we can both continue with our day." Hermione gave him a direct glare of open dislike.

Clearly, the girl wasn't in the mood for a pleasant chat.

"Very well, Mrs. Weasley. I take it you are still interested in our little plan?" He watched the girl with interest. They were going to be partners of a sort, and Lucius deemed it essential to learn more about her. He knew the basics, of course. She was Muggle-born, a Gryffindor, Draco's rival in Hogwarts, the brain of the Golden Trio, and an adequately capable witch.

"I wouldn't be sitting here otherwise, Mr. Malfoy." The answer was delivered with obvious annoyance.

She acted oddly irritable around him, and Lucius had to make an effort not to snap at her. He swallowed his intuitive, sharp reply and enunciated calmly, "Of course you wouldn't. Tell me, Mrs. Weasley, do you visit your husband's grave often? Believe me, I don't ask it out of idle curiosity," he hurriedly added, when he saw that Hermione was ready to jump.

"Every Friday."

What a coincidence, thought Lucius to himself.

"We need to develop a routine, Mrs. Weasley. We need to make them believe that there are certain recurring occasions when you are alone, unguarded and vulnerable. I think your weekly voyages to the cemetery will work perfectly. Now, I will be there every Friday as well, under Disillusionment charm, of course. We have to choose the time. What time is convenient for you? Later is better for me, Mrs. Weasley." Lucius looked at her.

The girl gave it a moment's thought and answered, "Seven in the evening will work."

"Seven it is then. Only a few things are left, Mrs. Weasley. You need to be alone at the cemetery. You will need to keep your comings and goings to a minimum, besides going to work and to the cemetery. And the last thing: I hope you understand that you cannot speak of our little project to anyone, especially to Potter?" Lucius drew this with finality.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy. Are you quite finished with stating the obvious?" With that, the witch rolled her eyes with blatant intent.

Rolled her eyes! Well, now she had done it! Lucius sprang up and closed on her in mere seconds. He was hovering dangerously over her, both hands on the armrests of her chair. He noticed with satisfaction how her pupils dilated in fear; he had caught her off guard.

Good!

"Now, you listen to me, insolent girl! This is not a game. You will get yourself killed if you do not do what I say. Can your little, overconfident brain comprehend that? They killed your husband and my wife, and they will kill you with pleasure if you give them the chance." The feverish motions of Hermione's chest caught Lucius' attention; he ceased his aggressive onslaught and returned to his chair.

There were a few moments of silence before Hermione's breathing returned to normal, and Lucius recovered his calm mask.

When the atmosphere in the room cooled, Hermione said with evident concern, "I have a question for you. What if they still choose Ginny? How could we be sure that nothing will happen to her? Or someone else, for that matter? And what is the plan of action if they take the bait?"

"Let me handle this Mrs. Weasley. I will make sure that Mrs. Potter will be completely safe. As for somebody else, Mrs. Weasley...give yourself some credit. Who could be more symbolic than you? I would say only Mr. Potter himself, and believe me, they will not go there. They are nothing more than a bunch of worthless cowards, after all."

With that, Lucius stood up. "We don't need to discuss our actions in case of the actual attack just yet. It will not happen soon; these things need time to develop. We will meet regarding that later. I will owl you when I deem it necessary. I will check on you at the Ministry, and you will know my presence at the cemetery on Friday. If something important arises, please feel free to owl me, or in a matter of urgency, you can use the Floo to get here. It will be open for you."

Lucius escorted her to the fireplace, and the girl left.

He returned to his library, opened the bar, poured himself a considerable amount of twenty-five-year-old Firewhisky, and sighed. He felt utterly drained and old.

Malfoy couldn't even decide what had tired him more: the girl's bitchy attitude or her completely transparent, flimsy excuse for a dress. He took the drink and settled at his desk. Lucius had work to do; Harry Potter was in for a surprise on Monday.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 18

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Chapter 4

Monday, June 27. Two weeks and three days after the attack.

Hermione fought through the morning's gridlock in the Ministry's corridor, trying to reach her office in time. Inexplicably, she couldn't shake off the strange feeling that she was an outsider, that she did not belong. She looked around; faces were rushing beside her, almost through her, giving Hermione their indifferent smiles and nods. They all continued with their lives as if nothing had happened. They didn't remember, they didn't care, they had all forgotten.

Suddenly, the motley crowd began to spin before her eyes and Hermione felt sick. She barely made it to the nearest loo, where her morning meal decided to leave her stomach for good. *Nerves*, she thought, and with a much lighter stomach and, oddly, a much lighter heart as well, Hermione continued on her way. A few minutes later, she had finally reached her office.

The day went on as usual. Somewhere around midday, when Hermione was engrossed in her work, a small paper butterfly flew into her office and landed right on the ~~End~~ *of the Month Report*.

Hermione opened the note, and there, in Harry's impatient handwriting, was written, *Hermione, please come to my office as soon as you can. I have extremely important news. H.*

Instantly, Hermione closed everything she was working on and hurried to meet her friend. Her heart was once again fluttering with apprehension, close to panic. She walked as fast as her feet would go, while trying to calm herself. "Easy girl, steady now," she muttered. Then, with an hysterical giggle, "What am I, a horse?"

When Hermione opened the door to Harry's office, her friend was sitting at his desk, massaging his temples with his fingers. The moment he heard Hermione stepping in, he jumped to his feet. "Hermione, it's you, thank God!" Harry hugged her and without further preamble put a letter in front of her. "I received this today. It was inserted in my morning's *Daily Prophet*. It looks exactly like the letters the Malfoys were receiving."

Hermione scanned the contents of the letter. It was written in a primitive manner, simply stating that Harry Potter should be aware that *they*' were watching him and his blood-traitor wife.

Again, the wave of nausea threatened to engulf Hermione, so she took a deep breath, swallowed, and asked, "Did you tell Ginny?"

"No."

"What are you going to do?"

"I talked with Arthur; we decided not to tell either Molly or Ginny. Arthur already alerted the boys. We will take turns staying with Ginny. Charlie is coming too."

"Don't you think she'll notice that one of you is always around?"

"I hope not. She is rarely alone anyway. I'm sure George will come up with an explanation."

The two friends looked at each other...green eyes locked with honey ones. Both were desperately trying to find something to hold onto, and both were thinking the same.

Is it ever going to stop? Will it ever end...this terrible, bloody belligerence?

"I need to go. Be careful, Harry, and keep Ginny safe, will you?"

"I will."

Back in her office, Hermione took a few minutes to calm herself down. Then, with a handful of Floo powder, she stepped into the fireplace. "Malfoy Manor," she whispered.

Malfoy said she should contact him in an emergency, and that was exactly what she was doing. A few minutes later, she stepped out of Malfoy's fireplace. "Oh, bugger," grumbled Hermione, when she noticed that the soot was all over her light beige robes.

Could this day get any worse?

Apparently...

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Weasley. Quite a surprise." Lucius appeared from the dimly lit hallway and looked at the dishevelled Hermione with interest.

His soundless appearance from the darkness of the corridor startled her. Next, she noticed sparkles of curiosity in his grey eyes. *Why is he always looking at me with such interest?* she thought. On the previous Sunday, Hermione couldn't help but notice the way Malfoy had regarded her dress...with a mixture of exaggerated annoyance and perceptiveness. *Prick*.

Malfoy motioned Hermione to follow him and led her to his office. Hermione was literally forced to bite her tongue, in order to be able to reach the room before she spilled

the news. Finally, Lucius settled at his desk and gave her a quizzical glance.

"Well, Mrs. Weasley, spit it out. I hear your teeth, grinding in anticipation. It's obviously burning at your insides, so spit it out!"

"Harry received a letter today. They threatened him and Ginny, mostly Ginny. What do we do?" Hermione waited for his reaction.

Malfoy looked at her with an arched eyebrow and bored expression. He wasn't doing anything else. There was a complete and total lack of reaction. None, nothing, zero. Hermione was lost. Her mind obligingly offered Ron's favourite phrase: "What, has he gone mental or something?" She watched Malfoy carefully, trying to understand. Then, the minute she recognised an arrogant smirk, which had appeared on his lips, everything became clear.

"You smarmy git! You sent it!"

Next second, her wand was digging into his neck. The wizard didn't even move; the smirk was still on his lips. "Lower your wand, girl. I'm not going to fight with you," he drawled.

Hermione was fuming with anger. The only thing she wanted at that moment was for Malfoy to give her a reason to put a hex on him. "I am going to hex your arrogant arse straight to hell," she hissed.

"No you won't, not when I am unarmed, and please watch your tongue. Could you at least try to behave like a lady?"

"I am not going to be your puppet, Malfoy. You are not going to play me like this ever again. You've come to me and have asked for my help. I will not tolerate your arrogance and haughty stupidity. Maybe your wife and other women you knew before were willing to be puppets in your hands, but not me. I can assure you of that!"

The expression on the wizard's face didn't change. Lucius sighed and stated, "Wrong; you couldn't be further from the truth. If only my wife had listened to me and done what I said, she and your husband might still be alive. Back to the matter at hand...why are you upset? I honestly cannot comprehend that. You asked me to make sure that Mrs. Potter will be safe, and I did it, quite elegantly and effectively. What is wrong with that?"

Oh, how she wanted to beat the air of superiority out of him, preferably with her bare hands!

"Why didn't you tell me about your plan?"

"Because, Mrs. Weasley...let me think how to put it mildly...you are not a particularly skilled liar. I doubt that you could play 'surprise' genuinely, hmm?" A satisfied smile spread across his face.

Hermione knew that he was right, at least in part; her anger disappeared. She was relieved that the letter wasn't real...thus, no one was threatening Ginny. Nevertheless, she wasn't going to give up.

"If we want to continue with our plan, you have to treat me as an equal, respect my opinion, and make a vow that all future decisions concerning our collaboration will be made together. Is this clear?"

Something changed in Malfoy's eyes, and Hermione was momentarily sidetracked by the range of dangerous emotions she saw there. His grey eyes were unblinkingly locked on her.

"And how exactly you are going to persuade me into this? Remember, girl, I am not going to explain myself to anyone. Especially you."

"Very well, Mr. Malfoy. In that case, I think you should be prepared to spend some time at home." This time Hermione was the one with the smirk.

Lucius gave her a wary glance. "And why is that, may I ask?"

"Because, Mr. Malfoy, I am going to tell Harry that it was you who sent the letter, and in addition, you were trying to use me as bait. I think it would be more than enough to keep you under house arrest until we catch the attackers. I can do it rather easily, believe me. I think Harry is quite capable of accompanying me to the cemetery, and besides, you are not the only wizard who knows how to place a Disillusionment Charm." Hermione was euphoric...the expression on Malfoy's face was priceless. Of course, she was bluffing shamelessly.

Lucius slowly stood up and approached her. She didn't move. The most vital part of the bluff was to stand her ground and remain calm. He stopped only a foot from Hermione, obviously trying to intimidate her with his proximity. It worked. The witch began to fidget nervously, but still, she didn't move an inch.

"You are bluffing, girl. You won't do it. It will never work. Potter won't agree to that," he whispered dangerously.

"Try me. And don't call me 'girl'," said Hermione and stubbornly jerked her chin up.

She could feel his breath on her neck and smell the scent of his cologne. Her heart sped up unexpectedly and, for a moment, Lucius Malfoy filled all her surroundings. His presence overwhelmed all her senses.

Then, he tilted his head even closer to her and murmured in her ear, "Deal."

Oh, the sweet, sweet taste of triumph. She won. She'd out-Slytherined the one and only Lucius Malfoy.

Or... maybe, he was just playing her again, was he?

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love. Epilogue ignored.
Please be aware that there is a slight amount of non-con touching in this chapter.

AmyLouise.

July 22, Cemetery, 7:10 pm

Something was obviously wrong with the girl. She was sitting silently on the ground near the grave, and the troubled expression in her eyes worried him.

It was their fourth Friday in the cemetery. Lucius was standing about twenty-five yards from Hermione; he had placed himself under the Disillusionment and Supersensory Charms. The wizard could see every movement of her chestnut curls and hear her breathing. Something had changed dramatically in the witch. He was trying to understand the problem, to detect the difference.

On their first two meetings in the Manor, she was vivid...heartbroken, of course...but still full of life. Her eyes showed a range of emotions, and she was so thoroughly absorbed in each and every one of them. If she were mad and angry, then it utterly consumed her. If she were concerned, then again, she was entirely engrossed in the feeling. This girl felt with every fibre of her soul, and nothing was half-hearted. It was mesmerizing. Lucius had never met anyone like her before. Never had he encountered a person so open and so genuine in everything. Even her attempt to bluff was delivered with the same wholeness; she honestly believed that she could pull it off.

"Silly girl," chuckled Lucius.

However, lately he had noticed that the girl was changing drastically from week to week. She looked thin and pale; her usual rosy-peach colour was gone. She was almost as pale as Narcissa now. Lucius didn't like it; it didn't suit her.

Her chestnut curls, on the other hand, became even more untamed and beautiful. Lucius flinched at this word, but as a connoisseur, he couldn't ignore a true beauty when he saw one. The only concern was that her curls seemed to be sucking the life out of the witch. They became more strikingly stunning, while she seemed to be slipping away.

The look in the witch's eyes switched between dreadfully haunted and maniacally determined. Both were wrong, in Lucius' opinion. Hermione Granger, as he imagined her, shouldn't show any of this. He was sure that a storm was coming, and the girl was at her wits' end. His only hope was that it would happen either before or after the culmination of their operation. The last thing Lucius needed was a hysterical witch on his hands and a bunch of murderous outcasts attacking them simultaneously.

Hermione's magical aura was changing too. It was swirling violently around her now, threatening anyone who would dare to come close. This too was a novelty for Lucius. He had never seen a magical aura of this strength around any witch. Something decidedly strange was happening, and Lucius needed to learn what it was.

Suddenly, his contemplations were interrupted. The girl was reacting to something, and Lucius focused all his senses on her. He could clearly see and feel the girl's natural reaction to the danger: her heartbeat increased and her body tensed, ready to spring.

Lucius was carefully scanning the area, looking for the cause. Then, he felt it too, the unmistakable presence of another magical being. Someone was near the girl, about six yards from her, hiding behind the monument. Once again, Lucius was impressed by the girl's keen senses. She was a damn good witch, with impressive intuition and perceptiveness.

At this point, he decided to move closer. Lucius was convinced that nothing would happen tonight; the villain was just checking the target and the area. The first time he and Hermione had noticed a foreign presence was on the previous Friday, but then it was just a slight shade, a trace.

Today was completely different. It was a strong presence and he could feel it clearly now. The girl was behaving according to the plan; she wasn't moving from her position. She was smoothing the stones of the grave absentmindedly, looking lost in her grief.

Thanks to the Supersensory Charm, Lucius could feel her growing tension; her pulse was beating in wild tempo now.

Presto, thought Lucius, walking briskly towards the girl.

He could almost feel the adrenaline rushing through her veins, preparing her body for action. He felt his own adrenaline level increasing at an alarming speed. He was only fifteen yards away from her when he saw him...the dark shadow was moving ominously towards the girl.

Panic overcame Lucius. He was still too far from her; he might not reach her in time if the scoundrel were to attack. "Shit, shit, shit," Lucius muttered, racing rapidly in the girl's direction. The scene in front of him was truly eerie: a cemetery in the twilight, the silhouette of a girl laid on the grave, and a dark, menacing shadow lurking near her...

Lucius Malfoy was highly displeased with himself. How could he be so foolishly unprepared? Swearing under his breath, he was rushing to the girl, watching the dark shadow worriedly. When he was almost near the witch; the shadow abruptly disappeared.

The threat was gone. Nothing happened this time, but it was far too close. The tension was thick and heavy. The girl jumped up the moment she sensed that the intruder had left. She walked quickly towards the cemetery's exit, paying no attention to Lucius. He was forced to hurry in order to keep up with her. She passed the cemetery's gate and, after a few more steps, suddenly became violently sick. Breathing heavily after all the running, Lucius (still under all these damn charms) stood there awkwardly, not knowing what exactly he should do, if anything.

"*Finite Incantatem!*" muttered Lucius.

After a few more minutes of hesitation, he came closer and pulled the hair away from the witch's face while she emptied the contents of her stomach on the ground. When she was through, the girl straightened up to *Scourgify* herself. Lucius was still holding her wild mane in his gloved hands and was somehow reluctant to let it go. Their eyes met.

Noticing the witch's slightly dazed demeanour, he snatched her by the waist, muttered, "We need to talk," and Apparated them both to the Manor.

The girl started to wrestle with him even before they had landed in the living room. The moment Hermione felt the solid surface under her feet, she resumed her struggle with full power. She was shrieking like a wild animal; her fists were hitting Lucius' chest with vigour. She was trying to utter something, but nothing even remotely intelligible was coming from her. She fully succumbed to hysteria.

At first Lucius was trying to keep himself aloof, but with each blow and shriek the girl delivered, his own composure was steadily slipping away. Then, when she slapped him straight in the face, he snapped. Lucius seized both of the girl's hands and, with an animalistic growl, pinned her to the wall, using his body to immobilize her. She was frantic, trying to gain her freedom again, writhing furiously under the pressure of his weight. In return, he just pressed harder into her and growled louder.

He moved instinctively, as a male with a dangerous, hysterical female in his hands. He needed to remedy the situation. Intuitively his mind knew the shortest path to stop the hysterics, forcing Lucius to act accordingly.

He was pushing into Hermione purposely now. One of his hands reached for a certain, vulnerable area of her body while his other hand, tangled in her hair, was keeping her face securely in place. He easily gained access to the witch's core; he wasn't a boy after all. After a few precisely delivered strokes, her breath hitched, and her eyes, clouded by hysteria, focused on him.

Lucius continued his skilled movements, while pressing his chest hard against hers. Hermione was moaning and twisting with abandon. Sensing that she was close, Lucius abruptly pulled her hair and bit the bare skin of her neck. Simultaneously, he roughly pinched and squeezed her sensitive flesh. This forced the girl over the edge, and she released a high-pitched scream.

It was over. The storm was gone and now was time to face the consequences. Lucius waited for Hermione to come back to reality, mentally bracing himself for remorse and anger. Eventually, her breathing returned to normal, and she looked at him, her eyes finally reflecting her usual self.

Hermione gave him an excruciating glance and whispered, "Oh, my God."

After that, she weakly pushed him off her and unsteadily walked to the fireplace, stumbling a couple times along the way.

The girl was gone. Lucius was standing in the middle of his living room, still in gloves and outdoor robes.

A cold shower and a sleepless night with the bottle of Firewhisky were in order.

AN - Right until late 19th century typical treatment for hysteria (or sometimes...female hysteria) was massage of the patient's genitalia to cause an orgasm.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms, and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love. Epilogue ignored.

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July 23, Morning

Malfoy Manor

Lucius sat on the patio, enjoying the soft summer breeze. The garden was in full bloom and looked spectacular. He was gently rocking a small child nestled on his lap. Her soft, red-coloured curls were tickling his arms.

"Is she sleeping?" asked a melodious voice.

"It seems so," answered Lucius, tilting his head to kiss the soft locks. They were warm and smelled delectable. It was jasmine with a hint of vanilla and white rose. He knew this scent so well, so intimately. It was the scent of Hermione's wild curls...

Lucius woke with a start. It took him a few moments to understand where he was. He had fallen asleep on the chaise in the library, a half-empty bottle of Firewhisky standing nearby on the floor. Lucius grunted and stretched his numb limbs. Waking up on the chaise in the library in the company of an oh-so-hot, twenty-five-year-old bottle of Firewhisky wasn't healthy. The headache was awful.

He sat up with difficulty; his balance hadn't yet returned, and he ran his fingers through his hair. That motion brought the faint scent of jasmine into the air. He still wore yesterday's shirt, and Hermione's scent lingered. It reminded him of something, something extremely strange. Lucius huffed in an effort to remember, and after a few minutes of uneasy focusing, it came back to him. He remembered his odd (to say the least) dream: *garden, child, woman's voice, and scent*. The dream was decidedly disturbing; it was obvious that his subconscious was trying to tell him something. Alas, Lucius didn't have the slightest idea what to make of it.

He needed to see the girl, he knew that much. Lucius frowned. *'The girl'* didn't seem quite adequate after the incident from the day before. However, he couldn't bring himself to call her 'Mrs. Weasley' in his thoughts either. Would it be *'Hermione'*, *'Granger'*, or still *'the girl'*?

Lucius tried *'Hermione'* a few times in his head, and then he even said it aloud (thank Merlin he was alone).

"Hermione, Hermione," he drawled, trying out various inflections. Finally, he settled on *'the witch'* for now, leaving *'Hermione'* as the last resort.

Her name, pronounced aloud, evoked the recollection of their previous evening's encounter. Lucius couldn't help but remember vividly how deliciously her petite body (Cissa was a bit taller and slightly bonier) had pressed against his. How fiercely passionate she had been in fighting, struggling, hitting, and after (especially after), though she wasn't quite herself, but still... Even just a casual cataloguing of the event had stoked a fire in his groin.

"Shit," muttered Lucius. He didn't like where this was going in the slightest.

He knew for sure that the dynamic between them had changed. However, he wasn't sure exactly where they stood with their project. Their collaboration was quite crucial for him; hence, he was going to find out. Lucius was going to pay the witch a visit.

Hermione's Flat

Hermione sat on the sofa with a huge mug of hot tea in one hand and a bag of Walkers Prawn Cocktail crisps in the other. Her curls were wet after a shower, and she was wearing her joggers and a tee.

Yesterday, when she had stumbled home from the fireplace, everything had been groggy, and anguish was the only feeling she could identify easily. She was totally exhausted...both physically and mentally. She had collapsed on the bed, not having the strength to analyze anything, and fell asleep in seconds.

Hermione woke up to a sunny Saturday morning, feeling surprisingly refreshed. A whole night of sleep was rare for her nowadays. She stayed in bed for a long while, and thoughts filled her mind. She carefully analyzed the situation. She was angry with Lucius and even more with herself. She couldn't comprehend why her worse moment of weakness was destined to happen with him in the vicinity. It just wasn't fair; all of it just wasn't fair.

The intimacy of the incident, the way Lucius handled it, caused her to blush furiously. She couldn't remember the details but a general awareness of what had happened settled deeply in the pit of her stomach. Something was throbbing on her neck, but she didn't pay attention. With a slight shiver, Hermione recalled how strange and overpowering his animalistic, male force had felt. She'd never experienced anything even remotely similar; nobody ever introduced Hermione to the level of control he held over her yesterday. With Ron, it was never about power, force, or control; everything was built on the partnership and equality. Intimate moments they had shared were

peaceful and gentle. Tame even.

Eventually, Hermione rose, took a shower, made herself a cup of tea, and grabbed a bag of crisps (her taste was rather peculiar these days). Concerning Malfoy, Hermione decided that the best she could do was to move forward. The bastards obviously bit the bait, the opportunity to make them pay was very near now, and that was what mattered. She needed revenge...now more than ever.

Hermione's musings were interrupted abruptly when, unexpectedly, her fireplace lit up, and a moment later, Lucius Malfoy stepped into her living room. She almost jumped in surprise.

"Mr. Malfoy, what are you doing here?" she breathed out.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Weasley," said Lucius, and his eyes focused on her intently.

Unconsciously, she immediately began to fidget under the questioning look of his pavement-grey eyes. Suddenly, Hermione became painfully aware of the lack of bra under her tee the damn thing didn't even reach her belly button. Moreover, if the minutes of complete silence and Malfoy's intense gaze...which was slowly creeping from her face downward...were anything to judge by, he was also acutely aware of her attire.

"Hmm. It's half past one in the afternoon. I didn't expect to find you in your negligee," said Lucius in an unnaturally monotonous voice, after his eyes finally found Hermione's face again.

"And do you think it's wise to keep the Floo open in your situation?" he added.

"Well, you obviously found it useful, and I wasn't expecting company, let alone you. Why are you here?" Annoyance once again began to bubble in her.

"We need to talk," he answered. "Yesterday we didn't get a chance. Then, there is the matter of yesterday's incident." The unusually hesitant tone of Malfoy's voice forced Hermione to look at him. For the first time, she gave him a good, long look.

There was something comical in how utterly out of place this proud, aristocratic, and extremely handsome man looked in her living room. He simply didn't fit. In his impeccable robes, with his cane and his gloves, he was just a bit too magnificent for such a casual environment. Hermione even felt a wave of pity for him. The poor man was completely out of his habitat.

"Would you like to sit down?"

Malfoy looked around but, when he evidently didn't find anything decent to sit on, he uttered, "I'm quite comfortable as it is, thank you." Then he continued, "As I was saying yesterday, by circumstance, I was forced to take certain liberties with you," Lucius paused, swallowed, and then continued again. "Certain liberties with your body to be precise, and for that I apologize. Though I believe it was necessary."

Bewildered, Hermione glanced at him, blushed, and in order to calm herself, took a deep breath. "You could've slapped me," she muttered.

"That could have ended badly for both of us," answered Lucius quietly.

"You could've poured a bucket of cold water over me," exhaled Hermione, as the idea just crossed her mind.

He gave her a quick glance and then, not quite looking into her eyes, said, "That might have worked. Unfortunately, I was not composed enough to think of it. Therefore, I used other means."

After that, uncomfortable silence hung between them. Lucius was scanning Hermione's living room sceptically. His eyes found the bag of crisps. "Is that what you've been eating? No wonder you look pale and thin..." Lucius poked the bag with his cane. Then he came closer, took the bag with two gloved fingers, his expression of disgust obvious, and read "Walkers Prawn Cocktail crisps." He looked at Hermione with a questioning arch of his eyebrow. "Are you sure this was intended to serve as food for a human being? It smells more..." and he crinkled his nose, "like something that a feline would eat. It couldn't be healthy."

Hermione had enough. She snatched the bag out of Lucius' fingers. "Stop it, why do you care? You're not my father." She glanced at him challengingly.

"I may assure you, Mrs. Weasley, that I most certainly don't harbour any fatherly feelings for you," and his gaze slowly caressed her body again. "You need to be fit for fighting, and that," he pointed on the bag, "is not a proper meal."

She felt nervous and, in order to distract herself, she decided to adjust her wet hair. Lucius was watching her intently and, suddenly, something caught his attention. He walked closer to her and looked on her neck with an odd expression.

"You didn't heal it yet?" he asked softly.

"Didn't heal what?"

"This." Lucius took his gloves off and lightly touched a throbbing spot on her neck.

Hermione had been so engrossed in her thoughts all morning that she had managed to miss the mirror completely. She had taken a shower and brushed her teeth, but she had no idea what he was talking about. And now, with Lucius hovering over her, she couldn't very well run to the bathroom and take a look.

"What is it?"

"You don't recall? No matter, let me fix it for you." He took his wand out and muttered, *Episkey*."

Hermione felt a light tickling sensation on her neck. Lucius softly caressed the healed area with his thumb and then slowly traced the outline of her neck with the backside of his hand. Hermione's vision blurred and her breath hitched slightly. She shivered under his touch, and it seemed that Lucius had halted his breathing for a few seconds. Then, he stepped back and sighed.

"We need to discuss our actions. The attack most likely will occur close to next Friday. Will you join me for dinner tonight at the Manor to discuss?" asked Lucius.

Something in his eyes was different, and Hermione hesitated, trying to understand the change. But no, he hid it quickly under the trained coldness. She huffed in frustration and answered,

"Tomorrow, I will come tomorrow, and besides, I have enough food for today." She shook the bag of crisps in front of him.

"As you wish. Tomorrow at seven then," said Lucius with finality and began to move toward the fireplace. On his way, he noticed her books, spread on the coffee table, and stopped to inspect them.

"Are you working on 'The Tales of Beedle the Bard'? Interesting. You know, I am sure you could find a lot of useful information in my library. We will discuss it tomorrow. Good day, Mrs. Weasley, and please secure this Floo connection after me. I am certain that you are quite capable of accomplishing it," and he left without a backward glance.

Hermione felt shaken. She took a crisp from the bag and munched it, deeply engulfed in thoughts.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms, and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love. Epilogue ignored.

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Sunday, July 24

Hermione's Flat

Hermione spent all of Sunday in conflict with herself. Several times during the day, she seriously contemplated the idea of cancelling the dinner, but she knew that they needed a plan of action. Thus, staying home was out of the question.

It had been six-and-a-half weeks since Ron's death; somehow it felt like longer, and she was going to dine with Lucius Malfoy. Somehow, she felt like a traitor of the worst sort.

Hermione could neither entirely dismiss nor fully comprehend the feeling. On the surface, the dinner was nothing; it was not a date, not even close to that. Yet in her heart she knew that something was stirring between Malfoy and herself. Otherwise, the hot waves of anticipation would not have risen in her stomach every time she unconsciously touched the spot on her neck. The spot that Lucius had healed and then so softly caressed.

Hermione's sudden and unexpected awareness of Lucius Malfoy as a man concerned her enormously. It was easy before: first he was an enemy, then he was just another wizard of her acquaintance. Now, he had become an ally, a partner, and maybe something more than that. Was he a friend? Could she trust him? Hermione didn't have these answers yet. She felt lonely and confused.

Then again, there was another matter that had made itself known two weeks ago. Hermione had decided to keep it to herself until it became apparent to others. The knowledge of what was going to happen made her realize that she very much needed a vendetta, perhaps even more so than Malfoy. The most important thing for her right now was to get those bastards, and if that meant dining with Malfoy, she would go and dine with Malfoy.

In the end, it was as simple as that. Thus, at precisely seven o'clock in the evening, she stepped out of Malfoy's fireplace. She was wearing a simple dark blue jacquard fitted dress a la sixties with matching pumps. Her wild curls were pulled up.

Malfoy Manor

Lucius looked at the witch in amazement...she looked astonishingly sophisticated. The dark blue of her dress drew attention to her honey eyes and contrasted with her peach-hued skin beautifully. Delectable, he thought. *Ah, and this delicate neckline, now open for viewing...*Lucius was forced to take a calming, deep breath.

It's amazing how little you need to get quite, hmm, 'excited,' when you are alone with a young and extremely appetizing witch. Lucius chided himself.

The image from yesterday still haunted him: Hermione with her hair wet, wearing something awfully short (with her belly button out in public!), flimsy, and shamelessly transparent. He wasn't used to this kind of *'lingerie'*. He wasn't even sure if that was the proper name for it. He had never seen anything of that kind on Cissa.

"That would be just ridiculous," he chuckled to himself and returned his attention to Hermione. He had a dinner to host. At that moment they sat in the Manor's grand living room and waited for dinner to be served.

"Would you like a glass of wine to whet your appetite, Mrs. Weasley?" murmured Lucius in a pleasant baritone.

"No, thank you. Just water please," answered Hermione.

Lucius cocked his brows at her. "Why? Does wine before dinner somehow contradict your beliefs or principals?"

"No," said Hermione, and dismissively waved her hand. "It's just... water is better for now."

"Hmm, how peculiar," muttered Lucius.

The moment the doors to the dining room opened, Lucius stood up and offered his arm to Hermione, which she accepted with a surprised glance. He escorted her to the table and helped her to sit down. By serving the dinner on a small, cosy table, the wizard ensured an intimate atmosphere, which he was decidedly aiming for. To his dismay, Hermione declined all his attempts to pour her a glass of wine, and Lucius honestly couldn't fathom why.

They ate and talked. They discussed their actions in case of an attack and decided that their plan should be straightforward: disarm, immobilize, and then send for Aurors. The point of Lucius' slight concern was Harry Potter's reaction, but Hermione reassured him that she would undoubtedly be capable of handling it. They also decided that from now on, Lucius should remain in Hermione's close vicinity to ensure his timely appearance by her side in the event of an attack.

After all immediate questions were answered and all decisions were made, their conversation strayed into the open philosophical field. Sure enough, Hermione took advantage of the first opportunity.

"It's interesting that you had such a significant change of heart during these recent years, Mr. Malfoy. You're paying your house-elves; you're cooperating with Harry Potter; you're even dining with me, a Muggle-born witch. Why did you change sides? What happened, Mr. Malfoy?"

As the question had left her mouth, she eyed Lucius with obvious concern. The wizard grinned; the little witch wasn't sure if she had overstepped the boundaries.

"Well, Mrs. Weasley, I didn't change anything. I simply quit," Lucius calmly explained. "Twice in my life I was foolish enough to choose sides. Moreover, I forced my wife and my son to choose with me. This mistake brought nothing but death and devastation to my family. I won't ever repeat that mistake again. I no longer belong to either side. I belong to myself. I am neither for nor against, Mrs. Weasley. Seven years ago, at the end of the war, I realized that I knew of nothing meaningful...only power, purity of blood, black, white, green, red. Everything was complete and utter bullshit. The only thing that mattered at the end was the survival of my family and my name. I am a

Malfoy, and I am on my own side. I've done, and will do, whatever is good for me and the people I care about. I will fight and destroy anyone who dares to touch or harm anything that's mine, no matter from which side he is."

Lucius looked at the witch with interest. "Tell me, Mrs. Weasley, are you still stuck in your childish ignorance? Do you still believe that there are only white and black, right and wrong? Do you still not recognize hues and mixtures in the world, even after you found out the truth about Severus and Dumbledore? Or, perhaps, you finally learned that all your life you will be forced to choose a lesser evil. Mm?"

Lucius was intently watching Hermione. She looked taken aback.

"I am not a child, Mr. Malfoy, and I am not ignorant. I learned and experienced a lot during the war and after. I know that life isn't simple, and all colours in it are completely mixed together. Bad and good, right and wrong are braided so tightly together that sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. Yet I strongly believe that there are basic principles and guidelines all human beings need to follow, even if it's just for humanity's sake."

By the end of her speech, Lucius was smiling. The witch was exquisite in her passion.

"Bravo, Mrs. Weasley, once Gryffindor, always Gryffindor... But enough, I would like to show you the books that I think would be useful for your translation. Are you interested, Mrs. Weasley?"

Lucius stood up and offered his arm to Hermione again. This time she didn't hesitate, and they walked to the library.

Once there, Lucius made a welcome gesture and drawled in a soft murmur, "I've reorganized and moved the books that I thought you might find useful onto these shelves. Please, Mrs. Weasley, take a look."

The witch enthusiastically walked toward the shelves, and Lucius walked with her. He was observing with pleasure how her pink lips were whispering the titles of books, and how her delicate fingers were gently caressing the books' spines. Of course, his wandering gaze didn't stop there. Lucius was appreciatively taking in the lines of her profile and the soft curves of her neck and shoulders.

Eventually, observing wasn't enough anymore. The need to touch her softness and inhale her scent became extremely acute. He didn't fight it. He simply came closer and breathed her in; the scent of jasmine with a hint of vanilla and white rose filled his nostrils. One stubborn lock of hair, which was coiling free at the nape of witch's neck, caught his attention. He experimentally touched it lightly, and then, he daringly traced the curl with his finger.

Lucius sensed how Hermione froze under his touch. He was right behind her now; there were only a few inches between them. In one small movement, he crossed the distance and exhaled raggedly. Lucius could see how Hermione's fingers tensed on the shelf. He extended his hand and slowly traced the length of her arm, starting from the tips of her fingers, then knuckles, delicate, thin wrist, elbow, shoulder.

The witch began to tremble, but it didn't stop him. He continued by caressing her cheek, running his fingers down her chin and neck. Next, he pressed himself lightly into her petite body, giving her an opportunity to feel him. At this, the witch stopped breathing altogether.

Lucius marvelled in a pleasurable closeness for a few seconds; however, all too soon, the witch began to stir and he, to his chagrin, was forced to release her.

Lucius stepped back, and Hermione turned to face him. Her breathing was laboured, her cheeks were flushed with lovely pink, and her poor little lips were bitten to a deliciously red colour.

Mouth-watering, thought Lucius.

"So, Mrs. Weasley, what do you think?" asked Lucius, feigning indifference.

There was a brief silence. He could see clearly that the witch was conflicted; she probably couldn't decide how to proceed. However, after a moment of consideration, she answered as calmly as she could.

"There are many good books here, Mr. Malfoy."

"Did you find something interesting, Mrs. Weasley? The library doors will be open for you anytime, and my elves will be available to assist you," said Lucius, as he stepped closer to her.

His movement obviously startled the young witch and she hurriedly began to move toward the door while answering, "I'll think about it, Mr. Malfoy. Oh, look at the time. I really need to go now. Thank you for a very pleasant evening." And with that, Hermione made a hasty exit.

Lucius' grey gaze followed her thoughtfully. Slowly, he drew a deep sigh, shook his head and then Apparated away from the Manor.

A minute later, he appeared in the Malfoy family tomb. Lucius sat down near Narcissa's grave and groaned quietly, "Cissa, Cissa, what am I doing? Will you forgive me, Cissa? Forgive me, forgive me."

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms, and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love. Epilogue ignored.

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Chapter 8

Thursday, July 28

Malfoy Manor

Hermione was standing in the middle of Malfoy's library, knowing quite well that she shouldn't be there. It was almost midnight, and she honestly didn't know what she was thinking when she decided to come to the Manor at this hour. Apparently, she had not been thinking at all; it was just a spur-of-the-moment decision.

The week had been horrible. Her body didn't give her a break...the whole week alternated between hunger and nausea fits. In addition, Hermione sensed every odour, every scent around her. Who could have known that silk and cashmere, so fashionable these days, have different and actually quite annoying scents? "Forever-staying perfumes" were killing her.

Hermione's mood nowadays was as unpredictable as a sea breeze. The heavy burden of loneliness was slowly getting the better of her. Yet she didn't want to run and cry on Harry's shoulder. He was already overloaded by problems and guilt as it was, with the investigation totally frozen, Ginny pregnant, and all his other duties. The possibility of worrying Ginny was out of the question as well. She was already in the middle of her second trimester, and Hermione was convinced that an hysterically crying friend would be harmful for her.

Thus, Hermione was all alone. She tried futilely to lose herself in work and her translation project. Unfortunately, this particular week, it just wasn't enough. By Thursday, Hermione was sick of it; sick of tears, sick of flipping through her photos of Ron, and sick of loneliness. Hence, without any logical reason, she came to the Malfoy Manor.

When she stepped out from the fireplace, the Manor was dark and quiet. She went straight to the library, hoping to get there unnoticed. The doors of the library, however, were already opened, and a dim light was on. Evidently, her arrival had not been missed by the elves. *Vigilant creatures*, she thought.

Hermione stood in the middle of the library and tried to decide what she should do next. Clearly, she had only two choices...either run before the Lord of the Manor appeared (and she was sure he would eventually) or to be brave and stay.

"Sleepwalking, Mrs. Weasley?" A familiar baritone disturbed the silence of the night.

Hermione flinched, drew a deep breath, and then turned to face him. Obviously, it was too late to run now. Lucius was leaning against the library door, smirking at her. He was wearing soft velvet trousers and a simple white shirt. A few open buttons at the top of his shirt offered Hermione a good view of Lucius' still well-defined chest. It was the first time she had seen him in such casual and relaxed attire. His broad shoulders and firm muscles were palpable under the thin, white batiste and Hermione, to her horror, couldn't stop staring at him. It was a lost cause; she knew it. He was a flame, and she was a foolish little moth...hypnotized and dazed.

"I am flattered that you found my library useful, Mrs. Weasley," stated Lucius.

This tore Hermione from her stupor.

"Good evening, Mr. Malfoy. Yes, I looked for a certain book, which I thought I saw here. But, unfortunately, I couldn't find it. I probably made a mistake. Sorry for disturbing you at this hour and... ah... I am... mm... probably have to go now, good night."

Hermione knew she was babbling. She also knew that she was blushing furiously. Shit, she thought. Lying wasn't her strongest skill. She bit her lower lip and walked toward the door. Lucius, however, clearly wasn't willing to let her escape and moved to block her exit.

Hermione was forced to stop and look at him. He was watching her seriously.

"I don't think so, Mrs. Weasley," he drawled. "Not before you tell me why are you here. This time...truthfully. Your lying skills are still rather weak and obviously lacking practice. So, please, proceed," and he waved, waiting for Hermione to start her explanation.

For a minute, she jittered restlessly under his questioning gaze, not knowing what to say. Then suddenly her mood shifted again, and annoyance rose up quickly and filled her up to the gills.

"What do you expect to hear from me, Lucius?" Unexpectedly for them both, his name flew from her mouth. He arched his eyebrows but remained silent.

"I felt lonely and was sick of it! There, that's the only explanation I have!" The wave of annoyance subdued as suddenly as it had grown a few second ago, and she added quietly, "I don't really know why I am here."

She stood right in front of him and looked straight into his grey eyes. The muted light in the library made them glisten with dusty-silver opal flecks. She lowered her gaze to his lips. Hermione had never noticed how sensual his lips were. They weren't remarkably full or bright, but still fascinatingly inviting. Next, her gaze caressed his aristocratically sculptured chin and jaw line, the pale skin of his neck and partially visible chest. She felt hypnotized again. The foolish, foolish little moth couldn't help itself; this open flame was luring her, enticing her from safety to unknown, dangerous, but oh-so-captivating territory.

Slowly, she raised her hand and touched his lips. Lucius didn't move; his grey eyes were watching her intently, and only the slight hitch in his breathing indicated his reaction. Maybe he was afraid to startle her again. Hermione didn't know and right now she didn't care. She traced his lips and continued to his masculine jawline, then lower... to his neck, and lower again, to his collarbone and then down...

Hermione slowly parted the unbuttoned top of his shirt and caressed his chest. Her breathing became laboured. Incredibly, just light contact with his skin aroused her to an almost unbearable level.

Finally, Lucius sprang to life. Her solo exploration was over. He put his palm over Hermione's hand on his chest and guided her under his shirt. The tips of her fingers touched his nipple, and they moaned in unison. His breathing matched Hermione's now; they were both gasping for air. Hot waves of passion and lust were crashing in their chests, trying to break through and merge in one wild squall of emotions.

A few rapid movements, and they were both on a chaise with Hermione on Lucius' lap. His fingers were swiftly working on her button-down blouse, and his lips were on her neck...placing light kisses and nibbles. Hermione's hands were tangled in his platinum locks. She was grasping his neck with desperation, trying to align her body with his and to lose herself in his embrace. By pressing into his chest, she forced him to circle his arms around her. For a moment, he simply held her. She felt his passion; his desire for her and yet it wasn't enough, the most vital element was absent...love. It was too early for love.

Like a thunderclap, Hermione's broken sob disturbed the harmony of their breathing. Unstoppable tears were streaming down her cheeks, and heart-wrenching sobs were ripping her chest.

"Lucius, Lucius, I am so lonely, so confused, so tired. It's not fair, so bloody not fair. I love him; I loved him, Lucius. And now you. Why is it always you now? Why is it only you now? Tell me," sobbed Hermione into his outrageously expensive batiste shirt.

Lucius was desperately trying to calm her down or to calm himself down (shit, everything was so evilly tangled). He whispered to her, "Let it happen, Hermione, let it happen. Let me make it all better. We will both feel so much better, Hermione; let me." His lips launched on her collarbone, and his fingers began to pull her blouse from her shoulders.

Alas, Hermione's eyes focused on him and she whispered brokenly, "No, Lucius, no. Stop. It's not us. It's our desperation. We are not ourselves yet. It will ruin everything. We will ruin everything with it, whatever it is...now is not the right time. No, please, no."

Lucius growled but stopped. They looked at each other, Hermione still on his lap. Then he huffed, "Foolish girl," and smoothed her dishevelled curls.

"My proper little Gryffindor, are you going to resist for the both of us? Are you strong enough? I'll test your resolve continuously, make no mistake about it. It's all decided. It's destined to happen. It's a matter of time now, darling; you'll succumb to it."

Hermione felt utterly drained; she couldn't even hold her head up. Exhausted, she leaned on Lucius' shoulder.

"You don't know everything Lucius, don't be so sure... I am tired. Take me home, please. Tomorrow is Friday; we will need each other. Take me home, Lucius," whispered Hermione and closed her eyes.

Lucius stood up with her in his arms and Apparated them to Hermione's flat. He put her on the sofa in the living room, gave her a wistful parting look and left.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms, and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love. Epilogue ignored.

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Chapter 9

Friday, July 29

Malfoy Manor

The dreadful odour of rusty iron spoiled the harmony of a familiar jasmine scent. Eerily beautiful chestnut curls embellished a pale, unearthly face. A helpless, petite body slumped in his arms. Lucius felt something wet and viscous on his hands. He looked down and froze... There, in startling contrast to a light-blue silk, he saw a heinous murky-crimson stain. It slowly crept forward and grew with frightful inevitability, soaking the silk. In horror, Lucius locked his eyes on her honey-coloured ones and watched how they gradually became cloudy and opaque. Colourless lips rustled almost inaudibly.

"Lucius..."

Lucius' eyes jerked open. The sun's harsh rays struck him cruelly. It was inexplicably difficult and painful to breathe, as if someone had hit him mercilessly beneath the ribs. Lucius sat up and realization hit him: it was his heart...his heart ached. The dream had been frighteningly vivid. He could almost smell the blood and see ghostly-opaque eyes in front of him. One thought flashed in his mind, *Hermione!* He needed to call the whole thing off!

Lucius sprang up.

An hour later, however, washed, groomed, and considerably calmed, Lucius was no longer so sure. If he called the whole thing off, he would probably never have his revenge...now or ever. Lucius was not ready for that; it was much easier to dismiss the dream.

It was just an idiotic, scary dream; my mind just played a joke on me. That is all. No need for hysterics or drama. Hermione is more than capable of fighting, and I'll be right beside her all the time. Everything will play out perfectly. The witch is at fault for this nightmare; I dreamed this because of her crying yesterday, argued Lucius with himself.

During breakfast, he managed to convince himself that the dream was nothing more than a complete nonsense. He even chuckled about it.

"And I hoped for a nice, erotic dream, filled with sex and, preferably, a nude Hermione."

Ministry of Magic

By the time Lucius arrived at the Ministry, he had gotten rid of his concern and doubt. He was his usual self...cold and composed, ready to proceed with his plan. Only an almost imperceptible ache in his heart reminded him about his morning horror. Lucius dismissed it as a residual effect of stress.

He was walking through the Ministry's corridors towards Hermione's office when he saw her. She was wearing her usual light beige robes. Lucius surprised himself with a sigh of relief...there was nothing light blue or silky in sight. Hermione looked quite well and rather busy. Satisfied, the wizard turned on his heel and left to mingle with a crowd of Ministry officials.

The day rapidly wore on, and Lucius decided to stay out of Hermione's way; they didn't interact at all. Perhaps, somewhere deep inside, Lucius was afraid to lose his composure and show his concern. That was not supposed to happen. Malfoys never lost their composure... well, almost never.

Around six o'clock in the evening, Hermione went home and Lucius Apparated to the Manor to change and prepare for the cemetery. His heart thudded in violent anticipation. He was ready for the strike, and he wanted it to happen today.

Cemetery

At precisely five minutes to seven, Lucius, under the Disillusionment and Supersensory Charms, stepped out of the Malfoy family tomb and stalked towards Ronald Weasley's grave with vigour and determination. He was almost at the grave when the scene in front of him forced him to halt his movements. Lucius froze on the spot, and cold sweat dampened his forehead and back. He refused to believe his eyes.

Hermione was already there. She sat near the grave, and (horror of horrors!) a whispery light-blue silk dress draped softly around her small frame. It was a shock.

Immediately the images from his nightmare invaded his mind: Hermione's pale face, her slowly fading eyes, and blood...viscous, crimson blood, seeping through the light-blue silk.

For the second time that day, it became painful to draw a breath. Panic grasped Lucius' heart and squeezed it with its ice-cold steel claws. His brain was working feverishly. *We need to leave. Immediately! I'll take her and Apparate us to the Manor. Nothing will happen. It's not too late.*

The wizard's body was frozen with panic, but he forced it to move. The next second he yelled.

"Hermione!"

She heard his call and turned with a startled expression. Only she couldn't see him; the Disillusionment Charm was working perfectly.

At that moment, four black silhouettes appeared and ominously surrounded Hermione. Lucius couldn't see her any more; they completely blocked her from his view. He drew his wand and shouted at their backs.

"*Stupefy! Stupefy!*" And then, "*Expelliarmus!*"

Colourful sparks lit the air of the cemetery. Different voices shouted their spells, but Lucius' mind didn't register anything except Hermione's clear voice, which echoed his.

"*Expelliarmus! Expelliarmus!*"

"*Petrificus Totalus!*"

In a matter of minutes, the four figures in black were scattered and immobilized. Completely unharmed, Hermione stood in the epicentre, smiling triumphantly. Her light-blue dress was unstained...no red, no crimson, nothing. Lucius drew a deep breath and whispered, "*Finite Incantatem.*"

She saw him then, and immediately turned her triumphant smile on him.

"Lucius, we did it!" she exhaled.

"Indeed, we've accomplished it H...", Lucius stammered slightly, but eventually managed, "Hermione."

She quickly walked to his side and looked at him with a soft, open smile.

"Why did you call me, right before they appeared? You startled me."

She looked beautifully untamed, with her curls tousled and face flushed with pink, the silk of her dress clinging to her every curve. Lucius sighed.

"It was momentary confusion... I think you may proceed and send a Patronus to Potter. I need a few minutes with those scoundrels." Lucius gently traced her jaw line. "Hermione."

Then, Lucius turned his attention to four figures on the ground. Hermione had put all four of them under the full body-bind. *Thorough little witch*, he thought.

One by one, Lucius took all four masks from the bandits, but he could not identify any of them. He felt confusion and vile, dark waves of uneasiness clashing into his chest. He knew that something was terribly wrong. His clammy fingers began to shake. In dreadful apprehension, he sensed the long forgotten, evil presence of dark magic. His temples began to hurt and his throat went dry.

Lucius made a vain attempt to draw a calming breath. Suddenly, a vaguely familiar voice menacingly hissed in his ear. "Are you looking for me, Lucius?" and the tip of a foreign wand slid under his chin.

A second later, Lucius received a brutal blow to the pit of his stomach. His vision blurred, and blood filled his mouth. He folded from the force of the impact; his wand slipped from his fingers.

"Ahhh, I have been waiting seven years for that," and maniacal laughter filled the air. Lucius didn't have even a moment to recover before he heard two voices shouting again,

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Hermione and the Death Eater simultaneously bawled the spell. Ignoring the pain, Lucius spun around only to see two wands fly from the hands of their owners. All of them were wandless now...

In a haze, Lucius saw Hermione struggling in Antonin Dolohov's hands. Her curls covered her face; he couldn't see her eyes. She was shrieking and growling, hitting the bastard forcefully with her little fists and feet.

Lucius desperately scanned the area for his wand...it was on the ground a few feet in front of him...when he heard Dolohov's maniacal laughter again.

"I'll take that, Lucius. Hope you don't mind sharing your little Mudblood, old friend."

At this, Lucius leaped forward, grabbed his wand and bellowed, "*Stupefy!*"

Too late. Dolohov disappeared with the struggling Hermione. Only a small piece of light-blue silk on the ground and the faint scent of jasmine in the air remained behind her.

Lucius fell to his knees and let out a wild roar. Gloomy, hopeless darkness surrounded him. He felt forlorn, bereft. Guilt and despair rudely forced themselves into his poor soul, ready to tear it to smithereens. The colourless lips from his dream rustled, 'Lucius' in his head, again and again.

Seconds later, multiple Apparation pops announced the arrival of Potter and his Aurors.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms, and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love. Epilogue ignored.

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Friday, July 29

Cemetery, 7:30 pm, five minutes after Hermione's disappearance.

For the last few minutes, Harry Potter had been staring at the unresponsive and distraught blond wizard. Lucius Malfoy was slumped on the ground on his knees; his platinum locks were in disarray and a thin bright-red trail of blood trickled down his jaw. Four bandits, clothed in black, lay fully-bound on the ground nearby. Hermione was not in sight.

There was something disconcertingly odd in this scene, something absurd. It made no sense to Harry, none at all.

It had all started when Hermione's Patronus interrupted the Aurors' meeting. Her little otter appeared in Harry's office and announced, in a euphoric, Hermione-like voice, that Harry and the Aurors were needed at the cemetery near Ron's grave. The tone of the message didn't suggest any reason for concern. Thus, Harry and his immediate attendants Apparated to the cemetery, where they now stood, surprised and somewhat bewildered.

"All right, here we go," muttered Harry to himself and lightly touched Malfoy's shoulder.

"Mr. Malfoy," he muttered. There was no response, and Harry patted Lucius' shoulder once more. "Mr. Malfoy," he called again. Still there was only silence in response.

Eventually, one of the Aurors behind Harry, evidently tired of waiting, let out an impatient and slightly annoyed huff. With this prompt, Harry forcefully shook Malfoy's shoulder and shouted, "Malfoy!" At last, Malfoy snapped out of his lethargy and focused his pavement-grey eyes on Harry.

Thirty minutes later, same place.

"Harry, Harry! Calm down! Please." Three Aurors seized Harry in mid-flight, when, in a rage, he tried to strangle Lucius Malfoy.

"You! How could you? I should kill you, arrogant bastard! You used her and betrayed her. She was just cannon fodder for you, wasn't she? Do you have any humanity left in you?" yelled Harry, his hair as wild as ever and his green eyes burning with fury.

"I hate self-centred people like you. You don't have compassion, sensibility, feelings...nothing! You're just a white, marbled, empty shell!"

Lucius was still deathly pale, but had mostly regained his composure and coldness. He muttered through his clenched teeth, "Calm yourself, Potter. Stop these hysterics and behave like a man. We need to act...there is not much time. We ought to drag the information out of these scoundrels. Let's move this to the Ministry's interrogation chambers."

Then he looked straight into Harry's eyes and continued, "As for your accusations...I had reached a mutually beneficial agreement with your friend. Mrs. Weasley willingly and quite eagerly had agreed to help me."

After that Lucius paused, and repeatedly clenched and unclenched his jaw, before uttering, "I can assure you that Hermione's kidnapping was an unfortunate accident. I did not wish Hermione any harm!"

Harry was caught off guard by Lucius' words, and the gentleness with which he pronounced *Hermione*. He looked at Malfoy suspiciously, trying to understand what exactly had transpired between his friend and Lucius. Not finding any explanation, Harry shook his head in disbelief, and busied himself with transporting the bandits to the Ministry.

While Harry Potter and the Aurors were fussing around the four wizards in black, Lucius found Hermione and Dolohov's wands on the ground, picked them up and discreetly put them in his pocket.

Saturday, July 30. The Ministry of Magic. Interrogation Chamber.

12:30 am, five hours after Hermione's disappearance.

The dimly lit room with gloomy coloured walls had seen many horrible scenes and heard many hopeless pleas for mercy.

In the centre of the room, Lucius Malfoy was methodically punching an unresponsive body. Blood and swelling made the face of the man unrecognizable. A sharp shout forced Lucius to halt his assault.

"Malfoy! Malfoy! Stop this immediately, or I'll call a guard and he'll escort you out!" shouted Harry.

Giving Harry a quick glare, and after delivering the last sharp strike to the person's skull, Lucius reluctantly released his deadly grip and the unconscious body sank to the floor. The blond wizard slowly and fastidiously wiped the blood from his hands.

"You know he told us everything he knows. With Veritaserum, we can be sure that there is nothing more to delve into here. The only thing we have...their meeting place in Ireland. I'll send people there right away," said Harry. Then, his eyes sparkled with challenge, and he added, "You should have known that Dolohov doesn't trust anybody. He was your former colleague, after all."

"Careful, Potter, do not tempt me," growled Lucius dangerously.

Two hours later. Malfoy Manor.

Lucius was sitting at his desk with a half-filled glass of the Firewhisky in front of him and Hermione's wand in his fingers. He was absentmindedly caressing the warm wood of the wand and his eyes were locked on the glass filled with dark, honey-coloured liquid. In the subtle light of the library, the liquid was shimmering softly. Hermione's eyes had been shimmering in exactly the same way when she smiled at him at the cemetery not so long ago.

Lucius drew a ragged breath and closed his eyes. His knuckles still stung after the interrogation at the Ministry. He purposely did not heal them; he wanted them to sting.

With a loud pop, a small elf appeared at the door.

"Master, Master, an owl, a strange owl, is bringing a letter for you."

And a little creature bashfully drew closer to Lucius' desk.

Angered by the intrusion, Lucius barked rudely, "What is it? Give it to me, and leave." Shivering, the creature cautiously put the letter on the desk's edge and, with a very quiet snap this time, hurriedly disappeared in one skittish movement.

Lucius opened the letter and read,

Lucius, old friend,

Do you miss your little Mudblood yet? I thought so.

Do you want a trade? I won't ask much: only my wand and 50000 Galleons, nothing more. Oh, and call off Potter's dogs, will you? They cannot find me, but they are still getting on my nerves.

You will come to the meeting place...I am sure you know where it is by now... at 5.00 A.M. sharp. You have to come alone, Lucius; do not play with me, or your Mudblood will get it. Do you understand? Good.

See you in a bit, Lucius.

P.S. Exploring new lows Lucius, using the pregnant Mudblood as bait? Bravo, old friend. Is the little bastard yours?

Lucius' vision momentarily failed him.

Then he reread the postscript one more time. At last, everything connected in his mind...his dream about the child, Hermione's sudden sicknesses, her irrational behaviour, her odd declining of wine at dinner. Lucius sprang up in a fit of anger. With one wave of his hand, everything was scattered from his desk with loud bangs, cracks and peals.

Shit! The witch was pregnant and had never told him. And he, the old fool, didn't even notice.

More loud and angry sounds filled the library. During the next few seconds, Lucius simply couldn't breathe. The image of Hermione in a bloodstained dress and the image of her struggling in Dolohov's arms merged into one gruesome picture in his mind.

With strenuous effort, Lucius willed himself to calm down and think. The relentless ticking of the old clock drove him to act fast. After a short contemplation, he destroyed the postscript. He took a letter along with a few other things and Apparated from the Manor. Lucius had only two hours and a hell of a lot of work.

Somewhere in Ireland.

Five o'clock in the morning, almost ten hours after Hermione's disappearance.

Lucius was waiting for Dolohov to reveal himself. He could feel his presence and was slowly scanning the area. He stood in a small opening, surrounded by lush greenery. A forest was slowly awakening after the night's sleep. His stormy grey eyes, accentuated by dark shadows that formed under them, were cold and guarded.

"Lucius, glad to see you again." Dolohov finally showed up. "Let's do it quickly...give me my wand and the money."

The moment Lucius saw Dolohov; a raw fire began to burn his insides. He was ready to kill... only thoughts of Hermione were stopping him. Before he spoke, Lucius clenched his fists. "Not so fast, Antonin. Take me to the witch first." His raspy voice disturbed the morning peacefulness of the forest. His breathing was laboured, and it was enormously difficult to keep up his facade. Emotions and adrenaline were running high.

"Ah, so it's your little bastard in there," hissed Dolohov in his vile voice. "All right, Lucius. Let's do it half way...give me my wand now, and I'll take you to the witch."

Immediately after he had received his wand, Dolohov took Lucius' hand and a minute later, they were at the threshold of a filthy-looking, dimly lit, miserable shack. Lucius could see a closed door in the depths. Without preamble, he moved inside, towards the door, but was stopped by Dolohov,

"Ah, ah, give me my money, Lucius."

Both wizards kept their wands trained on each other at all times. Lucius called loudly, "Hermione!"

Then he heard the slightly muffled but recognizable voice from behind the closed door, "In here." Lucius drew a sigh of relief and threw the sack with galleons to Dolohov. Unable to keep his disgust from seeping through, Lucius shouted, "Get out! Get out!" He roared. "Before I kill you, get out!"

Dolohov grabbed the money and was ready to leave. However, at the last moment, he paused and said, "Just so you know, Lucius, it was my *Avada Kedavra* that killed your wife. Too bad, I couldn't play with your Mudblood. The little bastard inside blasted me out every time I tried to do so."

The last shreds of Lucius' resolve wore off and he launched himself towards Dolohov with a deadly roar.

Maniacal laughter filled the air, but before Lucius had an opportunity to snap the nasty wizard in half, Dolohov disappeared.

In the next second, Lucius was inside the shack, ramming into the closed door. Under the sheer force of his shoulder, the door was reduced to a pile of rotten wooden planks in a matter of seconds. He didn't use his wand...Lucius felt a desperate, animalistic need to physically destroy something. Hurriedly, the wizard stepped into the dark, murky lair and rasped, "Hermione!" A second later, she was in his arms.

Hermione's soft voice whispered, "Lucius" with relief. In vain, Lucius tried to take in her condition, but it was too dark for that. So he asked,

"Are you all right, Hermione?"

"Yes, yes, I am fine." And she drew closer to him, her fingers tangled themselves in his hair and her warm breath fluttered against his neck.

Finally having the slight witch in his arms was Lucius' tipping point. Everything that had happened during the last twenty-four hours suddenly dawned on him, and an avalanche of emotions overwhelmed the wizard.

He lifted and pressed the little witch to his chest, walked outside and Apparated them to the Manor. Once there, still pressing his precious cargo to his chest, he walked briskly through the Manor, carrying her to the destination with urgent determination. Hermione tried to say something, but Lucius stopped her.

"Don't talk. We'll talk, and I will explain everything later."

She was still in his arms when they ended up in his private chamber. There, he hoarsely whispered in her ear, "Don't stop me, don't stop me, witch. I need it. I need you. The things I've been through... Don't stop me now, witch. There is no stopping now, Hermione. I need it. I need it."

He was chanting like a mad man. His fingers were fluttering over her hair, her skin, her lips.

She cupped his face with her small, warm palms and simply whispered, "Yes."

Lucius echoed her "Yes" in a low growl, and their lips met in a scorching kiss. Her fingers grasped his tangled locks gingerly, and his hands began to tear her dress.

"I hate this dress," he hissed. And it was destroyed...irrevocably destroyed in one swift motion.

She was exposed to him then. Hermione stood there almost entirely nude, exposed to Lucius' burning gaze. He tore his clothes off too, and their bodies finally met.

Skin on skin, lips on lips, hands hungry, desperately seeking bare flesh to feel, to caress, to possess. Lucius' lips were bruising Hermione's. Kisses were hard and merciless, with a salty taste of blood. It was necessary; they both needed to feel it, to live it through fully. There simply wasn't any other way for them.

They didn't make it to the bed, not this time; they just sank onto the plush rug. The last feeble barriers between them were violently destroyed by Lucius. There was no

foreplay, no coaxing, no gentle exploration. Lucius' mouth devoured her with his scorching hot kisses and bites. His fingers learned and mapped her body, demanding, forcing her to respond. Overcome by her own desire, Hermione fully succumbed to his demands, to his will.

They merged with the blunt force of passion, lust and desperation. She met his first powerful thrust with a rapturous moan, her nails digging deep into his back. Again and again she met his every thrust eagerly, needing to feel him inside her as much as he did. Their bodies, glistening with sweat, glided against each other in life's centuries-old dance. It was pure harmony in everything...tempo, intensity, vigour.

Only at the last moment, sensing the closeness of their mutual climax, did Lucius freeze for a millisecond. There he was, in all his glory...his wet, platinum locks dangled down, pearls of sweat glistened on his chest, shimmering grey eyes locked on the woman beneath him, and all his fine muscles ready to carry them into an abyss. He was balancing on the edge of sanity, trying to perceive the greatness of the moment.

And, it came to this final, upward spiral. He forced them both up, higher and higher, faster and faster, until Hermione's toes curled in pleasurable agony. Until the inner muscles of her molten core clenched at him, until her wild pulsating around him forced Lucius to lose his tempo and surrender. The world around them burst into a million broken mirrors, filling their ears with hysterically loud peals. Lucius' triumphant shout cut the air in unison with Hermione's melodic cry.

The gleams of the first morning sunrays found two exhausted lovers on the rug asleep, but still joined in the most carnal way possible.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms, and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love. Epilogue ignored.

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Chapter 11

"Potter will be here any minute," murmured a soft baritone from somewhere above.

Hermione opened her eyes, only to discover that Lucius' bare chest was completely blocking her view, and his lucid, silver-grey eyes were gazing at her intently. Lucius hovered over her, supporting the upper part of his body by leaning on his elbow. Her hips were still pinned firmly under his, and their legs were still intertwined. His soft, warm palm rested on her collarbone. A stifling hot wave engulfed her, and she blushed deeply and fiercely. Embarrassed by her own reaction, Hermione closed her eyes again.

Slowly, Lucius' palm moved from Hermione's collarbone and ventured lower, accompanied by the low, satisfied humming of its owner. It covered her breast and applied light pressure, fondling it gently. Lucius uttered a low purr, and the earth swayed under Hermione. Thank Merlin she was in a horizontal position. The mischievous, warm palm continued its tortuously slow exploration, forcing Hermione to gasp for air.

At some point, Lucius rolled on his side. Then, somewhat cautiously, he glided his palm to Hermione's already slightly bowed stomach. When nothing happened, he gently caressed the roundness and murmured, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Does it matter? Would it have changed anything?"

"Answering a question with a question...tsk, tsk, tsk, such a naughty girl."

His palm crept over her breasts again. Hermione had lost her train of thought and sunk hopelessly into the grey, stormy depth of his eyes. There were important questions she was supposed to ask. Hermione made an effort and focused. "You gave up your chance for revenge, Lucius. Why did you let Dolohov go? I thought it was your first priority."

Abruptly, he untangled himself from her, rose and walked to the window. The room was immersed in unresolved silence. Concerned, Hermione gazed at him, and... lost her train of thought again.

Oh, how could she possibly focus, when an entirely nude Lucius stood a few feet from her in all his magnificent glory? It was impossible, simply impossible. Hermione couldn't perceive anything else except him. In awe, she watched how his body softly glowed in the diffused light of morning. Her gaze caressed his long, muscular calves; smooth, toned thighs and buttocks; well-defined back and shoulders. He was still beautiful, breathtakingly beautiful.

Lucius was leaning on the windowsill in silence. Hermione stood up and walked to him. Now, standing near him, she could see the marks...angry red scratches from her nails on his back. First, she touched them with her fingertips. Then, balancing on the tips of her toes, she covered them with fluttering kisses. Lucius shivered and turned to face her.

"My priorities changed," he said and traced her lips with his thumb. "Moreover, I did not let him go. I handed him over to Potter."

"What do you mean 'handed him over'? How?"

"I am sure Potter will explain it to you soon enough. If I understood correctly, he was going to use a Muggle device to trace this bastard like a stray mongrel with rabies."

Hermione huffed in disbelief. "What? What Muggle device?"

Watching Lucius closely, Hermione noticed raw wounds on his knuckles.

"What is this? Where did you get these, Lucius?"

"It's nothing, absolutely nothing worth talking about," he muttered.

She took his hands in her smaller ones and brought them to her lips. She kissed every knuckle carefully, gently. The squall of emotions, which threatened to overwhelm her at that moment, seeped through each little kiss. Lucius moaned. It was his turn to gasp for air. Fighting his laboured breathing, Lucius rasped, "witch", and kissed Hermione with renewed fiery passion. His body was yearning and eager for an encore. The wizard's fingertips began their dance all over Hermione's bare skin again. And once again, she lost herself to him. Once again, she gave in to his masterful hands. Once again, she succumbed to his desire for her.

Right at this moment, a little, wrinkled creature appeared with a virtually soundless snap and squeaked, "Master, Master, Mr. Potter is being at the door."

Poor creature, it had taken him three attempts before the lovers noticed that they were not alone. Hermione squealed and hid behind Lucius.

"Let him in, ask him to wait," bade Lucius, and nodding repeatedly, the elf hurriedly disappeared.

Hermione blushed and glanced at Lucius shyly.

"Lucius, I have nothing to wear," she whispered, looking at the pieces of light-blue silk on the floor.

Lucius found his wand in the pile of discarded clothes on the rug and conjured a grey silk robe. He held it open, and Hermione dived into its soft folds. With one wave of Lucius' wand, the robe was adjusted to Hermione's size.

The wizard then opened the wardrobe and took a pair of black trousers and a white shirt for himself. A few minutes later, he was fully clothed. Lucius offered his arm to Hermione, and she took it. For a long moment, they simply gazed into each other's eyes. And then, hand in hand, they went to meet Harry Potter.

Just before they entered the room where Harry was waiting, Hermione stopped. She gave Lucius an apologetic glance and took her hand from him. He chuckled bitterly and whispered in her ear, "Where is your Gryffindor bravery, Hermione?"

Hermione closed her eyes as if she couldn't bear to look at him, shook her head and whispered, "It has abandoned me."

Lucius drew a deep sigh and opened the door for her. Hermione gave him a wistful smile and stepped into the room. A second later, her dishevelled and tired-looking friend warmly embraced her.

"Hermione, thank God! I went bonkers with worry; are you all right? This mental bastard Dolohov, did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine, Harry; a bit tired, but fine. Honestly, Harry, everything is okay. Don't worry."

"Hermione, I should be angry with you, you know! And I will be! Just not right now." And happy Harry's laughter filled the room. "Right now, I'm too happy to be angry."

At this moment, Hermione's attire caught Harry's attention. He gazed at her for a few minutes and then asked, "What are you wearing?" He frowned, and turned his questioning and suspicious stare on Lucius.

"I..." Hermione began her explanations, but was interrupted by Lucius.

"Mrs. Weasley's belongings were destroyed during her ordeal, and I offered her some of mine, Potter. She gratefully accepted."

Surprised by the hostile coldness of Lucius' voice, Harry muttered, "Oh."

Using the pause in the proceedings, Lucius asked, "Do you have Dolohov, Potter? Did your plan work this time?"

"Yes, Malfoy, it worked. We know where he is; in fact, my people are already there. I am sure we will have him in less than two hours. What, can you not wait to have your money back, Malfoy?" Harry's green eyes lit up with a challenge.

"I am not that concerned about money, Potter. I have plenty of it left. I want my negotiated rendezvous with Dolohov as soon as you get him."

"You will have it. I promised it to you, Malfoy, and you will have it."

"Very well, Potter. Let me know when."

Hermione did not like it. She could almost see her breath, the atmosphere in the room was so icy. She did not understand what the two wizards were talking about, but, she most definitely did not appreciate the tone in which they were talking. Being Hermione, she decided to interfere.

"Stop it, both of you!" she shouted.

The two men stopped their bickering and looked at her. Lucius arched his eyebrows in surprise.

"Now, one of you will explain to me, calmly and thoroughly, what is going on."

Harry fished out Dolohov's letter to Lucius from his pocket and silently gave it to Hermione. She read it quickly and looked at them questioningly, obviously waiting for further explanations. At this, Lucius waved dismissively to Harry and said, "Be my guest, Potter."

Harry sighed, nodded, and began his clipped and hurried explanations.

"Last night, Malfoy came to me with the letter. He already had the money with him. We decided on a plan; his only condition was to have a tête-à-tête with Dolohov, and I promised it to him. I was at my wit's end, Hermione. First Ron and then you, it's just..." and Harry trailed off, fixing his glasses on the bridge of his nose.

After a deep calming breath, he continued, "Then, you know, I had had this idea for a long time...to use a Muggle Global Pet Finder GPS system for tracing criminals in our world. It is the twenty-first-century, after all. I had the chip; we planted it in the sack with Dolohov's money, and Malfoy gave it to him. I activated the chip, and after one phone call, we knew exactly where he was. Easy." A smug smile appeared on Harry's face.

"Brilliant," breathed Hermione, and the next thing she heard was Lucius' annoyed growl. She looked at him. He looked lonely, and for a moment, Hermione forgot herself. She walked to him and placed her hands on his chest.

"Lucius, that's brilliant. You and Harry actually worked out the plan together. You agreed to use Muggle technology. You believed in it." Hermione's fingers began gently to caress his neck along the edge of his shirt. Their eyes met once again, and the surroundings disappeared for Hermione. There were only his grey eyes, only him.

Harry's artificially loud cough broke the magic between them, and Hermione reluctantly returned to Harry's side. She hugged her friend and said, "I am so proud of you, Harry."

The confused expression on Harry's face changed to a smile again. He hugged her back and said, "Let's go home, Hermione. I am sure you are dead tired. Actually, we're all tired, and I still have one bloody maniac to catch."

"Yes, let's go. I have to see Ginny. I missed Ginny and James so much."

The two friends walked towards the fireplace. Lucius muttered, "Accio Wand" quietly, and a second later Hermione's wand was in his hand.

"I believe this is yours, Hermione."

She turned to him again and took her wand from his hand. His eyes were locked on hers. And that was the moment when she saw something in Lucius' gaze. Something that made her heart ache; something that would not let her find peace at night, she was sure. There was longing...his pavement-grey eyes were shimmering with longing, longing for her.

With a heavy heart and watery eyes, she returned to the fireplace, where her friend was waiting for her. Harry gave her a wary look.

"My Floo and library are always open for you, Hermione," she heard before they left.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms, and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love. Epilogue ignored.

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Chapter 12

Saturday, July 30, afternoon. Ministry of Magic.

Harry Potter looked downright terrible. He was still in the same clothes he had worn on Friday morning. His hair was a mess, and it was extremely difficult to keep his heavy eyelids open. Harry sighed and turned his attention to Malfoy. Lucius stood in front of him as perfectly groomed as ever. His annoyingly impeccable robes quite literally hurt Harry's eyes. They just were way too perfect for such a morning.

Malfoy held his serpent-headed cane in his gloved hands, the customary mask of cold indifference in place. The only reminder of a sleepless night were the dark shadows under his eyes. Lucius' sharp, icy stare hit Harry like a dozen steel needles. It was clear that just beneath the restrained exterior simmered powerful emotions. Shivers prickled down Harry's spine...Malfoy was obviously in a very dangerous mood.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, Harry uttered, "Dolohov is in this room. You have fifteen minutes Malfoy. Give me your wand." He extended his hand.

"My wand stays with me. I won't use it on him, so stop quivering," Lucius snapped and walked to the door of the interrogation chamber. There Harry, who wasn't ready to let him enter just yet, stopped him. He stood there by the door, deeply engrossed in his thoughts...something was clearly bothering him. Lucius frowned and waited. When, after a minute, nothing changed, he hissed, "If there's nothing else, Potter, may I proceed?"

Harry's green eyes focused on Lucius again, and he hesitantly began, "When we seized Dolohov..." Harry paused and nervously rubbed his face with his hand, "... he yelled something about Hermione and you."

Pavement-grey eyes began to smoulder with murderous fury as Lucius inquired, "About Hermione?"

Harry nodded. "He said that Hermione... that she..." Evidently, the words didn't want to come out of Harry's mouth. After a pause and a visible effort to calm himself, he continued, "That Hermione is pregnant, and the child is..." The last part was lost. Harry just couldn't say it. "Agh, forget it."

This time, the fire in Lucius' eyes was addressed to the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Did I hear you correctly? Did you really just ask me that, Potter? You, who call yourself Hermione's best friend?" hissed Lucius through his clenched teeth. "Don't you know her at all? Did you believe this filthy bastard? What happened to Gryffindor loyalty?"

Harry felt miserable. He didn't know what had come over him. Why did he ask Lucius? It was a mistake. He shouldn't have asked. He shouldn't have doubted Hermione. However, from the moment he had noticed flickers of something between Lucius and Hermione at the Manor, the seed of doubt had planted itself deeply in Harry's heart. Then there had been Dolohov with his nonsense...the bastard's words fuelled his doubts even further.

Lucius cold voice interrupted Harry's inner turmoil.

"I don't want to know your reasons, Potter. This moment will haunt you for eternity. I, however, have one warning for you...silence your Aurors. This bullshit should not leave these walls. Do you understand? If it does, the damage will be substantial."

"Aurors will never tell...they all are true professionals."

"You might be surprised, Potter. Now, may I?"

Finally, Harry stepped from the door and said, "I hope you will use common sense, Malfoy. I doubt that you want to end up in Azkaban because of this pathetic excuse for a human being."

Lucius gave him a curt nod...his vindictive glare boded nothing but hell for the man inside.

The moment Lucius entered the room and shut the door, Harry sank to the nearby chair. He sat there and contemplated two things. First...how his best friend had managed to end up in the middle of such a mess; and second...exactly how many Ministry rules he had broken since Friday morning. Harry sighed. The Malfoys were always bad news. Always.

Inside the Interrogation Chamber

Meanwhile, inside the room, Lucius turned his full attention to the restrained figure in the chair.

A maniacal smile spread across Dolohov's face. "Lucius, old friend," he hissed.

"Antonin, we meet again..."

Dolohov opened his mouth to answer, but Lucius' Silencio caught him before any sounds managed to escape. Dolohov's smile faltered and his gaze became guarded and worried. Lucius' menacing expression frightened him. His attempt to draw a calming breath was cut off by Lucius' wand, which was pressed hard into his throat a second later, forcing Dolohov to struggle for every breath.

"I have heard enough from you. Now, you will listen to me. For Narcissa, I should have killed you, you dirty bastard. However, circumstances forced my hand. I will make

sure that you will rot in Azkaban instead, Antonin. I will not sully my hands with your filthy blood."

Lucius stopped his bloodcurdling hissing and stepped back from the prisoner. The constrictive pressure of his wand disappeared. Dolohov drew a relieved breath and relaxed. A mad, twisted smile reappeared on his face.

With a last, deadly glare at Dolohov, Lucius turned on his heel and with slow, measured steps walked towards the door. His gloved hand covered the doorknob, ready to open it. Then he paused.

"And yet..." He turned to face Dolohov again.

"One more detail," growled Lucius, focusing his grey eyes on his prey. Moving with predatory fluidity, he rapidly closed the distance between them. One powerful and precise blow of his cane forced the chair with the bound wizard to fall back. When the back of Dolohov's head met the stone floor with a sickening thud and a dark-red puddle began to grow beneath him, a crooked smirk appeared on Lucius' face. He made one more step forward, and looming directly above the man on the floor, gazed into his terrified, frozen eyes.

"Your filthy mouth will never taint the name of my women. You will never talk about Narcissa or Hermione again." With these words, he stepped hard on his throat, right under the chin. Putting his entire weight on his foot, Lucius waited until something snapped under it. When a soft cracking noise reached his ears and Dolohov's eyes rolled back into his head, Lucius uttered a satisfied hum and walked out of the chamber.

A minute later, Harry hurriedly walked into the room, took in the scene in front of him, and yelled, "WHAT DID YOU DO?"

"Relax, Potter. He fell; somehow his chair tipped over." And with an elegant swirl of his robes, Lucius left.

Saturday evening. Harry Potter's House

"I cannot believe it. Why didn't you tell us right away? How long did you know?" Ginny chattered happily.

"For about a month, I guess. I don't know, Ginny, why I didn't tell you. Everything seemed very complicated." Hermione smiled tiredly.

The two friends sat on the sofa and chattered continually. Harry looked at them with a smile. After he checked Dolohov into Azkaban's hospital, he was finally free to go home. So, he picked up Hermione from her flat right after work and brought her with him.

"What I don't understand is this: how could you, knowing that you were pregnant, agree to Malfoy's plan?" asked Harry.

"I didn't know when I said, 'yes', Harry. I found out later."

"Why didn't you call the whole thing off then?" Harry kept pushing.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know, Harry, honestly. I guess I wanted revenge as well."

Hermione thought for a moment and then added, "Yes, I wanted revenge Harry. I needed it. My child will never know her father. I cannot explain how conflicted I felt when I found out that I was pregnant. I was happy, yes. But at the same time, it hurt so much...I couldn't tell Ron, couldn't share my joy with him..."

"It's all bitter-sweet, Hermione, I know. We need to stop these depressing talks now," Ginny interrupted, patting Hermione's shoulder. "We all need to move forward...especially now, with a new Weasley on the way. Ron would want us to move forward; I know it." Ginny wiped the stray tear from her cheek. "By the way, we need to tell mum, dad, and the boys. When do you want to announce it, Hermione?"

Hermione smiled through tears. "You just can't wait, Ginny. Next week, I will officially announce it next week, I promise."

Ginny gave Hermione a warm hug and went to check on the sleeping James.

Taking advantage of the moment, Hermione turned to Harry. "How did it go with Dolohov?"

"Smoothly. We got him without a hitch. I am going to use this GPS idea quite often, I think." A smug smile lit up his face.

"Yup, it was very clever. Brilliant, I'd say. Where is Dolohov now?"

"In Azkaban's hospital; he had an accident during his conversation with Malfoy." Harry's lips formed a hard line, and he fell silent.

Hermione watched her friend thoughtfully. "You know, he could have done something awful to me. Dolohov. I know he wanted to. I didn't have a wand to defend myself. I had tried to Apparate, but it hadn't worked. I had been so scared, Harry, really scared...for the baby and myself," breathed Hermione as her eyes began to moisten again. "The baby saved me, you know. My little, brave baby was blasting Dolohov's arse into oblivion every time he tried to touch me. I had never felt anything like that before, Harry. Can you imagine? No wand, no anything; just raw, elemental magic." Hermione gently put her palm on her stomach.

Harry covered Hermione's palm with his. "That is a brave little lad in there. He will be just like his father."

"Try a brave little lass, Harry." Hermione's laughter filled the room.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 18

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...Where your flames still bite my thigh

And my ribs crack where your wheels wind (Anne Sexton)

Hermione's Flat

This Sunday morning, the *Daily Prophet* and Harry popped up in Hermione's flat simultaneously. She didn't even have the time to give the owl with the newspaper a treat before a very agitated Harry jumped out of her fireplace.

"Hermione!"

"Harry?"

Her dishevelled, green-eyed friend took his time before answering. He needed to calm his breathing. Meanwhile, waiting for him, Hermione opened the *Prophet* and froze.

"Yes, that," breathed Harry.

Hermione didn't hear him. She hadn't even seen the headings yet. Lucius' photograph on the front page captured her attention entirely. Long platinum locks flourished freely around his face. An arrogant smile of superiority played on his sensual lips. The eyebrows...his perfectly trimmed eyebrows...were arched as usual. Thoughtfully, Hermione traced his features with the tip of her finger and sighed. She had tried desperately not to think about him for the last twenty-four hours, but now all her hard work had been in vain...

"Hermione! Are you listening?" Harry's shouting brought her to reality.

"Sorry, Harry... what?" Then she saw it.

Hermione Weasley...the Recently Widowed War Hero Is Pregnant with Lucius Malfoy's Child! True or False?

Hermione bit her lower lip and read again the flashing title.

"It looks like I wouldn't need to announce anything, after all," she muttered.

Harry began to babble, "This bastard Dolohov, it's all his fault. I have no idea how this information got out. We will fix this. We could arrange the interview and refute..."

Hermione interrupted his rumble. "Harry, don't. I will not explain anything to anyone. I simply refuse. The press will lose interest after a while; they always do. Besides, I had a crystal clear reputation for far too long. It's about time."

Surprisingly, Hermione wasn't furious. She wasn't even angry. *Numb* and *indifferent* were the right words to describe her feelings. These dirty, meaningless games of popularity, reputation, and other nonsense didn't worry her. It was nothing, nothing worthy.

"Harry, could you do me a favour and talk to Molly, please? Could you explain everything to her?" asked Hermione. "Will you?"

"I will." With that, Harry, reassured by Hermione that everything was fine, went to the Burrow. Poor him, he had to face and calm down the rest of the Weasleys.

Left alone, Hermione gave Lucius' photograph in the *Prophet* one more glance and then with a *Reducto*, blasted the damned piece of paper into ashes.

Looking thoughtfully at the grey flakes swirling languidly in the air, she sighed. Lucius' picture stirred feelings and emotions inside her that she decidedly strived to avoid. She recognized unmistakable longing growing in her heart and an urgent, aching craving in the pit of her stomach.

Bloody hormones...

Hermione jumped off the bar stool and darted from the kitchen. She needed chocolate. Now!

Six hours later, she was in her kitchen again. With a soft moan, she took another truffle from William Curley's "Framboise Truffle" box and put it in her mouth. Wearing only Lucius' silk robe, she basked in the last rays of the sun, sighing at their warmth.

Her heart was aching; her body was burning with desire. She craved him...his lips, his hands, his fire. Hermione did make an effort to suppress this all-absorbing yearning, but lost the battle. She genuinely hoped that the chocolate would soothe her longing. Instead, rich, buttery, bittersweet truffles melted in her mouth and only fuelled the raging fire inside her further. These wicked truffles tasted just like Lucius' kisses...irresistible, addictive and sinfully decadent.

Hermione drew a slow, shallow breath. Soft silk delicately caressed her skin. Lucius' scent still lingered on it, driving her even deeper into the pits. She moaned again and unable to contain her desire any longer, reached between her inner thighs. Hesitantly, she lightly touched herself through the robe's silk folds.

Malfoy Manor

Thirty-six hours... he had not seen her for thirty-six hours. He hadn't touched her for thirty-six long, torturous hours. He had not inhaled her scent for the tormenting thirty-six hours. The need to sense her was acute, suffocating. His treacherous body refused to obey and keep calm. His own eyes betrayed him, allowing her image to haunt him. His fingers craved her warm softness, aching and trembling in anticipation. It was inferno...pure, undiluted hell. Hot, savage flames of it licked and bit Lucius' heart. Raw fire burned his insides. He was burning for her, burning alive.

It was Sunday evening, almost twilight. Yellow-blue moonlight deviously crept into the room, coaxing away the last rays of the sun. Fluorescent flecks danced mischievously in Lucius' platinum locks. He sat at his desk in the library; the *Sunday Prophet* lay in front of him. His grey eyes were focused on the front page's photographs...one of him and one of Hermione. The heading was shouting,

Hermione Weasley...the Recently Widowed War Hero Is Pregnant with Lucius Malfoy's Child! True or False?

Shit.

Lucius read the heading again and swore under his breath. Damn Dolohov and his foul mouth...he should have killed him, that filth, that son of a bitch...and screw Potter and his plan. Damn the press, always ready to rummage in someone's dirty laundry. Damn the Ministry...even walls have ears there. Damn Potter again, ignorant fool...he warned him yesterday to silence his Aurors...

Lucius growled. Of course, he would pull strings and shut mouths at the *Prophet*. However, the damage was already inflicted, and now he would have to endure the brunt of it. Lucius frowned...*Hermione and him*, to be precise. The Wizarding Community did not forget scandals easily.

The only comforting bit in all this mess was his moment with Dolohov. It was an immensely satisfying moment indeed. Lucius hummed, recalling it.

A second later, he carefully regarded Hermione's photograph in the *Prophet* again. It wasn't the most recent one. She was smiling warmly in it. Her chestnut curls embellished her happy face. She was beaming at someone. Suddenly, he felt hot, steamy geysers of jealousy beginning to fill his already burning heart. It was ridiculous,

he knew. *Bloody thirty-six hours*, he thought.

"I need to see her. Now!"

Lucius abruptly rose. The resounding crack of his chair meeting the floor echoed in the silence of the Manor. A moment later, he disappeared in the green flames of the Floo.

A soft, breathy moan met Lucius when he stepped out of Hermione's fireplace. He walked towards the sound. Soon, he stopped in awe...Hermione in his silk robe, with her eyes closed and her beautiful curls all wild around her face was perched on the barstool. The robe's folds fell open, revealing her long legs and creamy thighs.

Lucius drew closer to her, and realization hit him...his witch was pleasuring herself. The air became too hot for breathing, forcing him to loosen his cravat around his neck. *Hmm, talking about perfect timing*, thought Lucius as he crept even closer to her.

Hermione was utterly lost in the sensation, when a big, warm hand covered hers, and the familiar baritone whispered huskily, "May I?"

Hermione's eyes flew open and met Lucius' shimmering, lucid gaze, locked on her.

"Lucius," she breathed.

The next instant her hand between her thighs was replaced with his much more skilful one. Her wet fingers were sucked into Lucius' hot mouth and licked clean. Then, only then, his lips were on hers. The kiss was slow, simmering. Gently but insistently, his lips and tongue dominated Hermione's. They were dancing the dance choreographed by him. Her body was singing the song composed by him. His masterful hand was steadily driving her into orgasm with precisely delivered strokes.

Suddenly, his lips left hers, and his fingers abandoned her pulsating, needy core. Hermione felt absolutely disoriented as she was lifted and laid on the cold, granite counter top. The silk sash of the robe was untied; its soft folds were thrown aside. A low growl vibrated against her bare skin, "Need more, witch; I need to feel more of you, much more."

And his fingers were inside her again, moving urgently. His mouth was everywhere, licking, biting, kissing. His free hand found her sensitive breasts and caressed gently, switching between them. She restlessly squirmed under his massive attack on all her senses. Her moans and gasps filled the small kitchen. She felt the hot wave begin to rise from the tips of her toes higher and higher. It was suffocating. Hermione was immersed in pleasure, consumed by it. Eventually, after one last precise swipe of Lucius' deft fingers across her most sensitive spot and his hoarse whisper into her ear, "*let go now*," she was gone. Lucius' lips covered hers right after she called his name in ecstasy.

Lucius was leaning on the counter, watching and waiting for his witch to come down from her high. He gently stroked her damp curls and kept his other hand possessively on her rounded stomach. When her breathing returned to semi-normal and liquid, honey eyes focused on him, he said, "Good evening, darling. How are you?"

Hermione snorted weakly and answered, "Good evening to you as well, Lucius. I am fabulous, thank you." Hermione shifted and tried to sit up, but his warm, big hand on her stomach did not quite allow that. Lucius placed a series of light, gentle kisses all over her exposed body, fixed the parted folds of her silk robe together and retied the sash. Now Hermione was able to sit up.

However, the moment she did, Lucius gathered her in his arms and murmured softly, "I hope you would not mind, if I move us to a more appropriate location for our imminent activities."

"Imminent activities?" Hermione snaked her arms around Lucius' neck.

"Precisely, my dear. You could not possibly think that this was the end of it, could you?" With that, he once again Apparated them to the Manor.

One minute after they left, Hermione's fireplace lit up, and Harry stepped into the living room. He called, "Hermione... Hermione? Are you here?"

Only silence was his answer...

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms, and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love. Epilogue ignored.

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Chapter 14

The Manor

Kisses, her little kisses...sweet, sensual and intoxicating...were melting him. She made him tremble. Tremble! Lucius Malfoy, fifty-year-old man, trembled from the girl's soft kisses.

He stood in his private chamber with Hermione still in his arms. Wicked moonlight teased their senses and tampered with their sanity. It danced in Hermione's mahogany hair and shimmered in Lucius' silver eyes. Their magic was swirling and merging around them. A warm amber glow surrounded Hermione; cool crystals shone and sparkled around Lucius. The magic of the moonlight changed them, freed them from their doubts and worries. They were careless and sensual. There was no tomorrow, no future; only now, only them in each other's arms, only passion and fire.

Lucius released Hermione from his arms and ordered in a low growl, "Undress me."

She obeyed his order silently and readily. Slowly, she untied his cravat. Carefully, she opened every button on his many layers of clothes. Gently, she took them off one by one, savouring every minute of it. When at last she reached his bare flesh, a rapturous groan was torn from Lucius' throat. Hermione's fingers ravenously touched, coaxed, and caressed. His body mesmerized her; his scent intoxicated her; his smouldering gaze dazzled her. The sound of his frenzied breathing heightened her arousal.

Soon light touches weren't enough. Lucius slipped the silk robe from Hermione's shoulders and drew her to bed. There, for the first time in their short history, he allowed her to lead in their love dance. She laid him on his back and sat on his hips. He was hers. He had surrendered, submitted to her. Hermione's mouth was on him. Everywhere. She tasted him, devoured him, worshipped every inch of his body until Lucius grunted, his voice hoarse with urgency, "Now, Hermione. Take me into you now."

She positioned herself above him then, descending on him slowly, torturously, marvelling in the sensation of him sliding inside her, penetrating her. At last, Lucius' roar and Hermione's moan announced their unity, oneness. For a moment, it seemed that the world froze around them. Time stopped its running, and Earth halted its rotation. Hermione locked her eyes with Lucius, and they began their movements. The world was alive again. Time and Earth restarted their perpetual motion anew in unison with the lovers.

She was a vision, a siren. Lucius was lost, utterly, irrevocably lost. She was driving them both to the climax with such force, such passion. Later, he would dominate her again, and she would succumb to him more than once this night. Yet the ravishing image of Hermione on top of him...her rose-colored skin, glistening with perspiration; her amber eyes, half-closed in ecstasy; her cherry-red lips and wild curls; her full breasts and rounded stomach...would be engraved in Lucius' mind forever. Time and again they drove each other to completion and, eventually, to total exhaustion.

They lay in his bed in a tangled mass of limbs, silk sheets, Hermione's curls and Lucius' locks. Their exhausted bodies intertwined in every possible way.

"I should go," she said.

"Stay, nothing awaits you there, only a cold bed and grief. Sleep now."

Lucius' strong arms embraced her, and the steady thudding of his heart lulled her into slumber.

Harsh, merciless sunrays awoke Hermione. She found herself alone in bed; Lucius wasn't there.

Confusion, guilt, despair, grief...morning brought it all. The elusive euphoria of the night evaporated, vanished with the first ray of sun. Unavoidable, unforgiving reality dawned on her. Dark, heavy thoughts flooded Hermione's mind. Not love! Traitor! They shouted in her head. The urge to run was overwhelming, forcing Hermione to hurriedly spring up from the bed.

The door opened and, fully dressed, Lucius walked into the room.

"Good morning."

His freshly shaved face didn't bear any signs of confusion or doubt...a soft, satisfied smile played on his lips. Nude Hermione froze in the middle of the room, desperately trying to locate her robe. The next moment, it appeared in Lucius' hand.

"Are you looking for this, my dear?" he murmured as he held it for her.

Hastily, Hermione dived into the robe and tightly wrapped it around herself. Sensing her uneasiness, Lucius carefully observed the woman in front of him. His smile faded, and a familiar coldness slowly crept into his features.

"You were going to run, Hermione, weren't you?"

"No." Hermione's honey eyes found his silver ones. "What are we doing, Lucius? What's happening? I don't know how to do this, how to behave, how to justify myself."

Hermione felt her lower lip began to tremble, and she bit it hard. Lucius' eyes caught that. He came closer to her and traced her lip with his thumb, wiping a tiny, ruby-red droplet of blood. Her lips parted from the unexpected caress. A soft sigh escaped her mouth, and instantly Lucius' lips were on hers. His tongue gently swept over her bitten lip, soothing it. Hermione's mind clouded again, and she almost lost herself to the sensation. Almost.

Lucius was kissing her supple lips, knowing that in a minute she would push him away from her. Still, he couldn't resist. Without hesitation, he took everything her sweet mouth offered.

"Stop! Please, Lucius, stop." Her small palms pushed against him.

"We need to stop this, it's wrong. We both know that."

Anger began to stir in Lucius' heart. The girl did not know her place. She was his; he claimed her. He would not allow her to reject him like this.

"Ah, here come the Gryffindor morals." He smirked coldly. "Rather late for those, don't you think, Hermione?"

Hermione shivered from the ice-cold tone of his words. Understanding his growing anger, she pleaded, "You know we need to stop. Lucius, please, do not come for me anymore. Please, let me be."

"Are you trying to dismiss me, witch? No one dismisses me, no one."

A shadow of a wishful smile touched Hermione's lips, and she continued, "I cannot dismiss you, Lucius. I wish I could. Alas, I am too weak for that. I am begging you...just let me be, Lucius. Let me be." Her lips began to tremble again and her eyes filled with tears.

For a second, anger disappeared from Lucius' eyes and warm flecks of compassion flashed in them. Unconsciously, his hand rose to caress Hermione's face. However, the next moment, coldness returned, and he dropped his hand before it could reach her. He stepped back and uttered, "Very well, I'll do as you wish, Mrs. Weasley. I am sure you will find your way home. Goodbye."

And he was gone. He left Hermione be, just as she asked...alone, in tears and utterly heartbroken. With difficulty, she gathered the last shreds of her sanity and flooded to her flat.

The moment Hermione landed at her living room, she was met with another angry voice. "Care to explain, Hermione?" The tone and furious green eyes indicated that Harry was seriously pissed off.

Yet Hermione, in her emotional and mental state, didn't notice that.

"Harry!"

She saw her best friend and launched herself onto his chest, showering him with stifled sobs, tears, and muffled complaints, and effectively robbing him of an opportunity to lash out at her.

Harry

When Harry hadn't found Hermione at home the night before, and then again, didn't find her at home this morning, he just knew she was with Malfoy. Emotions were boiling in his heart; he could barely contain himself.

However, now...when his best friend and, at the same time, the guilty party...was crying her eyes out in his arms, he was at a loss.

"Hermione, Hermione, what did he do? Tell me. I'll kill him, honestly!"

"No," came her muffled reply.

Thirty minutes later, on this Monday morning, showered, dressed and ready to face the world, Hermione sat in her kitchen.

"When did it start?" Harry reluctantly asked Hermione. He had mixed feelings about this...he needed to know the truth, and he didn't want to hear it.

"When Lucius saved me from Dolohov." Hermione noticed Harry wincing at her 'Lucius'. "We were slowly coming to it for weeks. We spent a lot of time together. Loneliness is a scary feeling, Harry; terrible, actually." For a while, they sat in silence, both of them deeply engrossed in their thoughts. Eventually, Hermione broke the silence with a sigh. "It's over now, no more."

"Over? Is it truly?" Harry gave her a sceptical glance.

Hermione nodded. "Don't give me that look, Harry, it is over."

"I won't pretend that I understand, Hermione. And I cannot put myself in your shoes either. Hence, if you say it's over, it's over."

"Thank you, Harry. Oh shit, I'm late for work!" Hermione jumped. In a hurry, she grabbed her handbag and was ready to leave when Harry's hand stopped her.

"Well, about that...it is a mad house in the Ministry. The press is there; you can imagine the rest. I have a Floo in my office. I think it would be better to go directly to my office, and then we can wait it out there. Mm?"

Hermione gave Harry's words a moment of consideration and then said, "No, I won't hide, Harry. I will arrive at the Ministry the way I always do."

Harry smiled, patted her shoulder and muttered, "I should have guessed as much. Ginny and the family are waiting for us there."

The Ministry of Magic

She is late.

Lucius stood in the Ministry's corridor. A dark niche safely concealed him from the public's eyes. He was waiting for Hermione's arrival, along with the press and a few dozen innocent bystanders. The fruits of his morning's efforts were already evident. All the right people were talked to and all the strings were pulled. Unsurprisingly, one by one, correspondents and representatives were disappearing. The crowd was rapidly thinning.

Suddenly, a wave of excited rumble rolled over the remaining crowd. At last, the main attraction had arrived. In a few seconds, Hermione came into Lucius' view. She walked through the corridor with determination. Seven Weasleys and Potter escorted her, forming a barrier between Hermione and the crowd.

The moment he saw her, his breath hitched and his mouth went dry. His hands kept squeezing the cane until it yielded with a discontented creak. An unexpected sense of admiration flooded Lucius' heart. She was magnificent...her eyes were alight; her untamed mane curled wildly around her face. She held her head high with pride, and her every step was full of grace and confidence.

Lucius drew a satisfied breath: here she was...his witch, his lioness, his new lady. Their morning rant didn't matter. Nothing mattered, he had decided. And once the decision was reached, there was no way around it. Eventually, she would be by his side. And if it was pursuit she wanted, then it was pursuit she would get.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love.

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Chapter 15

*Got me hanging on a string, honey...**

Two Weeks Later

Hermione

Today Hermione sat in her office with her head resting on her hands. She was tired, and to be honest, utterly miserable. How long can a lonely, pregnant, heartbroken woman last? Even if her name was Hermione Granger, even if friends and family surrounded her, even if she was convinced that she was doing the *right thing*. Hermione knew the answer...eight weeks. It took her just two short months, or an almost tolerable eight weeks, or somewhat troubling fifty-six days, or torturous, agonizing, and at last, simply unbearable one thousand three hundred forty four hours...to cover the distance between sanity and madness.

The last time Hermione had seen Lucius on that fateful Monday was when, after a night of lovemaking, they had gone their separate ways in the morning. On that same Monday, she had marched through the Ministry corridor with Harry, Ginny and the rest of the Weasleys around her, when she had sensed his presence. She had known that he was watching her. She had felt how his warm gaze caressed her, forcing her heart to pirouette dangerously. She had turned, and her eyes had found him. He had stood in the dimly lit alcove...proud, powerful, and irresistible; his gray eyes had been locked on her. There had been no anger, no coldness in them, only burning passion

mixed with determination. Immediately, she had sunk into their shimmering-gray depth, finding perfect equilibrium, perfect balance and peace there. She had felt so comfortable in this deep, gray ocean, so safe, so desired, and so... No, it wasn't possible.

The moment Lucius had broken their eye contact, had turned on his heel and left, the equilibrium, the balance, had been destroyed. The harmony had been killed with one elegant swirl of his robes, forever...or so it seemed. Thank God, almost nobody had noticed that staring contest between them. Only Arthur had given Hermione a long, sympathetic look and had smiled sadly. The kind eyes of her father-in-law had been filled with compassion.

A few hours later that day, the press had left and had never returned...just as Arthur had predicted. He had been sure that Lucius would suppress the matter quickly and effectively.

That same evening, in a conversation, Arthur had tried to prepare Hermione for rumours, for the pressure she most likely would have to endure. He had been right again. Whispers...hushed, muffled whispers...rustled constantly behind Hermione's back. Whenever and wherever she went, she heard them. This endless hissing was enraging her. She had tried to fight it at first. But how can one fight thin air? And that exactly was what it was...faceless, shapeless shadows in the air; whispering, shameless rumours; rustling, disgusting innuendos; and gossip.

Life had returned to its almost normal cycle. Molly, Arthur, Bill, Charlie, Percy, George, and Ginny hadn't said a single word about the article in the *Prophet* or Lucius, probably thanks to Harry's efforts. All of them had been happy and excited to have one more Weasley on the way. Molly couldn't stop fussing around Hermione for weeks until, exhausted, Hermione was forced to hide from her motherly care.

During those weeks, Hermione had accomplished quite a few crucial things. First of all, she and Ginny had gone to St Mungo's. There, they had found out that Hermione indeed was pregnant with a little girl and that she was already around three months along. The second...important, difficult, but necessary...accomplishment had been that Hermione had finally gone through all Ron's things. Everything had been carefully folded and put in boxes for Molly, Ginny, and her to keep. She had needed it. It had given her some sort of closure, the feeling that life still goes on.

And life did go on, with the only hiccup being that Hermione could not forget Lucius, could not tear him from her head and...this she wasn't willing to admit even to herself...from her heart.

For weeks, every morning Hermione had been waking up hoping that this day would be easier. Then again she had hoped for it before going to sleep at night. No such luck! No matter how thoroughly she had busied herself with work or friends and family, it hadn't been getting any easier. No, it had been only getting harder and harder. She had tried to forget and couldn't. Work, friends, family had all been there for her, but unfortunately, they just were not enough.

Hermione had gone to the cemetery frequently...crying and seeking comfort there. However, unyielding granite hadn't been particularly understanding and could not provide anything, except for the black emptiness, freezing coldness, and all-absorbing loneliness.

And she was still alive, damn it! Hence, she needed a man with warm flesh and blood to sustain her. Every night Hermione's body betrayed her, taunting her with dreams and memories. Sometimes they would start with Ron, sometimes not. Yet, by the middle of the night, they always returned to Lucius...Lucius kissing her, Lucius touching and caressing her, Lucius making love to her. Hermione craved him with every fibre of her being, and yet she was still fighting. Still fighting against herself.

Some days, she would throw away Lucius' silk robe, only to take it back a few hours later. Some days she would eat tons of chocolate and pleasure herself. All these attempts were fruitless, futile. Thoughts of Lucius never let her go.

By the end of the sixth week, the scent of his cologne had begun to pursue Hermione everywhere, especially at work. Often she had imagined the swirl of his robes as if he'd just turned around the corner of the Ministry corridor. His soft baritone had sounded in her ears in a low murmur, as if he just had been talking to someone outside of her office.

It was madness...hot, white madness...that was slowly engulfing her.

And now Hermione was there, at the end of this downward spiral, at the sacred place called *her wits' end*. "Who could have thought, I would be so weak?" she chuckled sadly. Tomorrow would be Dolohov's trial, and Hermione would need to take the stand, but this didn't worry her. She wasn't afraid of that. Lucius would need to take the stand as well. That meant tomorrow she would have to face him again. Tomorrow, for the first time in eight weeks, she would see Lucius.

Hermione Granger was never a coward. But this time she was afraid...afraid of herself.

Lucius

It was not easy to stay away from the witch. At first, he thought it would take a week, maybe two, and Hermione would run into his waiting arms. She had not.

"Stubborn little witch," muttered Lucius to himself.

By the end of the third week, it was clear that Hermione would not give up easily and quickly. Lucius braced himself for a long and excruciating wait. He had enough common sense to understand the necessity of this...the witch had to come to him willingly, by herself. Lucius, being a veritable Malfoy, was sure that time would do its job, and eventually her need for him would overcome the witch's stubbornness. He would not push her; he would wait. Lucius would do as he had promised Hermione...he would stay away from her. Well, at least he would try.

Lucius busied himself with slight remodelling of the manor. Occasionally, he would go to the cemetery. However, soon he began to crave his witch. The image of them making love haunted him. It stole his sleep in the darkness of the night, and his peace in the light of day. Frequently, he would walk back and forth in front of the Floo in silent battle with himself. Desire and need for her were so acute that he could barely contain himself. The sensation of a horribly blunt, steel blade slowly slicing his heart to pieces tortured him. Was it love? Was it supposed to hurt this much? Lucius did not have an answer. He was a complete novice at this...an amateur, lovesick, half-century old wizard.

On the sixth week, Lucius Malfoy partially gave up. He went to the Ministry. There, he spent hours around Hermione's office under the pretence of taking care of some nonexistent matters. He talked with her secretary about the weather and politics. He knew quite well that she could hear him from her office and that she would be able to distinguish the scent of his cologne long after he was gone. A few times, Lucius even let Hermione see him as he rounded the corner of the Ministry's corridor. He was driving them both crazy, torturing her with his presence, torturing himself with her nearness. In other words, it was madness...complete, utter madness.

Eight weeks passed, and finally the investigation on Dolohov's case ended. The trial date was set for the next day. Lucius sat at his desk, looking at the Malfoy's family tree. He was waiting for Draco. He had sent for him this morning...they needed to talk. He had seen his son a few times after Dolohov was caught. To Lucius' surprise, Draco and Astoria were not at all eager to return to England. They both felt quite comfortable and content at their villa in Nice. Astoria was almost at her due date, and in about three weeks, the Malfoys would welcome a new heir...Scorpius.

Lucius drew a heavy sigh. Looking at the Malfoy's family tree, he saw generation after generation of pure-blooded wizards. One arranged marriage after another. Marriages in which everything was considered...wealth, social status, blood purity. The only thing that was never considered in these marriages was love. It was never about love in the Malfoy history.

Lucius strived to convince himself that he had fulfilled his duty to his family. He had given the Malfoy line a son, a pure-blooded heir. Now it was Draco's turn to become the Lord of the Manor. Lucius would step down, and his son would take his place. That was the plan.

Luckily, Draco's marriage with Astoria was a success. They were perfect for each other and looked genuinely happy. And now Lucius was granted a chance to be happy as well. He had found himself a witch with whom he wanted to share the rest of his life.

"Father?" The customary drawl sounded in the library, interrupting Lucius' musings.

"I am here, son."

Draco came into view. Lucius watched him thoughtfully. To Lucius, Draco was a fine young man. All authentic Malfoy features were in place...he was blond, tall, broad-shouldered and handsome. Lucius also recognised the fact that the boy had a keen, witty mind. Yes, Draco was certainly ready to replace him.

After greetings and a brief news exchange, Lucius decided to get straight to the point. "I think it is time for you and Astoria to return to England, son. I want you to take my place, to fulfil your duties as the Malfoy heir," said Lucius, watching his son carefully.

"So, it's true then. You've got yourself tangled in Granger's curls, father. Interesting...."

"Where did you hear this? Did you believe that rubbish in the *Prophet*?" snapped Lucius at him.

Draco chuckled and gave his father the best Malfoy's smirk. "No father, not the *Prophet*. We share elves, remember? And elves like to talk to their young master. Therefore, I know everything. Thus, you can spare the explanations and especially, the details."

"Well, all the better that you know the reason, then. And wipe that smirk from your face, boy, before I whip you."

"No."

"No?" Lucius frowned.

Draco looked into his father's eyes and added, "We are not coming back, father. Astoria does not want to return to England, not until Scorpius turns eleven. And taking into account that he is not even born yet, we are not coming back for quite some time. I am surprised that you were able to see past Granger's blood status, but I can understand you, father, honestly I can. You never loved mother, and mother probably never loved you. Now you've found it...the love. I am glad you eventually did. But I am not coming back, sorry. You are on your own in this. At least for the nearest eleven years."

Lucius listened to his son quietly, and then, after a moment, he said, "Very well, son, you made your choice, and now it is time for me to make mine. I will marry the witch and will bring her here. She will become a Malfoy, the new Lady of the Manor. I am still the head of the most influential wizard family in England, and I can and I will do as I wish. No one will stop me."

Draco shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. "It works fine for me. As long as I don't have to call Granger *mum*. Are you sure she will have you though? The little witch can be quite stubborn sometimes; I know her. She does not always know what's good for her." Mischievous flecks played in Draco's eyes as he wiggled his blond eyebrows.

"Don't tempt me, boy...on your way now. Give Astoria my regards, will you?"

"I will. Goodbye, father."

A few minutes later, Lucius was alone again. He was pleased with himself. *Tomorrow*. He would have his witch tomorrow.

*Karen Elson/Pretty Babies

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love.

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Chapter 16

Tuesday, September 27, 9:50 am. The Ministry of Magic, Courtroom # 7.

A murky, gloomy courtroom met Lucius and Draco with hollow, cold emptiness, producing shivers in both of them. They sat on the bench and waited in silence.

By request of all involved parties, Antonin Dolohov was given a closed trial. Therefore, there would be no press, no flashing photo cameras, no curious crowd allowed...only the victim's immediate family members, the Auror leading the investigation, and two key witnesses.

While the Malfoys were waiting, the room was slowly filling with people. One by one, all the Wizengamot's members walked into the courtroom and took their places. Harry Potter, the chief investigator, appeared shortly after them. Soon after his arrival, Lucius and Draco had the dubious pleasure of witnessing the unorganized, noisy entrance of the motley-looking Weasley clan.

There was, however, someone missing...one particular witch, to be exact. Lucius huffed in annoyance. With his eyes trained on the entrance, he was an epitome of rigidity. It was five minutes to ten, and Hermione still was not in sight.

Where is she? Uneasiness began to gnaw at Lucius' heart, and his mind began to draw unrealistically gruesome pictures of what might have happened to her. Thus, when at one minute to ten his long-awaited little witch finally stepped into the courtroom, Lucius let out a sigh of relief.

Hermione momentarily paused at the entrance, and Lucius immediately caught her eyes. Warm, liquid amber met shimmering, lucid silver. Their desperate gazes, hungry for each other, collided and merged violently. Both of them were trying to see through and to penetrate the armour and touch the soul of the other. Both were seeking for the signs; looking for affirmation that their suffering, longing, and craving was mutual. Sure enough, they both found what they looked for. Lucius unmistakably sensed the crumbled state of Hermione's resolve and her readiness to give up. Hermione clearly recognised Lucius' dire need and a burning desire for her.

The loud voice of the minister interrupted their moment. Kingsley Shacklebolt announced the beginning of the trial. Hermione reluctantly tore her eyes from Lucius' and hurriedly sat down on the nearest bench.

Violent intensity permeated the room...Dolohov was going to be brought to the courtroom in a minute. Lucius was calm and composed; he was quite sure that the outcome of this trial was already predetermined. On the other hand, it was obvious that the emotional state of his son was the absolute opposite of his own. Lucius could feel that Draco's nerves were taut as the string of a bow. The boy was extremely tense; his hatred towards his mother's murderer, whom he was about to see, was almost palpable.

Hence, the moment a chained Dolohov, clothed in prison robes, appeared on the threshold, Draco sprang up. He was already in mid-air jump to Dolohov's throat when Lucius managed to intercept him.

"Easy son, easy. Get a hold of your emotions, Draco. Do not make a spectacle of yourself," growled Lucius in a low mutter.

"That filth, that son of a bitch, should be dead," hissed the enraged younger Malfoy through clenched teeth.

"Yes, he should. However, he will slowly rot in the misery of Azkaban instead. I have come to think that it is a rather plausible alternative. Look at him, Draco. He is already half-dead. The rest is only a matter of time, son," uttered Lucius in a hushed whisper, trying to calm down the youth.

A pair of pavement-grey eyes focused on Dolohov's figure. The prisoner was chained to the chair in the middle of the courtroom, facing the members of the Wizengamot. His head was unnaturally crooked to the side; his wet lips were twisted in a demented smile; a thin trail of saliva trickled down his jaw. His mad, maniacal stare constantly shifted from one face to another.

"What the hell happened to him?" Draco turned to his father with puzzlement and disgust.

A pair of blond brows arched in the customary Malfoy manner, and a response sounded in a low, satisfied drawl, "Antonin had an unfortunate accident, Draco. He is probably still recovering."

Realisation dawned on the younger Malfoy and the smirk of understanding spread across his face.

"Father," drawled Draco with the slight nod of recognition.

"Son," Lucius gave a curt nod back.

The head of investigation was the first one to speak. He presented the case to the minister. After hearing Potter's presentation, Shacklebolt had a number of questions for the defendant. At this point of the trial, the head of the investigation stated that Antonin Dolohov had suffered from a brain haemorrhage, which had resulted in his loss of speech.

Unsurprisingly, this news was met with a satisfied murmur in the courtroom. There were even a few loud shouts from the Weasley family.

"You deserve this, bloody bastard!"

The commotion forced the minister to call for order. After peace has been restored, Dolohov answered the questions by shaking his head insanely. That being done rather quickly, the minister requested that witnesses take the stand.

Lucius was called first. He stood in front of the Wizengamot's members with his habitual aristocratic confidence and answered all questions in his calm, pleasant, and self-assured baritone. Ten minutes later, Lucius returned to his seat. Now it was Hermione's turn.

She got up graciously and walked forward. The silk of her light lavender robes draped beautifully around her body, clinging to her every curve. Lucius could not tear his eyes from her, even had he wanted to. The minister was asking Hermione questions, and she was answering him. Lucius, however, did not hear any of it. His full attention was focused on the music of her melodic voice, on the softness of her curves, on the beauty of her face. He missed her. He missed her terribly.

Was it amoral to think about another woman on the trial of the murderer of his wife? Yes, it probably was. Should he have stopped it? Yes, he probably should. Could he have stopped it? Yes, he probably could. Did he want to stop it? Hell no, he most certainly did not!

Lucius' eyes followed Hermione when she returned to her seat. The witch made a point of not looking at him during the trial. "No matter," he thought, "she will look at me later. I will make her look at me."

After Lucius and Hermione had given their testimony, there was only one thing left...the verdict. This part of the trial went exactly as expected. Antonin Dolohov was found guilty on all counts and was sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban. That was the end of it. The closure. The dead could not be returned, but now they were at least avenged properly.

The moment Shacklebolt announced the end of the trial and called the case closed, Draco hastily bade his goodbye and rushed home to Astoria. Lucius shook his head, gave him a mocking glance, and chuckled, "Who could have thought that a Malfoy would be so easily domesticated?"

He walked out of the courtroom and settled outside of it, waiting for Hermione. His eyes were once again glued to the door. At last, Hermione had said all her farewells and stepped into the corridor. She spotted Lucius immediately. However, she only gave him a slight nod and started to move through the Ministry corridors towards her office.

"Oh no, you don't," muttered Lucius and went after her. The enthusiastic beating of his heart accelerated in anticipation.

The hunt was officially on! The predator was ready to claim his prey.

He knew for certain that she was aware of his pursuit; he was hot on her heels. And yet the stubborn witch chose not to stop. That was even better; Lucius indeed enjoyed the chase very much.

The delicate scent of her perfume filled his nostrils. Her untamed curls flourished before his eyes. The fluid motions of her body stoked raw, scorching fire in his groin. And after a few minutes, he could swear he sensed her arousal in the air as well...or maybe he was just absurdly oversexed.

"All right, that is quite enough," growled Lucius. With that, he snatched Hermione by the waist and dragged her into the first empty room he saw. Hermione shrieked but did not fight him.

Once the door was closed, and locking and imperturbable charms applied, Lucius turned his full attention to the slight witch in his arms. She was trembling and panting feverishly. Her back was pressed against his chest, and Lucius' arms held her tightly.

Lucius lowered his face into her curls and inhaled. For a moment he just breathed her in, marvelling in her closeness.

"Why did you run, you silly girl? What were you thinking?" he purred in her ear after a minute.

"You promised to stay away, Lucius. Why aren't you?" breathed Hermione.

Lucius pressed her to himself even tighter and began to nibble on her neck. Simultaneously, he ground his hips lightly into hers. They both moaned from the friction. And yes, now Lucius was absolutely certain that he sensed Hermione's arousal in the air.

"Why should I, Hermione? I desperately want and need you. You, quite obviously, desperately want and need me. So, why should I stay away? Could you please explain it

to me? Because I cannot comprehend that." Lucius' murmur vibrated against Hermione's neck.

His deft fingers began to swiftly undo the buttons on her robes, and shortly both of his palms covered Hermione's sensitive breasts. She moaned again and arched into him, causing him to grunt. Encouraged by Hermione's responsiveness, Lucius covered her neck with open-mouthed kisses, leaving a wet trail on her bare skin. One of his palms ventured lower to caress her abdomen while the other fondled her breasts and pinched her nipples gently.

Alas, his content was short lived. Suddenly, Hermione untangled herself from Lucius' hands. She turned to face him, drew a heavy sigh, and said, "You are asking why, Lucius? Look at me; look carefully." And with that, she tore open the folds of her lavender robes and exposed herself to him.

"I am almost five months pregnant, Lucius! I am carrying another man's child! Aren't you repulsed? You should be repulsed; you are a Malfoy for God's sake! How could you possibly want me...a pregnant, Muggle-born witch? What could you possibly need from me?"

Lucius froze, taking in the sight of her. Her stomach was more rounded and more prominent. Her breasts were heavier. She looked much more pregnant now and was absolutely, utterly, positively, breathtakingly beautiful.

"Repulsed? Repulsed, you said." The sound of his ragged breathing filled the room.

With a predatory growl, he closed the distance between them.

"Let me show you exactly how repulsed I am."

In an instant, Hermione was pushed up against the wall. Lucius was all over her: kissing, licking, biting, touching, caressing every inch of her body. He was taking, breathing her air right out her mouth. His lips were everywhere. His hands were everywhere. He took her by storm, attacking and overwhelming all her senses. While controlling her every breath, he seized her every attempt to fight and overpowered her every will. Until eventually, she gave up and succumbed to the maelstrom of sensations and desire.

Her arms snaked themselves around his neck then. Her lips opened for him, granting him an entrance. Her legs wound themselves around his waist, pressing him closer, even closer to her, and she let out a beautiful, melodic cry of surrender.

And he knew then, that he had won. She was his forever. Forever...no less. Lucius Malfoy will see to it.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love.

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Chapter 17

Tuesday, September 27, Evening. Cemetery.

The bright red sunset filled the cemetery with rose-coloured shadows as the sun slowly sank into the horizon. A woman's lonely silhouette lay on Ron Weasley's grave. Her chestnut curls spread across the granite stone, glistening in the tired sunset rays. Her petite body shook as she wept, and the thick granite stone greedily swallowed her muffled sobs and whimpers.

Hermione had come here right after her passionate encounter with Lucius. He had been determined to take her to the Manor immediately, but Hermione managed to convince him that she still had work to do. After a lengthy discussion, Lucius left, determined to pick her up later in the afternoon. The moment he left her office, she fled to the cemetery. She felt that she needed to be there.

Was it a yearning for forgiveness, a need for approval, or some sort of blessing that brought her to the cemetery today? Hermione didn't know, but regardless of what she sought, all she found was the same, cruelly silent grave, and a cold unresponsive stone. And thus, she lost herself in grief once again. She cried until her throat was raw from sobbing, until her eyes were unable to produce any more tears, until she was completely exhausted. Then she just lay there. The sense of time abandoned her. Her limbs became stiff and numb from the prolonged contact with the cold stone.

"Enough," a familiar baritone sounded from somewhere above, and at the same time, two strong arms lifted Hermione from the grave.

"Lucius," she whispered and clung to him. Here he was...warm, real, alive. His presence gave her everything she needed, everything she had been seeking. At that moment, pressed snugly against his chest, Hermione found the comfort and peace that she had been longing for. There was no point in denying or fighting him any longer. At last, Hermione felt content. Resting in the security of his arms and inhaling his spice scent, she finally let her heart calm.

Suddenly, she heard another familiar voice.

"Let go of her, Malfoy." At that, Lucius' arms embraced her even tighter.

"Harry, what are you doing here?" Hermione turned and looked at her friend. His furious green eyes were fixed on her.

"I looked for you everywhere." Harry gave her a sharp glare full of accusations. "I thought maybe you needed a friend after the trial, but I can see you have already found one. And you said it was over?" Harry's voice climbed higher as his disappointment grew.

"I know what I said, Harry," whispered Hermione. She desperately tried to find the words to explain, the words that would help Harry to understand her.

"Harry, I..."

A calm voice interrupted her. "I think it is obvious that your concerns are misplaced and your presence is utterly unnecessary, Potter. You may go ahead and take your leave now. As you can see, Mrs Weasley is already taken care of."

Harry clenched his fists and uttered, with disapproval oozing from each word, "What are you doing, Hermione? Are you insane?"

Hermione slowly shook her head and whispered, "I am sorry, Harry. We will talk later. I am very tired now," and again pressed her face into Lucius' chest. In the next instant, she felt the pull of Side-Along Apparition.

Wednesday, September 28, early morning. Malfoy Manor.

The next morning, Lucius opened his eyes and was greeted by a luscious mane of chocolate curls. A soft curvy body rested peacefully in his arms. Hermione was still asleep.

Yesterday, she had been so drained that even before the elf brought the tea, she was asleep. The only thing Lucius had left to do was to provide warmth and comfort by holding her. He had hoped for other sorts of closeness last night, of course. Well, at least she was now with him, in his arms. Today, Lucius woke up full of optimism. He assumed that Hermione would be refreshed, full of energy and, he hoped, desire. A soft sigh announced her awakening and a minute later, her honey eyes found him, and she smiled.

Lucius drawled softly, "Good morning," as he watched Hermione carefully, their unfortunate morning from eight weeks ago being still quite fresh in his memory.

Hermione smiled even more brightly and answered, "Good morning," and gently traced his jaw line with the tips of her fingers. Lucius didn't require any further invitation. He launched his lips onto Hermione's with vigour, and she answered him with the same intensity. She tangled her hands into his hair and arched her body unto his. In one urgent move, Lucius threw the silk sheets open.

"At last witch, at last!" he rasped. His lips and hands began to map her body thoroughly. "Why did you let me suffer for so long? I have craved you so much." She mewled in response, trying to press her body even more into his embrace.

The lovers lost themselves in each other, and the music of Lucius' low murmurs and Hermione's soft moans filled the room.

"So delicious, so ripe," purred Lucius against her soft skin. "I need to taste you, witch. Open for me, Hermione, let me taste you. I am hungry and thirsty for you, witch. Open for me, darling, open now."

His mouth insistently worked its way down Hermione's body. With his soft coaxing, Hermione opened her thighs for him. Yet her movements were unusually hesitant, and a rosy blush crept onto her cheeks. Lucius glanced at her in confusion, and her eyes' bashful expression explained everything to him. The witch was young, and evidently, her late husband had not mastered this particular skill. With a low chuckle, he whispered, "Do not worry, my little bookworm. I will teach you everything." His smouldering gaze slowly trailed over Hermione's body, and the fire in his eyes almost burned her bare skin.

"I will teach you everything," he repeated, "everything I know." With that, Lucius dived between Hermione's thighs. The young witch's breath hitched as she submitted to his onslaught. Of course, it turned out to be a rather long practical session. Though it wasn't at all surprising...keeping in mind Hermione's thirst for learning and Lucius' willingness to share his knowledge.

Later, as an extremely pleased and sated Lucius basked in sweet exhaustion, he thought that their morning had indeed played out nicely. Hermione's voice, mellow after hours of intimacy, tore him from his light slumber with, "Hmm, something changed in this room... The colour, did you change the colour?"

"I decided to refresh the paint on the walls." Lucius lazily twisted her springy, chocolate curl in his fingers.

"Ahh, I see." The witch looked around before turning her amber eyes to him. "You have chosen a strange colour palette for a Slytherin."

"I needed something amber and chocolate around me." Opal flecks of affection sparkled in his silver eyes. "I missed you, witch," he whispered.

Hermione's eyes widened, and she slowly leaned to him, holding her breath and focusing on his lips. Alas, the next moment a clock chimed somewhere in the depth of the Manor, and she exclaimed, "Is this the time? Shite! I am late! Oh Merlin, I am terribly late for work, I have to run." And she attempted to jump out of bed.

Lucius' hands didn't allow her to do so, however. "Shh, you are not late; relax, Hermione. No one is expecting you at work today or for the next four days as well. I took the liberty of sending the owl to the Ministry yesterday. You are, my darling, on a much needed vacation until Monday." A smug smirk played on the wizard's lips.

"I beg your pardon, you did what?" Hermione's tone and the sudden darkness in her eyes didn't forebode anything pleasant, and Lucius frowned. "It's unbelievable. Who gave you the right to stick your aristocratic nose in my work, Lucius? Answer me. Because, as far as I am concerned, I certainly did not," Hermione rambled on, simultaneously trying to free herself from his arms.

The blond wizard did not budge, though. He just held her tighter. "Shh, I do not see anything wrong in my actions Hermione. You were tired, exhausted even...definitely not fit for work, and so I organized a little vacation for you. That is what affectionate and thoughtful wizards do, is it not?" He began to nibble at the nape of her neck. "And besides, the prospect of having you all to myself for five full days was irresistible, darling. I simply could not help it."

Hermione drew a sigh and tilted her head, giving Lucius more skin to nibble on. "Don't ever do that again," she muttered unconvincingly.

"I cannot promise you that," said the wizard. A loud grumble from Hermione's stomach gained Lucius' attention, and he stopped his nibbling, grunting, "I need to feed you breakfast, before the little lady here," and he gently patted the roundness of Hermione's belly, "hexes me for neglecting her mother."

"How do you know it's a girl?"

"I have my sources, witch," drawled Lucius arrogantly. Hermione just flashed him an incredulous glance and shook her head. Lucius snapped his fingers, and just a few minutes later, Wrinkly, a little elf, appeared at the door. He was holding a food tray and a teapot. Hermione gasped in surprise and hastily pulled the bed sheet up to her chin. Lucius smirked at her reaction, took the tray from the elf's nimble hands, and dismissed him with a slight nod. He manoeuvred the food tray between them, right in the middle of the large bed, and they ate.

Somewhere between a piece of toast with marmalade and sips of tea, Hermione leaned on Lucius shoulder and asked, "So, what's the plan?" Lucius carefully put the cup with tea on the tray and locked Hermione's eyes in his intent, silver gaze.

"We will announce our engagement in three months or so, and then, after six months you will become Madame Malfoy." There was a brief period of silence, during which Hermione battled with her temper.

A few minutes later and after a calming breath, she finally managed, "Aren't you just a wee bit too sure of yourself, Lucius?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Only as sure as a true Malfoy ought to be," murmured a true Malfoy in a soft, velvet baritone and sealed Hermione's lips with a passionate kiss before she had the chance to utter her rebuke.

At first, Hermione made quite an adequate effort to push him away, determined to give him a piece of her mind. However, all her attempts proved futile and, eventually, all her steam evaporated. Desire for a blond wizard engulfed her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, tangling her fingers in his hair. His low growl of approval reverberated throughout the chamber. Once again, the symphony of ragged breathing, gasps, purrs, mewls, and grunts filled the air.

At some point, the music of their lovemaking was embellished dramatically when the totally forgotten tray with tea and food slid theatrically onto the floor. It met the parquet with a resounding bang, along with ding-dongs and peals. The lovers on the bed, however, didn't notice a thing.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 18

Tragedy left them both bereft. Thirst for revenge forced them to work together. Desperation drove them into each other's arms and a tiny spark grew into the scorching fire. Fate granted them a new chance in love. LM/HG.OOC. Epilogue ignored.

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Chapter 18

*A middle of adventure, such a perfect place to start**

Four months later. Malfoy Manor.

Hermione was woken up in the middle of the night by an especially noteworthy contraction. They had started in the evening, and were coming with irregular intervals and strength. This one, however, was more powerful than the other ones.

Hermione sat up with a quiet "Oh" and patted her belly, calming down the little girl in her womb. Then she turned her gaze on the man sleeping beside her. The neon yellow-blue moonlight played on his skin and shimmered in his hair. His broad shoulders and defined chest glowed softly in the dim light of the night. His face was calm and relaxed. Long blond lashes fluttered slightly with each drawn breath. Hermione bit her lower lip - he was so breathtakingly delicious and tempting - and his masculine form awoke butterflies in her stomach. This wicked, naughty man managed to seduce her even in his sleep, even now when she was in labour.

This embarrassing, fangirl reaction to Lucius still surprised Hermione no end. For four months, she had strived to wrap her mind around this fact. For four months, she had tried to classify her feelings towards him, to understand where all this passion, awe and fondness had come from, and the explanation still eluded her. With each passing minute, she only managed to sink deeper and more profoundly into the grey, lucid ocean of his eyes and the spicy scent of his cologne. Each day, she was losing even more of herself into the burning fiery passion cauldron of his caresses and the irresistible comfort of his affection towards her.

Eventually, after hours of thinking and analysing, Hermione settled for the unbelievably illogical, but only explanation that she could find...she was head over heels in love with Lucius Malfoy. Yes, she was irrevocably in love with this difficult, complex and utterly fascinating man. Yes, she positively loved him, despite his dark past, their prodigious differences, and the vast number of his flaws.

She knew damn well it would not be a bed of roses: he was extremely possessive and almost unbearably controlling; he spread his dominating influence over his family with certainty, considering everyone in this category as being in his exclusive possession and under his undivided control. Sure enough, Hermione found herself in this exact predicament, even though she wasn't technically a Malfoy yet and would become one only in six months. It didn't really matter. A flamboyant diamond on her finger sparkled proudly in the moonlight as a reminder of to whom she belonged now.

To be honest, at first she did passionately fight against his controlling and possessive nature in an effort to maintain her independence. It was but a while later that she finally understood the nature of the beast...it was the way Lucius was brought up, his background. He simply was unable to behave differently. For centuries, the Lord of the Manor was responsible for the welfare of his family members; he was their only protection, and they depended on his support. It was in his blood; it was a part of him, and he couldn't fight it. Thus, Hermione learned to dodge and mollify his urge to control. After all, she was a remarkably clever girl.

During these four months that they had been together, Hermione had learned so much about him. She had learned how intelligent and knowledgeable this man was. For Merlin's sake, the man was a bibliophile, just as she was. He knew the history of the Wizarding world by heart and had read the entire book collection in the Manor's library. Hence, he was quite capable of providing mind-stimulating dialogue and discussion.

Of course, they had very dissimilar views on various topics, and thus their debates were often quite heated. But because Lucius was such an amazingly skilful manipulator, he always knew exactly when to seize the argument, right before it became too intense. His preferred method of stopping the discussion was to pin Hermione against the first somewhat horizontal surface to be found, strip her bare and plunge deep inside her. It was an extraordinarily effective method indeed and worked like a charm every time. Hermione smiled to herself and sighed wishfully. Regrettably, as her pregnancy progressed, this particular acrobatic etude had gradually become more and more difficult to achieve, and eventually, simply impossible. Surprisingly, the number of their arguments lessened rather drastically after that. *How very odd*, hummed Hermione to herself.

At times, he still did behave like his overbearing, haughty, arrogant, aristocratic self. So, Hermione was forced to give him a cold shoulder or a few days of a no sex and complete silent treatment. After just a couple of times of the combined therapy, she noticed that Lucius began to ponder his words carefully before speaking.

Still, her affection for him overshadowed everything. She came to love his smirks and arched brows, his dry, patronizing humour and sarcastic remarks, his low chuckles and annoyed huffs. She loved the way he grunted before getting up from the bed, the sounds that he made during his morning grooming ritual, and how light his eyes were right after the shower. Oh, those eyes could turn her on in a second!

She found out that he, too, still had the nightmares after the war. Hermione learned how to silence his whimpers and to soothe him back into slumber if he woke in a cold sweat in the middle of the night.

She was in love...plain and simple. Their passionate nights, and sometimes days as well, sustained her. They became her new energy source. Both of them were insatiable: every time they were near each other, their mutual desire flowed wildly through their veins. Every time he entered her, filled her, trembled in an orgasm deep inside her, and shouted her name in ecstasy, she felt his magical energy surging through her and merging with her own magical power. During those moments, Hermione was certain that their union was far beyond his or her control. It was their destiny; they were fated to each other.

And that's what mattered the most. Although the first few weeks after she had moved in with him were excruciatingly difficult for Hermione to endure, together they made it. Lucius helped her to make it! His presence by her side halted whispers and rumours, scaring off the cowards back into their shadows. He comforted her after Harry didn't

even greet her with a "Hello" when they had met in the Ministry corridor. He held her and dried her tears after she received Molly's angry letter, in which Molly demanded an explanation. He even attempted to explain Ginny's silence to her, though without a success.

Then, after the first three weeks, things got better. Ironically, it started with Draco: for once, he was the bearer of the good news. When, one Sunday morning, agitated, dishevelled, and to be honest, positively mad-looking Draco burst in to the Manor's grand hall, Hermione froze in horror. She expected him to be furious, repelled by her, so she braced herself for a tantrum. Draco, however, didn't even bat an eye.

"Father," he yelled. Then his eyes landed on Hermione, and he said, "Granger, Granger, be quick, where is my father? Astoria is in labour. I need our family Healer there, now," and then he raked his blond locks with his shaking fingers. "She is in pain, Granger. Is it supposed to be like that? She is in a great deal of pain. That damned mediwitch said it is normal. I want our Healer there, and father... Where is he?"

For a second, Hermione was motionless, as if in a stupor...Draco surprised her immensely. However, after she noticed his shaking hands and his eyes, glassy with anxiety, Hermione sprung to life.

"Don't worry, Draco, everything will be fine. The pain is usual and expected. Astoria will deal with it...believe me."

"Draco, what happened?" The urgent voice announced Lucius' arrival.

"Astoria is in labour. I want our Healer Tibald there. Please, father, I don't trust that bloody mediwitch."

"Why did you leave Astoria alone, Draco? Is she alone?" Lucius quickly wrote the note to the Healer and sent it with an elf.

"No, of course she is not, father. Wrinkly is also there, as well as that damned mediwitch. Let's go, please."

"Yes, yes, just one moment, son. Hermione." Lucius turned to her, his eyes searching her face worriedly. "Will you be all right? Would you like to go with us?"

"I'll wait here, Lucius. Don't worry, I'll be all right. Good luck, Draco." Lucius came close to Hermione and gave her a lingering kiss, which caused Draco to roll his eyes at such display of affection, regardless of his half-mad state of mind.

"Father, please, we need to go."

"Yes, yes." And the two Malfoys hurriedly left to meet their new heir.

On the same day, while Hermione was reading in the Manor's library, a little elf brought her a letter. "There is a letter for missy Hermione. A good, good letter for missy," he said and disappeared. The letter was from Ginny, and Hermione's fingers began to shake. She opened it and read, while holding her breath.

Hermione, I don't give a damn about what everyone around me thinks. If you need to be with Malfoy, to hell with it, be with Malfoy. I don't bloody care. You are still my friend, my sister, and my son's godmother. Bring your bum over here as soon as you can. Please. Harry will behave; I promise.

Ginny

And so, Hermione did take her bum over there as soon as she could, and Harry did behave, just as Ginny had promised. It took a while for Harry to return to normal communication with Hermione, but eventually, he did. After all, they were very close friends and had gone through a lot together. Fortunately, a friendship of this kind was strong enough to overcome the differences. They talked; Hermione explained, and they understood each other.

The rest of the Weasleys managed to stay clear of Hermione right until Ginny went into labour with Albus. Hermione went to St. Mungo's with her and Harry, and that's where Arthur and the boys found her when they arrived. Seeing her there, sitting by Ginny's side, already quite heavy with Ron's daughter, melted their reservations away...she was one of them, carrying one of theirs, a Weasley. They simply could not deny her. Only Molly was still unforgiving and held on to it. Perhaps she needed a bit more time....

Hermione's breathing hitched. A strong, deep and painful cramp in her lower abdomen and sudden wetness between and under her legs and thighs tore Hermione from her musing. She had been so engrossed in thought that she had entirely forgotten about her contractions. Now, she was quite rudely brought back to reality...her waters broke, and contractions returned with renewed strength. They were deep and excruciatingly painful. At first, she tried to time them, as the mediwitch had taught her, but soon the pain became practically unbearable, and Hermione urgently shook Lucius' shoulder. His eyes opened.

"Lucius, it's time," she whispered between pants.

His grey eyes flashed with concern, and he sat up. "How are you feeling...are you in pain? Are you sure you want to go to St. Mungo's?" His voice was still raspy and scratchy after sleep. "All Malfoy women have given birth here, in the Manor, in the comfort of their own bed. Are you absolutely certain you want to go to the hospital?"

"Lucius, we've been over this a hundred times already. I want to go to the hospital, and I am not a typical Malfoy woman, and...Oh." Hermione's speech was interrupted by a contraction. "Lucius, we need to go now, and please, send a note to Ginny."

"Stubborn little witch," Lucius muttered while putting on his black lounge trousers and a white shirt. Then he hastily wrote the note to Potter.

Potter, Ms. Rose Weasley is on her way. Please arrange the proper welcome. LM.

A moment later, Hermione uttered a loud, long, and desperate howl. Lucius urgently scooped her in his arms and yelled for Wrinkly. With a feverishly panting Hermione in his arms, Lucius barked his orders to the elf.

"Find Tibald and ask him to come to St. Mungo's immediately. And deliver this note to the Potters."

Wrinkly nodded, "Yes, Master, Wrinkly will do, Master. The baby is coming, Master. Master should go now; baby is coming. Little missy Rose is coming."

Lucius huffed with exasperation and stepped into the fireplace with his precious witch in his arms. A second later they both disappeared in the green flames of the Floo. A mediwitch met them upon their arrival and urgently escorted them to a room. A few minutes later, Tibald was there as well.

In the room, with Hermione already in bed, Lucius drew a ragged breath. He held Hermione's hand and listened to her moans and pants. He watched her lying there, pale and sweaty, with apprehension and worry. She looked so extremely fragile. Gently stroking her hair and face, he asked, "Are you all right?"

Hermione smiled and nodded weakly. Lucius, however, was far from convinced; his little witch did not look all right to him. He redirected his question to the Healer: "Is everything in order, Tibald?"

The Healer met his worried glance and answered, "I'll know in a minute, Lucius. We need to run some diagnostic spells." And both the Healer and the mediwitch began to fuss around Hermione, quietly muttering spells and making passes with their wands.

When the requested minute passed, Lucius gave the Healer a stern, inquiring glance: "Well?"

The Healer frowned, and after a few more quietly muttered spells by him and the mediwitch, he stated, "There is a slight complication. We need to try a few manoeuvres, in order to deliver Miss Weasley naturally. Unfortunately, you will need to wait outside the room, Lucius."

Lucius turned his face to Hermione. Anxious grey eyes met honey ones, and Hermione smiled at him again. "Lucius, go. We will be fine. Let them do their work." Lucius slowly, reluctantly, released Hermione's hand, kissed her clammy forehead, and stood up.

With measured steps, he came close to the Healer, purposely invading his personal space. He hissed, in an obvious threat, "You do understand that you are responsible for Hermione and the baby? I entrust their well being to you, Tibald! I strongly recommend you do your best. You have known me long enough, Tibald...if anything should happen to them, I will not be gentle." With that, he left.

In the corridor, Lucius blindly stumbled towards a simple hospital bench and sank on to it. He sat there alone and scared to death that the world around him would crumble once again.