

Crumple: Aftermath

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Crumple: Aftermath

by [MissiAmphetamine \(Kaleidoscope\)](#)

Summary

What happens in the aftermath? In the wake of Hermione's capture and imprisonment, she and Draco, having escaped to the Order, must somehow find a way to heal.

This is the long, painful, imperfect journey of two people in love - through their consuming trauma, guilt, the judgement of those around them, and the memories of suffering they wish they could shed. But despite the pain, Crumple: Aftermath is ultimately focused on a reverence for healing, trauma recovery, redemption, and the love of two people who are utterly devoted to each other.

The need to see him itches beneath her skin. Hermione is no longer capable of judging whether that's normal or not. She loves him, so she thinks it's probably normal to hate the idea of him locked in a cell, with them separated from each other. On the other hand, she thinks it might not be normal to feel a constant clawing anxiety that hovers on the edge of full-blown blind panic, over that separation. That part of it might be trauma related, Hermione suspects. But what does she know? She's probably half mental at this point. She's not even sure she should love him, after – everything. She clasps her hands together, digging her nails into her own flesh.

Notes

The sequel to Crumple, which was originally finished on the 28th April 2015. I never planned for a sequel, but nearly a decade later I'm finally writing the next and final part of Hermione and Draco's story, and I'm so excited. I hope you all enjoy the ride.

Thanks to my amazing beta reader, **Pidanka!**

► Content Warning

My policies:

I can be contacted at u/KaleidoscopeDL on reddit, or darcyordinarylewis2 at gmail.com (which I admittedly don't check often,) for any queries. Binding is permitted for personal use, or as a gift, and I love to see people's incredible work. Please ask before you translate my fic, or create a podfic, so I can link to it!

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Readers, feel free to point out any typos or technical errors you might encounter – and please leave kudos if you got some enjoyment out of the fic; your feedback feeds me 😊

This is a transformative work. Harry Potter and all the characters belong to JK Rowling; I'm just playing in the magical world she created.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

► Housekeeping!

Thank you so much to everyone reading, leaving kudos, subscribing, commenting, and sharing!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

CRUMPLE

aftermath



KALEIDOSCOPE

(missiamphetamine)

One

They land *somewhere* with a sickening crack, Malfoy's arms tight around her and her stomach lurching wildly, nausea seizing it in a rhythmically clenching fist. An alarm sounds, cutting through the air with a wailing that only makes the nausea worse, and Hermione turns in Malfoy's grip and throws up on the floor. It's wooden, she notices inanely as he lets her go, gagging himself.

"Granger," he says breathlessly, and he's angry and desperate at once. He'd prepared himself to die, Hermione thinks wildly, and the love he'd admitted to has become a hiltless blade now that he knows he'll live, cutting him as he holds it. "Granger, are you okay?"

Bile is acrid in her throat, searing up her nostrils, but the heaving seems to have stopped. Hermione spits on the floor and wipes the back of her mouth, lifting her head to stare at him. "Oh my god," she mumbles as she meets his eyes. "Oh Merlin." They're out. They're actually out. Both of them. *Free*.

"We made it," she half-yells over the alarm, voice shaking and distorted with the sobs that spill out next, dry and weird, choking her. Hermione is simultaneously more happy and relieved than she's ever been in her life, and also filled with a boundless maelstrom of tears. She doesn't understand it. She reaches for Malfoy, and he pulls her close without hesitation, wraps her up and buries his face against her neck, his chest moving raggedly with his breaths, his own cheeks wet.

"We made it," he agrees, sounding numbed and uncertain, the words nearly lost under the alarm. He'd planned to die; it was what he thought he deserved. It was little wonder he was in shock right now. Hermione doesn't particularly care at the moment, if she's honest. A wholly selfish, wild joy has spun over her. All that matters is that they are both out, and they're together. Somewhere. Clearly somewhere magically alarmed, presumably belonging to the Order. She lifts her face from Malfoy's chest, lips parting to ask, "Where are we?" when the alarms suddenly stop.

"Drop your wands! Get on your knees with your hands in the air, now!" A woman's voice rings out in the silence, commanding and hard, at odds with her lilting Scottish accent, but the words wash over Hermione almost without meaning. Understanding evades her, the words just a barrage. Her world has been nothing but Malfoy and torture for over a quarter of a year, and the arrival of other people is unexpectedly hard for her shocked, disappearing-addled brain to comprehend.

"Shit," Malfoy swears wearily, and his hands pull away from Hermione, the clatter of wood on wood sounding. He's dropped his wand. Hermione stares up at him, bewildered, as he takes a pace back from her, hands raising to shoulder height, and then things happen very fast.

"Malfoy?" she asks, feeling small and unsure, nausea sharp in her gut again. It's stupidly hard to think. Panic starts clawing at her insides, and the look she shoots Malfoy is pleading, but he doesn't go to her. He gives her a wild-eyed look and tells her to get down, to do as they say, but Hermione is frozen. He swears as flashes of light indicate more people apparating in, and she stands there, unmoving.

"She's Hermione Granger," he's shouting loud and clear as he gets to his knees. "Don't hurt her, please! She's Hermione Granger. I'm Judas. Draco Malfoy. My handler's Knight. Kingsley Shacklebolt."

There are too many bodies in the room, and Hermione wants to scream as Malfoy settles on his knees. She clutches at her throat, her breath coming short. It makes her think of a revel. A witch steps between her and Malfoy, blocking Hermione's line of sight and looks her in the eye. "Merlin,

it *is* you," the witch says in a familiar voice, and Hermione realises with a shock that snaps down her spine that it's Cho Chang, staring at her as if Hermione is a ghost.

"Yes, it's me," Hermione summons the sense to gasp out indignantly, past her breathless, surging panic. And then she sees past Cho's shoulder. "Wait – what are you doing?" Two wizards she doesn't know are shoving Malfoy roughly face down on the floor, even though he's cooperating. Horror and fury curdle in Hermione's belly at the sight, and without thinking, she pushes Cho aside.

"Stop it! Leave him!" she demands, grabbing at the nearest wizard's collar and yanking him briefly off balance.

"Hermione," Cho protests, grabbing her upper arm and pulling her back.

"He saved me! Malfoy saved me – what the fuck do you think you're doing, you – you *idiots*, leave him alone!" Her voice becomes progressively more shrill and unintelligible as it progresses, gulping for air in great, unsteady breaths, the room starting to spin around her. She's hyperventilating. Now Cho's grip is helping keep her upright as she sways on her feet.

"Calm down, it's okay. You're safe."

"I – I *know* I'm – safe. *He* saved me. Leave – leave him – alone –" The words come out in gasps.

They've magically bound Malfoy's arms cruelly tight behind his back now so that his shoulders are wrenched backwards, his face turned toward her, and Hermione can see the pain on him; his eyes glazed and his mouth hard, sweat on his forehead as he pants for air.

"I'm okay, Granger," he says hoarsely. "Just let them... It'll be okay." He can't even finish a sentence. He's not okay. This isn't okay. For days, he's been lying to her when he was going to just go and die, and how does she know he's not lying to her now?

There's a silence. Hermione realises that she's gasping those things at him aloud and incoherent as tears streak her cheeks, and the handful of witches and wizards in the room are staring at her. Pity and horror hang thick in the air. She snaps her mouth shut and stares at him pleadingly. But what can he do? They haul him roughly to his feet, and his eyes never leave hers.

"Malfoy, please," she says dumbly, "make them understand. Make them let you go."

He looks gut-punched, face a misery. "Granger," he says roughly, begging *her* to understand, and she knows there's nothing he can do. There's no chance anyone here will listen to Malfoy. The only person *she* knows is Cho. She turns her stare on the Ravenclaw, manic desperation winding her muscles tight.

Hermione knows what happens when the Order captures someone. She remembers it vaguely as if peering through fog, the memories somewhere past the fear and panic eating her alive. Detainees get taken away for processing. And Hermione doesn't think she can maintain her sanity without Malfoy. There are too many people, and everything feels terrifying and wrong, and she wants *him*. She needs *him*.

"Please, Cho. Please. He's not an enemy. He saved me. He's on our side. Please," she begs through whooping gasps for air, and the other woman's eyes are full of confused pity.

"Okay, Hermione. Okay. We're not going to hurt him," Cho says, as if Hermione's a particularly dim child. Maybe she sounds like one. Her limbs feel trembly and she can't get a breath, and Malfoy is standing there staring at her, pain etched on his features and worry for her filling his eyes, his mouth a hard, thin line. Cho mutters an aside to a nearby wizard that sounds like, "Get Harry and Ron here, now."

Hermione can't find it in herself to care that Harry and Ron are okay. Are on the way.

"Don't take him. Please. Cho. Malfoy hasn't done anything wrong. He's on our side, for Merlin's sake! You don't *have* to!" Frustration and fury clog Hermione's throat and make her heart gallop, thundering wretched and hard. She feels an absurd longing for their room in the mansion; just her and Malfoy, alone, in a bubble of fragile safety. She's been institutionalised, Hermione thinks hysterically. She wants her cell back. Oh god. A sob hitches out of her.

Cho looks out of her depth. "It's protocol, Hermione," she says apologetically, and then the bitch flicks a hand at the wizard holding Malfoy by one elbow.

They vanish.

Hermione feels her stomach drop. A horrified terror washes over her; irrational, uncontrollable, and entirely unhelpful. Everything whites out for a while. When she comes back to herself she is sitting on the floor in a corner hugging her knees, a hoarse whining moan coming from deep inside her chest and someone is shaking her, saying her name with worry grinding through their voice.

"Malfoy?" she asks, small and hopeful, and her voice chokes and stumbles. Hermione lifts her head, her cheeks sticky with tears, and Ron looks back at her, a complicated expression on his face, his blue eyes watery. His hands are on Hermione's shoulders. A surge of instinctive, terrified revulsion tears through her and she recoils, skittering back across rough wooden floorboards.

"Don't touch me!" she chokes. "Don't – I can't –"

Ron stares at her from his crouch on the ground, expression wounded now. Bewildered. Harry stands behind him, Hermione sees; the same wild shock of black hair, his glasses crooked, his expression an echo of Ron's. "It's me," Ron says, as if she's a wild animal, holding one hand out for her to take. "Not Malfoy."

"I *know* that," Hermione says tartly, annoyance creeping up absurdly. She shuts her eyes for a second and breathes, struggling for control, her heart a wild drumbeat and her breathing ragged and gulping, panic still hot in her veins and making her dizzy. She's had a panic attack; she lost time, Hermione tells herself, trying to take stock. They took Malfoy. She needs him back. She stares at Ron and Harry, wondering why she isn't happier to see them. But mostly all she feels is a weird, numbed awkwardness, and the need to get to Malfoy.

"I know that," she repeats. Ron looks exhausted beyond belief. Dark hollows swallow his blue eyes, and he's halfway to a scraggly beard, his skin more pallid than usual. And Harry doesn't look much better. He's clean-shaven but his eyes are haunted. It's grief that hits Hermione then. A strange, consuming sense of loss; she has lost who she was. The Hermione Granger that Ron and Harry knew is dead, burned out by torture and degradation, and months of constant, terrible fear and suffering.

"We missed you," Harry says then, and it all slams home.

Hermione's homecoming has been nothing like she expected. Nothing like what she fantasised about obsessively in Voldemort's mansion.

She has spent most of it crying, and begging for Malfoy, and now she sits curled up on the floor in the corner of the room while Harry and Ron stare at her helplessly. Her sobs are a wild, uncontrollable force seething in her chest and hiccupping out of her until her heart and stomach hurt, and she's gagging. Both men try to touch her, to comfort her, and her body reacts of its own accord, their hands making her think of that dinner party. Of the wizards with their blunt probing fingers and cruel hands, laughing at her pain, making her lick their feet and their – their –

Hermione shrinks further back into the corner and begs them not to touch her, in a haze between reality and memory and unable to distinguish the two.

"M-Malfoy. I n-n-need Malfoy," she judders out almost incomprehensibly through her sobs, telling herself to just fucking stop crying, *calm down*, but her body is on a roll and she is along for the ride. A passenger, it seems. Because she *can't* stop.

"Hermione, it's okay," they say helplessly, trying to soothe her while they ignore her pleading for Malfoy as if they can't process it. Maybe they just don't know what to say in response to their best friend begging with a mad, sobbing desperation for a Death Eater, even if he is a spy. "You're safe. You're okay."

But it's *not* okay. Malfoy has been bound and hauled off roughly by people who despise him, which is bad enough. And she is alone with her friends, but instead of being overjoyed and flinging herself into their arms, she is a terrified wreck who can't stand them touching her. Who can't disentangle the past from the present. Who is sobbing like a mad person. She feels broken. She should be happy and she isn't. What's wrong with her?

Her sobs eventually ease off to shaking gasps for breath, as Harry and Ron hover over her, helpless and distraught, and utterly bewildered. And then, to her own private shame, she begins to beg to go home. They think Hermione means her Muggle home, with her parents – the house is sold now, her parents in Australia. They remind her of that with infinite kindness, voices soft as they're careful not to touch her. They must think her imprisonment has driven her insane. Round the twist.

But Hermione doesn't mean that place. She means the room with the green-striped wallpaper and her cosy armchair by the bookshelf, and the view over the maze, and *their* bed. That is home, now, in her mind. Sickly, she longs for her cage.

"I want Malfoy," she mutters miserably into her arms, blocking out the world. Not wanting to hear Harry and Ron's platitudes anymore.

What has she become?

In the end they place a vial on the floor in front of her with a clink.

"It's a Calming Draught," Harry says gently. "You need to drink it, Hermione, or we can't do anything. We need to get you back to HQ so you can rest."

Hermione eyes him suspiciously, and then the vial. It *looks* like a Calming Draught. And it's Harry and Ron; they're not going to hurt her. "What about Malfoy?" she demands hoarsely, and Harry winces, Ron scowls. Neither of them is comfortable with her obsessive focus on him.

"We can try to sort things out in the morning, Hermione. After you've been debriefed." Harry is quiet but decided, and Hermione knows there's no point in arguing.

She wants to cry again, but this time a weary, resigned weeping. They're not going to go and let Malfoy out of whatever cell he's locked in. It's just not going to happen. Not tonight, at least. An idea occurs to her, desperate and unlikely. "Can – can I stay with Malfoy?" Twin looks of horror are turned on Hermione before Harry's is obscured by his hands scrubbing exhaustedly over his face. When he emerges, his bright green eyes are wet.

"No!" Ron says, and it's final. " *No.*"

"But–"

"No," Harry confirms. "It's against protocol anyway. Remus would never allow it." She looks at him, pleadingly. " *No.* Just drink the Calming Draught, 'Mione. *Please.*"

A wave of defeat crushes her beneath it, and a few tears trickle down her sticky, snot-smeared cheeks. She unfurls herself enough to grab the vial, uncorking it with a flick of her thumb and downing it in one. As soon as it hits her stomach, she can feel the effects spreading through her, and the world goes fuzzy at the edges. Her emotions all go dull, and she sees no reason to protest when Ron reaches out to her.

"Come on, Hermione. Let's get you home to bed." She takes his hand and lets him pull her to her feet, swaying a little. And then everything is a blur.

She's obedient and pliable as they apparate her somewhere else. A magical home, all narrow corridors and small rooms, and she's led up three flights of stairs past plush furnishings and wallpapers that exude a faded grandeur. She thinks she catches sight of Neville in the living room, and Mrs Weasley and Ginny on the first floor landing, and a few other people she doesn't recognise right away or can't place by a glimpse of the backs of their heads.

"Your room," Ron says with a flourish as he opens a door in the loft conversion to a small bedroom tucked in the eaves, with one window that the moon shines through, the velvet curtains open. The walls are sloping down two sides, and an old-fashioned small double bed takes up most of the floor space, up against the far wall under the eaves so it faces the door. There's just enough room for a small bedside table on each side and a dresser beside the door. Magical gaslights in elegant sconces are affixed to the two interior walls, which are all papered in blue and gold paisley.

Hermione steps into the space – there's a large, ancient Persian rug covering most of the floor – and all she can think, very tiredly, is that there's no Malfoy. "He shouldn't be locked up," she says apropos of nothing as she plumps wearily on the edge of the bed and begins to unlace the boots Malfoy got her. She strips off all her outer layers clumsily – scarf, jersey, and chambray shirt, leaving her in socks, wool leggings and her warm vest, as Harry and Ron stand by the door looking like great, useless lumps. "He's *your* spy."

The Calming Draught must have worked because as muzzy as she feels, Hermione seems to be somewhat more rational. She stares at the two men standing nervously by the door; dark hair and ginger, both looking at her like she's a stranger. Probably she looks it; she shakes her hair out a little and tries to finger-comb some order into it and knows she fails. "Why is he even detained?" she demands as neither of them answers.

"Routine," Harry says shortly. "We can't trust double agents, Hermione. By very definition, they're untrustworthy. And he wasn't supposed to come back." He pauses. Amends: "Not yet, anyway."

Harry's words rattle around Hermione's head like knucklebones. His casual disregard of Malfoy disgusts her. "He wasn't *going* to, until I made him! He was going to get me to safety and then go let Voldemort torture him to death!" She shoves herself to her feet in a burst of anger, and then stands there swaying, glaring at him.

"Okay – okay. I think we should talk about this in the morning," Ron says, tired and drained, and Hermione thinks that none of the three of them look happy. "I know you don't like it, but Malfoy's a big boy. He'll be fine in the cells overnight."

He's right. Hermione hates it, but he is. Nothing is going to happen to Malfoy overnight. And she'll be fine without him. Or so she tells herself very firmly, her heart racing. "Tomorrow," she says hard, brooking no disagreement. "Tomorrow you take me to him."

"Hermione, we can't just –" Harry begins to prevaricate, and Hermione's impotent anger flares. She hates this place suddenly. This place, and Harry and Ron, and the Order who happily had Malfoy commit atrocity after atrocity in the name of the greater Merlin-damned good, ruining him, tearing him apart until he got to the point where he truly believed his death was the only good option. It horrifies her, sudden and sharp. She thinks she might rather be in Malfoy's cell with him than up here alone with the hypocrites who condemn him.

"Tomorrow," she cuts across Harry's excuses, her voice loud and edging toward shrill again. "Tomorrow, you take me to him." Her fists clench, her vision swimming. "Swear it, Harry." She doesn't trust his platitudes, she realises with another lurch of horrible disillusionment, but she still believes he won't break his word to her. "Swear it."

He looks unhappy but he shares a glance with Ron and then nods, and Hermione feels stupidly left out. Once it would've been the three of them sharing a glance and exchanging a wordless exchange. Now, Hermione is the outsider. "Fine," Harry says. "Although I think we need to talk about why you're so fixated on him first."

It feels like a slap. It's cruel and unnecessary to bring it up now, and Hermione recoils, stomach flip-flopping sickly. They haven't asked yet. They haven't figured it out. Hermione thinks they half suspected some kind of spell from the charms they cast on her before apparating here, but she's clean of any magic. Is it so unbelievable that she could just care about him? They've spent over three months together, completely dependent on each other for everything; is it really implausible that she cares?

Even setting the notion of love aside, it seems natural that some kind of bond would develop. She and Malfoy have been through hell together – that leaves a mark. They've drawn each other's blood, healed each other's wounds. Wept for each other. But Harry and Ron clearly don't see it that way. Hermione doesn't explain it; her tongue feels thick and clumsy, her head stuffed full of cotton wool. And she certainly doesn't mention love. It doesn't seem like it will be helpful right now, she thinks, knowing that's an understatement. She doesn't know what she'll say tomorrow.

"But then you'll take me to see him?"

"Yes," Harry grates out, clearly frustrated and annoyed. Hermione doesn't care.

"Okay," she accepts, nodding once. A thought occurs to her, as the two men shuffle out the door awkwardly. "Um. Is there a loo around? In case I need it in the night?"

"The next floor down, just down the corridor," Ron says. "Last door on the left." He offers her an uncertain, sweet smile. His blue eyes are bright in their dark-smudged hollows, the untidy stubble on his jaw making him look older. Hermione returns his smile, her mouth feeling wobbly and tears threatening again. She did miss them, she thinks dizzily. So much.

"I missed you," she says aloud. "I really did." Harry's expression goes soft as the frustration is stripped out of him with those few words, and Ron gulps, nodding, his eyes wet.

"I know this has been difficult," Harry says awkwardly, hands twisting on his wand. "But you have no idea how glad we are that you're back, Hermione. *Safe*." Ron nods a silent agreement, muscles in his jaw bunching, the back of his hand swiping over his eyes.

"Yeah," Hermione nearly whispers. "I know." She's glad too. And she knows she should be happy. But the happiness won't come, and she's scared of their touch, she doesn't know if she'll ever feel safe again, and she needs Malfoy like a plant needs light, and everything feels *wrong*.

Chapter End Notes

A note for non-Brits: Hermione frequently wears a 'vest' in this, which is a sleeveless undershirt, often made of cotton, or merino (for warmth.)

[Example A](#) and [Example B](#)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

Two

He paces the cell at a pitching limp, abdomen and chest aching from a flurry of heavy boot kicks, left knee swollen, the skin of his face feeling hot and taut where Creevey's fists had landed during the short beating he'd endured before another wizard had pulled Creevey off him with a sharp word of reproof. He doesn't blame Creevey for it. Draco had killed Dennis, after all. Last year, during a skirmish, he'd opened Dennis's throat with the cutting curse after Nott Sr. had set him alight. Colin was entitled to get his kicks in, Draco thinks as he lurches slowly from wall to wall in some kind of mindless attempt to stay calm. What he's feeling now is a loving embrace compared to what he'd be feeling if Hermione hadn't blown all Draco's plans out of the water. A few bruises are nothing.

Hermione; he thinks of her and worry fizzles under his skin like a badly made potion. She's safe now, and that's the most important thing, but the way she'd looked at him as they'd bound him...the way she'd begged for him not to go... He worries. She's not who she was before all of this. Draco has broken her. She's still Granger, all determination and steel and snappiness, with that wicked intelligence, but the spine of her is snapped; Draco has taken her, and he has broken the thing that held her together. She's a shadow of herself; all her essential, brilliant qualities still there but without order or stability now, and he doesn't know if she can hold herself together with people who don't understand that.

But then maybe that's what she needs. To be free of him. Draco loves her. Merlin, he loves her so much that he had aimed to die for her – not even to save her, but to pay for what he's done to her. To her, and to so many others. And maybe that would've been better, he thinks as his left knee goes out, and he makes a strangled sound, catching himself on the wall heavily and then surrendering to a seat on the bed. Sinking down with a groan. He loves her, but he's the one who ruined her. He saved her life, but Merlin, the price she'd had to pay. Maybe he should've just killed her the moment he saw her unconscious body in the dungeons. Draco buries his head in his hands. His fingers grow wet.

He hadn't killed her, though. No mercy from him. No. Instead, he'd mauled and beaten her. Stripped her and raped her. Forced her to dress like some fuckdoll and be violated by other dark wizards... Bile rises in his throat and he swallows it down, not sure if he's more sickened by what he did to Hermione over the months, or by the dark, possessive rage he suddenly remembers feeling at that dinner, as they'd hurt her. Possessive. Jealous. Draco pants and swallows down vomit, like a dog. He's disgusting. He's sick, and he's loathsome, and he should never have thought he had the right to tell her he loves her. That secret should have died with him.

Hermione will be better off without him, he thinks, straightening and wiping his face. She might find it a shock because she feels like she loves him, but she'll adjust. And then she'll realise that what she thought was love was just the fawning of a captive, and then she'll never want to see Draco again, and that will be for the best, he tells himself. She will hate him, and that will be good.

The thought makes him wish desperately that he'd died because what else is left for him. There is nothing. Nothing at all. Only a sea of self-hatred and blame because he's been the Order's monster, and he deserves it. Draco groans, wishing a thousand things that will never happen.

And he doesn't really believe a word he thinks, even. Because ultimately, if Hermione walked in here right now, he would do anything she wanted at all, as long as she wanted him to, even as he kept hating himself for the way he'd broken her. Because he loves her more than morals, more than goodness, or rightness. He loves her more, even, than he loathes himself. Draco shuts his eyes, thinking that he would willingly destroy what was left of his stained, pitiful soul for her. The only problem is, he'd take her down with him.

"I want to see him," Hermione says with calm clarity, hands laced together and resting on the table in front of her as she meets the eye of the wizard sitting opposite her. Lupin. Hermione isn't sure why he's been appointed the job of debriefing her and handling the situation. Maybe because she knows him. Or because he's known for being compassionate and gentle with damaged people.

Not that the meeting is private; Hermione is aware of the procedure and knows every word she says will be seen by others.

A self-writing quill is on the table to Lupin's right, laying across a ream of parchment, and will document everything Hermione says, to be read by any Order member with sufficient authority to request it. Which is probably around a couple of dozen people, including Harry. So Hermione has, with a weary pragmatism, told Harry and Ron they can sit in if they're quiet. But first, she needs to set the terms and conditions of her briefing, so to speak.

Lupin meets her gaze steadily, pale eyes unreadable, expression mild. "I believe Harry has arranged for that after your debrief. Although, you may wish to take another Calming Draught and rest directly afterwards, Hermione. I can't imagine it will be easy on you." His voice is steeped in empathy, and Hermione shifts uncomfortably in her seat, her pulse suddenly picking up and her breath catching. She has been trying not to think about this. That she will have to tell her friends about what happened.

They won't understand, she thinks, her hands pulling back to her lap, her shoulders tensing. They'll look at her differently; how could they not? The thought of telling her friends everything makes Hermione feel grubby and ruined. But, she reminds herself, she doesn't have to tell them *everything*. This is not a church confession or a therapy session – they're looking for a basic outline of what happened and any useful information she may have gathered. Not a biopic retelling of her ordeal.

She straightens, tucking a bit of hair behind her ear and licking dry lips. She wears the same clothes she'd arrived in, and her hair is back in a messy bun. She's wandless still – "We'll take you to find a wand after the debrief and...your visit to the cells," Harry had said when he and Ron had collected her from her bedroom that morning, after she'd spent a long, awful night sitting in the corner of the room wedged between the dresser and the low, slanting wall, sleepless and stupidly frightened. She wonders what they did with Malfoy's wand. It never worked well for her, but it was better than nothing – she feels she knows it now.

"I'll be fine," Hermione says stiffly to Lupin, although she's not entirely sure. She can't afford to fall apart though; if she does, they'll use that as an excuse to keep her from Malfoy. "I insist on seeing Malfoy."

Lupin's return look is sad, and oddly understanding. He nods, and there is a brief pause where the small, cramped room Lupin uses as his office is utterly silent, the air hanging still and thick. Even Harry and Ron are quiet, not shuffling or fidgeting. And then Lupin picks up the quill and sets its tip to the parchment where it hovers, trembling slightly like an eager dog, and clears his throat, eyes on Hermione.

"Please tell me your name and date of birth, for the record."

And so it begins. "Hermione Jean Granger. Nineteenth of September, 1979."

"How were you captured?"

"I was part of a small team performing reconnaissance in Ottery St. Catchpole," Hermione says numbly. It feels like that happened a lifetime ago. She'd left in autumn, and now it was nearly Christmas. She runs through the mission; they'd been observing activities in the area, suspecting that Fenrir Greyback's people had a base of operations there, kidnapping Muggles and Muggleborns to turn and feed upon. They had been supposed to observe from a distance, but a member of the four-person team had set off a Caterwauling Charm one evening.

The team had become separated in the ensuing chaos of dark wizards and werewolves boiling out of several houses like disturbed ant nests, and in a stroke of sheer bad luck, Hermione had fallen down an embankment trying to dodge a werewolf and broken her wand. Unarmed, she'd been forced to flee the area and, in an even worse stroke of bad luck, had been scooped up by a group of snatchers, and portkeyed to the dungeons of Voldemort's current place of residence.

"Did you see any other Order members, living or dead, in the dungeons?" Lupin asks, a calming kind of dispassion in his voice. Hermione is grateful for that; she is already on the verge of tears, and she thinks sympathy might send her over the edge.

"Not that I recognised, no." She swallows hard and begins her campaign for Malfoy's freedom. "I was in the, er, dregs of the dungeon. In the cells that mostly held Muggles who had outlived their usefulness. The snatchers didn't recognise me, you see, and Malfoy was there when they brought me in. He put me where he hoped no one would notice me. He hoped to get me out from the start."

The quill scratches away quietly beneath her words, stopping when she stops. Harry is frowning – for some reason, he clearly hates that Hermione is attached to Malfoy. It irks him, she can see it, whereas Ron seems more worried than irritated. Hermione supposes she should be able to understand their dislike and discomfort; Malfoy is, objectively speaking, halfway to a monster. The things he's done to maintain his cover while in Voldemort's service are nothing short of horrific. She knows it. She's not blind to what he has done for the Order, and the Merlin-damned greater good.

But from Hermione's perspective, that means the blood is on the Order's hands too. Because Malfoy was only there doing what he did, for the Order's sake, under their direction. Otherwise, Hermione rather thought he would have run long ago. Or just died, like he'd planned to last night. Her skin crawls at that thought.

"I understand," Lupin says, but slides a slim folder into the centre of the table anyway, flipping it open and extracting a sheaf of magical photographs. "I'd appreciate it if you could look through these anyway. Just in case. They're missing Order members, Order sympathisers, and their family members."

Hermione nods and takes them, shuffling through the – too many – photos with care, and shaking her head, mumbling a 'no' at each one she studies. It hurts that so many people have been taken, never to be seen again, their ages ranging between the very, very old and a dozen at least who are younger even than Hermione. One small witch was only five or six and Hermione remembers her first revel with a sick lurch; the skinless body of a child lying discarded on the floor. But there is no way to tell if that dead child was the grinning girl in the photo.

She shoves the photos away. "I – no. I don't know. I didn't recognise any of them."

Lupin leans forward, examining her face with a worn kind of care, his light brown hair falling over his eyes. He peers through his fringe, intent and thoughtful. "But?" he asks, seeing the hesitation Hermione tries to hide.

She swallows hard and steels herself. "The bodies I saw weren't always identifiable," she says in a small, pained voice, as if the words are thorns plucked from her flesh.

"Which one made you think twice?" he asks, teasing out the information doggedly. "Which one did you question?"

Hermione shakes her head. "It's not –" She doesn't want to say, when really it's just a guess, a similarity, not an identification. "When Malfoy had to bring me out to – to the Dark Lord during a revel for the first time, to claim me," she says thickly, *remembering*, "there was the body of a child who might have been around the same age as this one." She sorts through again and slides the girl's photo out of the pile. "When I saw her photo, it made me remember. But the child at the revel could've been any girl. The body wasn't...identifiable. It just made me think of – that. That's all."

"There were no identifying features at all?" Lupin probes, and Hermione suppresses the urge to scream, or slap him.

"It was skinned," she says crisply, stomach churning, and she hears a small, sickened noise come from the corner where Harry and Ron are sitting. Lupin doesn't flinch, but he does sigh and nod, sitting back in his chair as he gathers up the photos, slotting them neatly away again. His eyes are filled with a deep, weary sadness.

"I understand. I'm sorry, Hermione."

She trembles, an ache vibrating in her chest as she bites down hard on her tongue and tries to use the sharp pain to focus as wild, wracking sobs claw to get out of her. It takes her a second before she trusts herself to speak. "I survived," she says tightly, shrugging. And the child didn't, is the unspoken half of her sentence, and she can see everyone is thinking it as clearly as if she'd spoken it.

Then Ron speaks, breaking protocol, a frown furrowing his brow and his blue eyes sharp on hers. "What do you mean Malfoy claimed you, Hermione?"

She flinches. Oh god, did she say that? She doesn't remember saying that. And she can see, in the burgeoning horror lurking beneath Ron's features, that he already *knows* what it means. Her pulse becomes a thrum of panic, and there is a buzzing in her head, her fingertips tingling as she clutches her hands hard together in her lap.

"Ron..." she says, a pathetically weak protest. Begging him to let it go as he stares her down, desperate for her to deny his suspicions. Harry's jaw is tight and she can see him putting the pieces

together in his head as his expression turns grim and furious at once.

"Hermione," Ron says, "tell me what that m—"

"Let's focus, please." Lupin saves her; his voice clear and firm, and Hermione drags her eyes away from Harry and Ron's pale, sickened faces and looks at Lupin. His expression still has that mild, faintly sympathetic set that is masking his true feelings well, and it's a relief to look at. He demands nothing of her, save for the facts. "You're here to silently observe, with Hermione's permission," Lupin makes clear, glancing at the boys – men, really. "Not to ask questions."

Hermione feels as though she's had a stay of execution. And now she dreads leaving this room, dreads the debriefing ending because she *knows* that Harry and Ron won't let that go. She feels like vomiting. She takes a sip from the water glass to her right, which stands on a tray with another tumbler for Lupin and a jug of water. The world seems very distant and unreal right now, and she suspects she's dissociating. It's not so bad.

They move on. Lupin feeds her a litany of questions, focusing on information, but Hermione really knows very little. She tells him about the Death Eaters she saw at the mansion. She tells him about the nightly patrols of the grounds. About the cells, and how they burned prisoners. About the house elves, who run the mansion's household operations, and the squib servants. And she tells him all she knows about the American wizards who had dinner with Voldemort.

Lupin probes further about the Americans, looking for more than just names, and Hermione knows he's only trying to tease out scraps of information she may not have realised she remembered, but she hates it. She hates remembering that dinner, her skin crawling and her hand going to her throat, where the collar had dug into her flesh. Constricting her breathing, making her gag.

"I wasn't exactly paying attention to the conversation," she says, strain making her stumble over her words, voice high and faint. "I was the e-entertainment, not a f-fly on the wall. I wasn't – I don't remember it well."

"I know, Hermione. I know." Lupin is horribly kind even as he cruelly persists. "But anything – anything you can recall might be valuable."

"I blanked out, okay?" Panic crawls up her body like a physical force. "I dissociated. I don't – don't remember." It isn't quite true. Hermione remembers parts of it well enough. When she thinks of the dinner, she can never stop seeing Malfoy sitting there with a mask of unconcern on his face as the others used her as a torture doll, for instance. But that's not what Lupin wants to know.

Lupin *has* succeeded in dredging up some memories Hermione had been unaware she'd retained, though. And she wishes dearly that he hadn't as they spin through her head like a horrifying movie reel. She sits very, very still, recalling for the first time being splayed on the dinner table on her back with her legs hanging over the edge, within Malfoy's reach as he'd drunk his wine. A wizard had pulled his fingers from her abraded vagina, fumbling to replace them with his erect penis, and Malfoy had reached out a hand placidly and placed it over her vulva. "No," he'd said, cool and blank, his first and only intervention that evening. "No one puts their dick in the Mudblood's cunt except me."

Oh Merlin, oh god, why did she have to remember *that*? Tears spring to her eyes and she is aware she makes a horrible, animal sobbing cry, one fist pressing to her stomach as she gasps and gags, and then twists in her seat, a small puddle of watery vomit splattering on the floor beside her. She hates Malfoy with a sudden, startling fury that stampedes through her – but it passes as quickly as it

comes when Hermione remembers that he had no choice but to do what he'd done. And the hatred vanishes, leaving her hollowed out and wretched, longing for the hot comfort of his arms.

She's so messed up, Hermione thinks hysterically. So fucking messed up.

"I don't remember," she chokes again. Lupin leans over the table and wordlessly vanishes the vomit before sitting back down, chair squeaking on the floor. Harry has his hand pressed to his mouth, and Ron is leaning forward with his head in his hands. She almost feels sorry for them; they are the picture of impotent devastation, and Hermione knows they long to take away her pain. But they can't. No one can. Not even Malfoy. She straightens her spine, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Bile is burning in her throat, and she gulps more water.

"Sorry," she says. Ron makes a choked, miserable sound.

"Don't apologise, Hermione," Lupin says, calm as ever. "I'm sorry you have to go through this. I know it can't be easy. But it's important –"

"I know," she cuts in sharply, getting sick of his platitudes, anger seeping into her words. "I don't remember anything else of use about the dinner unless you'd like the details on how they tortured me."

There is a thick silence in which Hermione counts to three. "No," Lupin says. "That won't be necessary. Although you may find it useful to talk to a healer about it, Hermione."

Hermione begins to wish fervently that he would stop saying her name. Over and over. She nods an abrupt acknowledgement but says nothing on that. She won't be speaking to a healer, but to say so might make Lupin try to argue in favour of it. Instead, she refocuses on the debriefing.

"Is there anything else you need to ask me?" she queries coolly, holding herself together by sheer force of will and the knowledge that if she collapses, there's no way she'll see Malfoy.

The need to see him itches beneath her skin. Hermione is no longer capable of judging whether that's normal or not. She loves him, so she thinks it's probably normal to hate the idea of him locked in a cell, with them separated from each other. On the other hand, she thinks it might not be normal to feel a constant clawing anxiety that hovers on the edge of full-blown blind panic, over that separation. That part of it might be trauma-related, Hermione suspects. But what does she know? She's probably half-mental at this point. She's not even sure she *should* love him, after – everything. She clasps her hands together, digging her nails into her own flesh.

Lupin scans the dictation the quill has taken at this point, pale eyes thoughtful. "There's nothing else you can think of?"

She's told him everything she knows that might even vaguely be helpful; anything Malfoy told her, which was precious little, everything she saw and overheard at the two revels and the dinner – also precious little. She is not a font of knowledge. She spent over three months locked in a room, not spying from behind paintings with holes cut in the eyes, she thinks wildly.

"Nothing," she says flatly. "Except that I would like it on the record that Draco Malfoy saved my life and protected me as best he could from torture and abuse, suffering severe punishments and torture himself in the process. I wouldn't be alive without him. As far as I'm concerned, he's a hero."

A complicated expression flickers across Lupin's face then. "Noted," he says. "You can wait outside then. I'd like to speak to Harry and Ron for a moment." Then the mild expression Lupin has masked with drops away completely, and Hermione sees a deep, pained sympathy and understanding. It cuts to her core. She bites her lip to stop the tears from coming and nods, shuffling numbly from the room.

When Harry and Ron come out a few moments later, both have suspiciously red-rimmed eyes, and neither one will look her in the eye. "Let's go then," Harry says shortly, voice hoarse as he holds out his wrist for Hermione to take, to side-along apparate. Neither of them asks her about what Malfoy claiming her means as they stride through the halls of the grand old manor house they've disappeared to, and Hermione thinks perhaps she should thank Lupin for that.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

Three

Unsurprisingly, they descend a set of stone stairs to the cellars, which have been refashioned fit for purpose as a holding facility. A long corridor along the left leads past the cells on the right; each cell has stone walls and an unassuming wooden door, and lamps burn at intervals along the wall, giving the corridor a warm glow. Harry and Ron lead Hermione halfway down the corridor, and she notes that each occupied cell is labelled with a last name and first initial, magically inscribed on the wood.

When they reach '*Malfoy, D*', Harry and Ron both turn to Hermione rather than opening the door. Shit, she thinks, stomach dropping. She folds her arms across her chest, defensive and bracing, giving them a sharply querying look, trying to emulate the no-nonsense Hermione Granger of old.

"Go on then," she says brusquely when they hesitate and look at each other nervously, as if each hoping the other will do the dirty work.

Harry is the one to speak. "We don't want to push you, Hermione. Remus made it clear that – well –" He stumbles over his words, fidgeting with his wand. Takes a deep breath and tries again. "We did say we needed to talk about what's going on with you and Malfoy. We're your friends, Hermione, and what we've seen since you got back has been..."

"Concerning," Ron says. Hermione rolls her eyes, trying to focus on irritation rather than the unbridled rage she feels because Malfoy is right through that door, and they're keeping him from her.

"You heard what I said to Remus."

Harry frowns. "I know, but–"

"We spent over a quarter of a year together," she says briskly, having practised this speech in her head over and over again while huddled sleepless in the corner of her room last night. "All we had was each other. We could only trust each other. For over three months, we lived in each other's pockets. Every single day." She pauses, letting that sink in.

"I understand that, Hermione," Harry says, but she sincerely doubts that he does. How could he? "But you seem kind of..."

"Fixated," Ron finishes Harry's sentence again.

Hermione has decided she doesn't want to tell her friends she loves Draco Malfoy just yet. That's not the kind of bombshell she thinks is wise to drop on them without warning. So she attempts to

focus on the more basic human connection forged between her and Malfoy through the trauma they'd survived together.

"Honestly, you two," she starts, irritation sharp in her tone. "I just *told* you. Like I just told Remus. We spent three months with each other. Malfoy kept me alive. He protected me, as best he could. He took *horrible* punishments to try to save me from torture and abuse." She pauses, swallowing down tears. "You have no idea what it was like. He kept me sane. *He took care of me.*" Hermione's aware she's starting to gabble faster, and tears are welling hot in her eyes, and it makes her angry that she can't stay fucking *calm*.

"I need him," she all but begs, vaguely aware that this doesn't make her sound any less fixated. She sounds crazy. Her hand presses against the wooden door just beside her, fingers splaying flat. He is right there, on the other side of the wood. "He – he makes me feel safe. Because he *kept* me safe. And now I don't know what to do without him," she admits honestly, silently begging Harry and Ron to understand.

They look at her uncomfortably.

"And he shouldn't be locked up anyway," she adds, indignation grounding her once more. "After everything he's done for the Order, to lock him up is just *wrong*."

"You do know what he's done, don't you?" Harry asks uncertainly, and Hermione's look is so scathing that she's surprised he doesn't burst into flame.

"I saw him every night when he came home – back," she corrects herself quickly, cheeks heating but forging on. "I saw the blood. I smelt the smoke. Sometimes he let things slip. So yes, I know what terrible things he had to do in the service of the Order, Harry. I'm not an *idiot*."

"Then –"

"Why?" she finishes. "Because he did it all for the *fucking* Order –" disgust creeps into her voice and Harry and Ron stare at her wide-eyed – and to save *me*, and you have no idea what it's done to him. None. You just used him like a pawn, ordering him to do whatever it took to maintain his cover. He did terrible, awful things that have ruined him in ways you can't even imagine in order to get your precious information. And now that he's had the nerve to get out alive instead of dying at the Dark Lord's hands, you're just going to lock him away, like some dirty secret?"

She's panting by the time she's done with her impromptu rant, fists clenched at her sides as she stares Harry down, the unfairness of it all biting at her. Harry is silent and so is Ron, who looks distinctly awkward by Harry's side; Hermione gets the feeling that, like her, he doesn't know much about the double agents and informants that the Order makes use of. She also gets the impression that neither of them has truly thought about the reality of being a double agent before.

"It's only temporary, 'Mione," Harry says weakly. "It's just procedure. He's a Death Eater. He has the Mark. We can't just have him wandering around one of the safe houses." He rubs his forehead, shrugging helplessly. "At the very least we need to fully debrief him on every mission he carried out for You-Know-Who, and then put – I don't know, house arrest precautions in place? We've never had this situation happen before. It's messy."

He flings his hands in the air. "What about the families of the people he's killed? Do we just tell them that 'too bad, he gets off scot-free'?"

Hermione rears back, Harry's words like a slap in the face. The fact that he has a point only makes her angrier. "He only killed them because your precious Order *told him to!* It fucking destroyed him having to do that. You have no idea. *I do.* I saw what it did to him. How can you punish him for doing *what you told him to do?*" She is nearly screaming when she's done, her chest heaving as if she's run a marathon, and Harry and Ron just stare at her, twin expressions of shock on their faces.

"Your Order?" Ron quotes her, a betrayed kind of bewilderment in his tone, and Hermione is too angry to care that she shouldn't have said that. She went much too far in general; she may as well have openly declared that she's stupidly in love with Malfoy, because it was obvious in every word. Although, with the emotional density of the two men in front of her, it may have gone right over their heads.

But from the look Harry is giving her, he seems to suspect something is going on between her and Malfoy. Shit. Hermione clenches her jaw.

"If it were *my* Order, Ronald," she bites out, "it wouldn't insist on people committing terrible crimes for some 'greater good', and then abandon them to die because they aren't pure enough due to them doing what I ordered them to do! That makes no fucking sense."

"Well, yeah, I agree on that," Ron says, flustered, and Harry shoots him a *look* that says '*shut up*'.

"It's not up to me anyway, Hermione. It's up to the senior Order members. So you'll have to talk to them."

"Then I will. Now can I finally see Malfoy?"

Harry frowns, but taps the door with the tip of his wand and mutters something under his breath, and the door swings open to Malfoy's cell. It is a very small stone room with one flickering torch on the far wall. To the direct left of the door is a toilet, and then further along the left wall, a sink. The only other furniture in the room is the rudimentary bed facing the door, the room small enough that there's only a narrow walkway between the bed and the bathroom fixtures. The cell is clean, but otherwise utterly bare.

Malfoy sits in shirtsleeves and trousers on the edge of the bed, feet bare, elbows resting on his thighs. He jerks his head up as the door opens, and Hermione sees startled steel grey eyes half hidden behind the pale wheat of his fringe, and a bruise that smears across the left side of his face, from the corner of his mouth along his cheek, all the way up to under his eye. It's the sort of bruise that one only gets from repeated blows to the face, and Hermione is simultaneously furious and frantic.

"Granger," he rasps, and the relief and longing in his voice make her knees literally weak. She clutches at the door frame, her heart a cascade of tumbling beats. He looks past her shoulder and sees Harry and Ron there; she can read him well enough to see the way he registers, catalogues, and dismisses them within a second. He stands slowly, and she reads the fresh pain in the way he holds himself. Someone in the Order has gotten their kicks in.

"Are you okay?" he asks her, and his fingers twitch at his side, as though he's stopping himself from reaching out as his eyes drag over her.

"Y-ye- *no*," she stumbles and her breath catches in a sob, and then – heedless of Harry and Ron – she crosses the room in two steps and flings herself against Malfoy. He is hard and warm, and his arms come around her instantly, his face dropping to bury against her hair which has fallen from its

bun, his breath hot, his fingers pressing points into her back, his heart thudding quick against her ear.

It's like coming home.

"Granger," he says warningly, quiet in her ear. "Your friends are *right there*."

"I don't care," she tells him, leaning back in his arms so that she can examine his face, her hands cupping his sharp jaw as she eyes the bruising. It's slightly swollen and dark violets and blues, and she presses her lips together. "Who did that?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. Not someone I know. It doesn't matter anyway," he dismisses it, tone casual, but his hands are holding her very tightly and his eyes are devouring her. "Why aren't you okay, Granger?"

"Because," she mumbles, crushing her cheek against his chest again. "You're in here, and I'm not."

He huffs a laugh. "You want to join me?" His hand is stroking through her hair now as he holds her close, and Hermione thinks that something is different now they're out. He's not holding part of himself back anymore – it's as if a weight has fallen away from him. All his sharp, cold edges feel weirdly blunted. He's a prisoner, but Hermione realises he's probably more free than he's been in years. It makes her heart ache, her fingers tight on his shoulders, careful of his ruined back.

"Yes," she says, not even joking. If she thought the Order would let her, she would.

"But you're okay?"

"I mean, yes? But – but I'm really not, Malfoy," she admits as they draw apart a little. She chooses to ignore Harry and Ron, although she can almost feel their eyes boring into her back. "I didn't sleep last night. I sat in a fucking corner and tried not to panic. I was so scared and I just – just wanted *you*." Her breathing has suddenly gone to hell; ragged gasps juddering in and out like dry sobs, and Malfoy cups her face with one hand, his thumb rubbing over her cheekbone.

"Hey. Hey, it's okay, Granger. Deep breaths."

"I – I *can't*. They – they debriefed me just before, and I had to talk about – about what happened," she tumbles out, hitching and unsteady, "and they didn't ask me about – but I thought about it all anyway, and I can't st–stop thinking about it now, and – and – and I'm so *tired*."

"Fuck," Malfoy mutters. He tucks her against him again, rubbing her back firmly up and down as she sobs pathetically.

"I just want *you*." Her fingers dig into him as she remembers last night, and adds: "And you were going to *leave me*. You were going to go off and *die*, and leave me thinking Merlin knows what. You *bastard*."

"Fuck," Malfoy mutters again. "I'm sorry, Granger," he says helplessly.

"You were going to die," she repeats fiercely, and he shrugs, swallowing dryly.

"After everything I've done, what else could I do?"

"You *idiot*." She wants very badly to hit him. "You're as bad as them," she says, flailing behind her to indicate Harry and Ron.

"Speaking of *them*," Malfoy says dryly, "they both look like they want to murder me, Granger. I may end up dying anyway."

Hermione huffs a wet, snotty laugh, something wonderful twisting in her belly. Malfoy is here and safe, and not dead, and maybe things are going to be okay. But in the meantime, there's Harry and Ron to face down. She takes a deep breath and straightens, pulling away from Malfoy and wiping her tear-wet face with her shirt sleeve, and then her runny nose. The two of them are staring at her and Malfoy, varying degrees of disbelief and disgust printed on their faces.

"What," Ron says, enunciating very carefully, "the fuck is going on?"

Hermione cringes and tries to think of an explanation that won't lead to a confrontation she can't bear right now.

"Well, apparently Granger hasn't slept," Malfoy says neutrally, which makes Hermione blink in surprise. He lifts his chin as if presenting it to take a blow; only Malfoy would be stupidly stubborn enough to make himself an easier target. "That's probably the most pressing issue."

"No," Ron says, eyes narrowed. "No – *no*. The most pressing issue –" he spits the words out vehemently "– is why you're touching Hermione like you still think you own her."

Hermione can't stop the gasp that tumbles from her lips, her hand instinctively pressing against her mouth as if she can push it back in, nausea surging in her stomach. Her gaze flies to Malfoy, and from his clenched fist to the muscle ticking in his jaw, he is coiled and vibrating with a dangerous tension.

"I never did own her," Malfoy says tightly, "and she touched *me*."

The emotion in the room is overcharged. Hermione can almost *feel* the anger making the air crackle.

"What happened at the revel where you claimed her, then?" Ron asks, blindly going for the jugular, not thinking about the damage he'll leave in his wake as Hermione flinches back, feeling as though he'd just punched her in the stomach. "Wasn't *that* you staking your ownership?"

Malfoy goes ashen, and when he speaks, his voice is broken in a way that frightens Hermione, his breath shallow and his mouth twisted with a bitter self-loathing. It's as if a switch has been flipped, and his carefully constructed mask has been shattered. "I – I didn't want to." He's breathless, protesting, a kind of contained panic in his eyes. "I didn't *want* to do it."

He looks like a trapped animal as he takes a sharp step back. His eyes meet Hermione's, and *oh*, she hates the way she feels right now. Sick to her stomach with memory, and in a way, it makes no sense because she loves him. But she *didn't* then. And she didn't want it then. Neither of them did. And even if they *had*, they wouldn't have wanted it at a fucking revel. And he wouldn't have brutalised her, leaving her bleeding between her legs, her skin broken from his bites, and blooming all over in dark bruises that he'd beaten into her flesh.

She thinks she might throw up again, for the second time that day. As she stumbles for the toilet, Hermione dizzily thinks that it's not fair she's throwing up so much, considering she hasn't even

eaten anything. But all that comes up is the water she drank during the debrief, and bile. She makes awful, retching sounds ripped straight from her gut, but only a trickle passes her lips.

"Hermione!" That's Harry's voice, full of worry, "Hermione –" His hand falls on her shoulder, and she jerks away and nearly falls over her own feet.

"Don't touch me!" She stumbles and puts her back to the wall. "Don't fucking touch me!" Harry backs off. It's him and Ron, standing at the end of the bed by the door, and Malfoy, standing against the far wall, staring at her with his face a tangle of self-hatred and worry for her. Is it ironic that the only man she can stand to have touching her, is the one who raped her? She doesn't know. Doesn't care.

"Malfoy," she says, an exhausted plea, and his shoulders slump. He knows what she needs. She sees him shove that self-hatred down, his eyes haunted, and then he opens his arms. Hermione is aware of Harry and Ron both staring horrified at the disturbing sight she no doubt makes as she sidles past the pair of them and all but glues herself to Malfoy.

"This isn't okay." Ron's voice. Talking to Harry as if Malfoy and Hermione aren't right there. She shuts her eyes, breathing in the scent of him. "Harry, this isn't fucking – we can't let her do this. This is *wrong*. Something isn't right if – he – he *raped* her, Harry. Right? That's the bloody implication here. And *look* at her!" Ron sounds like he's on the verge of being sick himself.

"This isn't how I wanted this to go," Hermione says to Malfoy, muffled against his shirt. He takes a shuddering breath, and she realises with a shock that he's on the verge of tears.

"How did you think it was going to go, Granger? The seal of approval from all your friends? A perfect happy ever after?" He is all bitterness and sarcasm, and it stings.

"I was going to ease them into it," she says miserably. "Nice and gentle. Like boiling a frog."

He barks a hoarse, genuine laugh into her hair, and she feels a spark of pleasure that she did that. Startled that laugh out of him. "Salazar, this is such a mess."

Harry and Ron are still talking. Arguing, actually. Hermione does her best to tune them out, because she knows what's going to happen, and she wants to focus on Malfoy. While she can.

"At least you're alive." It could have gone so much worse, she reminds herself, and him. This is not the worst-case scenario.

"Always the optimist, Granger," he says very gently, fingers combing through her hair and catching on tangles.

"They're going to take me away." The thought of it threatens to strip away her tenuous grip on sanity.

"Mm. I imagine so. I think they think you're...what's the Muggle term?"

"Brainwashed?" she offers, and he nods against her head. His heartbeat is a fast drum. Harry and Ron have fallen silent at some point. Hermione isn't sure when. "I'll convince them I'm not. I just have to talk to someone rational." Hermione racks her brain, trying to think of someone who might actually believe her. "Maybe Tonks will get it," she suggests weakly.

"You know how sorry I am, right, Granger?" There's a wobble in his voice.

"What?" Hermione is bewildered.

"About – about the revel. What I..." He can't bring himself to even allude to it. He clears his throat and goes on. "All the things I did. And what I – let happen. I'm so fucking sorry. You know that, right?"

"Yes," Hermione says emphatically. "Merlin's sake, of course I know that. Just – *stop*. I don't want to think about it." It makes her feel sick again. It makes her want to claw her skin off, whether he's sorry or not.

"Sorry." And then he hisses in a breath, his grip on her slackening and falling away. "I think you have to go now, Granger."

"No." She holds him tighter, feeling herself seesaw back toward that blind panic. "*No*. No, I can't. Shit, *shit*, Malfoy, please don't let them take me."

"Fuck, Hermione, I can't stop them," he says brokenly, as if it kills him to say it.

"Hermione?" Harry's voice, attempting softness.

"You have to go with them, Granger. *Hermione*," Malfoy says urgently, putting his finger and thumb under her chin and forcing her to meet his eyes. Wet and dark in the torchlight, like river stones pressed into his flesh. Dulled with hopelessness. "It'll just make it worse if you fight." She knows he's right, but the thought of letting go of him is anathema.

"Hermione, we need to go," Harry says. "You need rest."

"She will," Malfoy says sharply, his gaze flicking over her shoulder. "Just give her a second. *Please*." He's actually pleading, raw and open. Harry doesn't say anything, but Hermione hears footsteps shuffle back a few paces.

"But I can't sleep without you," Hermione says in a very small voice, and tears are sliding fat down her cheeks. Malfoy's jaw ticks and he looks away for a second, taking a deep, slow breath and letting it out again. When he looks back to her, his eyes are red-rimmed.

"You'll be okay, Hermione. You're safe with them. It'll be okay. But you *need* to go, or they're going to drag you out of here."

"Hey –" Ron begins to protest, and Malfoy shoots him an icy glare. Ron doesn't finish.

"Go," he tells her, and Hermione takes a deep breath. She knows she has to, but it's so hard to make that first move when she feels frozen; as if she'll shatter with the smallest shift. But it has to be done. She pushes up on tiptoes and kisses Malfoy soft and light on the mouth. He makes the smallest sound, deep in his chest, and leans in. For a beautiful heartbeat, they are pressed together, and then Hermione steps back.

She doesn't tell him she loves him. It's too precious to say and have Harry and Ron scoff at. Instead she forces a smile to her lips. "I'll see you soon."

Malfoy nods, his expression grave and still as he watches her go. The door banging shut behind them feels like a death.

"Hermione..." Ron begins, and the fact that he is *genuinely* bewildered and distressed and overflowing with a helpless worry for her only makes it worse.

"Not right now, Ron," she says wearily, tears still rolling down her cheeks as if she's a leaky tap, trying her very best to pull herself together. She didn't survive months of captivity only to fall apart the minute she got out. Even if that does seem to be what she's doing right now. "Just...don't." They walk out to the apparition point in silence.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

Four

They apparate back to the safe house, landing in the garden shed and walking up to the house in silence, Harry leading them into the small back hall, Ron taking up the rear. When they get inside, the two of them just stand there for a moment, as if they're not sure what to do now. Hermione looks at them both and can practically *see* all the questions they want to spew at her hovering on their lips. And maybe it's best to just bite the bullet, as her father would've said, and get their horrified interrogation out of the way. Or at least answer a few of their more pressing questions. She can hardly feel any worse than she already does, Hermione thinks wryly.

She takes a deep breath. Malfoy would expect her to pull herself together, she tells herself firmly.

"I need a cup of tea," she says aloud.

"Tea," Harry echoes awkwardly, and then nods. "Yeah. Of course. The kitchen's just – this way." He leads her through the second door on the left, into a small kitchen that opens up into a slightly larger dining room. The room is empty. Hermione realises she was half expecting to see Mrs Weasley bustling about and filling the space with warmth and energy. Before Hermione had been captured, she'd been at the same safe house as Ron and Ginny, and Hermione thought she saw her last night.

Harry puts the kettle on the hob, lighting the flame with a wave of his wand.

"Is your mum here?" Hermione asks Ron as she stands in the corner of the kitchen, the question coming out stilted. He looks surprised that she's capable of coherent conversation, and she feels slightly offended. Is she really that bad?

"Um. Yes. Mum and Ginny. Fred was here for a while, but he and George are based elsewhere now. The same place as my dad. And people are always shifting around. You know how it is."

Hermione nods. She remembers. Hardly anyone is in one place for more than a couple of months. "Who's here at the moment?"

Ron frowns, thinking. "Well. There're nine bedrooms here. We've got the communal rooms down here – kitchen, dining room, sitting room, Lupin's office, which you saw earlier, and the utility room. Then three bedrooms and a bathroom on the first floor, same on the second floor, and the loft conversion where you are has another three tiny bedrooms."

Harry's moving around the kitchen, occupied with making the tea – getting down the mugs and fetching out the milk – and Ron is marginally more relaxed as he ticks people off on his fingers. "First floor, there's me and Harry in one room. Mum in another. Tonks and Lupin in the last. Second is Kingsley, who shares if someone unexpected turns up temporarily, Dean and Justin, and

Hannah and Angelina. Ginny's up top with you, and the last room is...empty right now." Ron's voice trails off at the end, and Hermione knows why the other room is empty. Someone else has been captured, or killed.

The people here are a mixed bunch; she likes all of them well enough, though she isn't particularly close to any of the younger ones except Ginny and Dean. But asking about them has eased the tense atmosphere of the room.

"You didn't sleep last night?" Ron asks then, as Harry waits for the kettle to boil, watching them both. Hermione shakes her head.

"No," she says quietly. "I have trouble sleeping. Usually Malfoy –" She cuts herself off abruptly, and Ron groans, dragging a hand over his face, rubbing at the ginger scruff he's cultivating. He looks tired and resigned, the shocked denial – so clear on his face in Malfoy's cell – absent now.

"Just say it, 'Mione," he tells her, then mutters, "Merlin's sake," shaking his head as if in disbelief. Hermione stares down at her hands, clutched together in front of her.

"Usually Malfoy woke up when I had a nightmare," she says, adjusting it from the 'usually Malfoy slept in bed with me' that she'd been about to say. "And then he'd sit up, watching over me. It made me feel safe. I don't know if I can sleep without him."

Harry makes a harsh sound in the back of his throat, and Ron shoots him a quelling glare. Hermione would've thought it'd be the other way around. She looks at Ron, her hands wringing together. "I know you think I'm crazy. Or damaged. Or he's – he's brainwashed me. Trust me, I know how messed up it seems. How messed up it *is* –"

"Yeah. It is, Hermione," Harry says, and Ron looks down at his feet, not disagreeing. "I'm not some evil ogre. I'm your friend, and I'm worried about you because you're – you're screwing the guy who – who did *that* to you?"

Hermione is unspeakably grateful Harry shied away from the 'r' word, and also bristling at his assumption. "We're not doing *that*. We've *never* done that. Not even close," she snaps, and this time, it's Ron who shoots her a weird, unhappy look.

"Except for when he *claimed* you?" he asks, disgust dripping off the word.

Hermione is already sick of people flinging that in her face. "Are you telling me that you wouldn't do that, if my life – both of our lives – were at stake? Either of you? Ronald? Harry?" She skewers each of them with a cold glare. "I *didn't* want it. And it was fucking terrible. I have nightmares about it. It makes me sick, literally. But I also knew it was the only way to stay alive. So I told him to do it. Are you saying you wouldn't? You wouldn't beat me and fuck me to save my life? You'd let me be given over to the Dark Lord's followers? As if that would be better? I guess at least then *your* hands would be clean."

She's crude and bitter, the rage at what happened boiling up under her skin again. She wonders if it will ever lessen. Both the men are silent, staring at their feet. The kettle begins to whistle. Hermione waits. The kettle shrills. Hermione stomps over past Harry and grabs it off the hob, wrenching the gas off and then staring at Harry, eye to eye.

"He *beat* you?" Harry asks very quietly, and there's nothing in his voice but an aching compassion. Hermione gulps. The anger leaves her in a rush.

"It had to be believable," she says, setting the kettle onto the scorch-marked wooden board next to the stove. Her gaze locks to Harry's bright green one. He looks ill. "I want an answer."

When he finally speaks, it comes croaking out of him reluctantly. "Yes, Hermione. Yes, I would." She looks to Ron. His freckles stand out starkly against his ashen, sickened face.

"Merlin, Hermione. That's fucked up. But...yeah. I guess I'd have to."

"And so did Malfoy," she says tightly. "It – it wasn't *fun* for him, you know. Think about how you felt just imagining it." She pauses a beat. Sighs, feeling very old and unbearably weary. "So yeah. I don't hate him for it anymore. I think he hates himself, though."

"How can you...?" Harry starts and trails off. Hermione can figure out the general direction of his question though.

"That's why it's messed up," she says. "Now pour the tea, Harry."

They sit around the end of the scarred dining room table, drinking their tea in silence for a while. The table seats ten and is crammed into a narrow room with a bay window and slightly garish wallpaper in purple and gold striping. An ornately framed magical painting of a kneazle is on the wall. The kneazle is currently sleeping on a large wheel of cheese, which itself is surrounded by various fruits. It's a very ugly painting, but the kneazle looks a bit like Crooks.

Harry has put a plate of biscuits together, but Hermione finds herself unable to bear the thought of food passing her lips. Ron eats them with gusto, and Harry nibbles. Despite being a fairly full household, no one appears, and Hermione suspects that everyone has been forewarned to make themselves scarce. She wonders if it would be better or worse to have other people around. As it is, she just has silence except for Ron's chewing.

"We really can't just let Malfoy out, Hermione," Harry says out of nowhere. "All judgement on your...*thing* aside, it's not up to me. And the process will take time."

"How long?" she asks shortly.

"Maybe a week? Two at most," Harry hazards, and Hermione whimpers and sinks her head into her hands.

"You really can't sleep without him?" Ron asks around a mouthful of biscuit, and it's so *Ron* that Hermione gives a tearful giggle. This is the sort of thing she'd missed so dearly, when she was gone. The kneazle on the wall stirs, rolling into an upside-down twist.

"I don't know." She shrugs, feeling miserably resigned. "I guess we'll find out."

"Maybe a potion will help," Harry offers, and Hermione nods, hating the idea.

Silence falls again, but they're both watching her surreptitiously, and she can still feel the unspoken questions, as if they're floating telepathically through the air and beating against her skull. "Just ask," she says sharply into the silence eventually. "I can tell you want to ask me things. So do." And then she glares at them both. There are crumbs on Ron's fairisle jersey. "But use your heads. Don't ask me anything – well. You know."

Ron speaks first, and it's not what Hermione expects. "Do you think you'll be okay?" he asks with a worried, unvarnished kind of earnestness, and Hermione starts crying.

It takes a while to explain that she isn't angry and that wasn't the wrong kind of question while both Ron and Harry sit there helplessly, clearly wanting to hug her, or pat her shoulder and shush her. She sniffles her way back to normality and wipes her face with a handkerchief Harry fumbles out of his pocket, which appears to be clean.

"I hope so," she says finally, with a bit of wry humour as she scrubs at her cheeks. "I don't feel much like it right now."

"You're tired," Ron says. "That doesn't help." Hermione agrees with a nod and offers Harry his handkerchief back. Unsurprisingly, he tells her to keep it.

"So you and Malfoy – when did it start?" he asks, and it could sound combative, but he softens his voice and it just sounds like a question.

"Feelings? I don't know." Hermione thinks about it. "I think the first time I really *realised* I – well, had feelings, was about a month in, when he took the flogging for me."

"*Flogging?*" Harry asks, sounding horrified, and Hermione nods, realising belatedly how bizarre and barbaric it must sound to someone who hasn't lived with Voldemort for three months.

"To save me from attendance at a revel as the – the entertainment. We'd already talked about the possibility, and I'd agreed that I would rather do that than what could happen if I refused. But when it came down to it – he couldn't bring himself to ask me to do it, so instead he lied to his master, and took forty lashes for me." Hermione remembers that night vividly. They'd both been very drunk by the end of it. "I nearly kissed him that night," she says simply, "and then had a freak out over it. Because I knew I shouldn't feel that way. But I did. I do."

Harry stares at her for a long moment. They both do, in fact. And then Harry nods. "Right. So when did you, erm, *stop* freaking out?"

Hermione laughs bitterly. "I haven't." And then she shakes her head. "No. I know what you mean. And you're pushing the questions, Harry. This is intrusive," she says neutrally, just stating a fact, but before Harry can apologise, she holds up a hand and goes on. "I'll answer, but only because I want my best friends to understand, and not think I'm some crazy victim with Stockholm Syndrome – Harry will explain that to you later, Ron," she adds as an aside when Ron frowns in puzzlement.

She takes a steadying breath and continues. "I could count the times that Malfoy and I have kissed properly on my fingers. Just before, in the cells? That was probably only the sixth time. And I've initiated pretty much all but one, I think." The one when he told her that he loved her, standing in the snowy woods. When he was about to send her off to safety, and then go to his death. "So – so whatever we have, it's not based on him turning me into some willing sex slave. Okay?"

Both men seem oddly chastised. "Okay," Harry says quietly.

Hermione excuses herself after the tea, and climbs the stairs winding up to her small attic room, where she bolts the door, drags the blanket off the bed, and tries to sleep in the corner. It eludes her, and instead she spends hours ruminating over every terrible thing that could happen. She ends up in

a ball crying on and off, her lips dry and cracked and head aching in heartbeat throbs. She wants Malfoy.

She wants Malfoy.

She is still lying there in a stiff, aching ball when someone knocks on her door. Her limbs protest as she stands, and the clock on the bedside table tells her it's dinnertime; her stomach has become oddly silent on the matter. Hermione would've thought she'd drift off eventually over the past five hours, but she'd kept nodding off and then waking with a jerk, dread pooling in her stomach and a scream unvoiced on her lips. At least she didn't sleep long enough to dream.

"Who is it?" she asks dully, wondering why she cares.

"Hermione? It's Ginny," comes through the door, and Hermione unbolts it and creaks it open. Ginny stands there grinning at her, tall and slim with her red hair gleaming, a tray in her hands. "Hi."

"Ginny. It's...good to see you," Hermione says limply, knowing she doesn't sound it.

"Mum thought you might prefer to have dinner upstairs? Things get a little wild at dinnertime. Although you're welcome to join us. I'll just carry your tray down," Ginny says in a rush, and Hermione smiles faintly, taking the tray from her with the idea of using it to shield against a hug.

"Thanks. And say thank you to your mum, too. I think I will eat up here. I'm not really...fit for company," she tries, and that sounds right. It's true, and also not *'I'm a complete mess who can't sleep and has spent five hours crying for Draco Malfoy'*.

Ginny's sweeping glance seems to take in everything from Hermione's frazzled, lank hair to her bitten nails, and a tight, sympathetic smile flashes across her face. "Well, I'm just in the next room along if you need anything later. I'm usually in my room after ten, and I don't mind being woken."

"Thanks, Ginny," Hermione says sincerely, and Ginny flashes that close-lipped sympathetic smile again.

"It's no problem. Once you're finished with dinner, just leave your tray outside the door if you don't want to be disturbed." Hermione nods, and Ginny takes a step back. "I'm glad you're back, Hermione." And then she turns and goes with an awkward little wave, and Hermione clicks the door shut behind her with a push of her foot. She wonders what Malfoy is having for dinner. She imagines the Order would feed him fairly well. The tray goes on the dresser by the door. She takes the glass of orange squash off, sets it aside, and then stares narrow-eyed at the rest.

A roast dinner. Thin slices of beef and golden, crispy roast potatoes are washed in gravy, and a pile of peas and carrots sits in a puddle of it. Hermione finds she can't stand the idea of consuming any of it. She recognises the feeling; control of what she can control, as some kind of unhealthy coping mechanism. *Hello, old friend.*

"Shit," she mumbles, but puts the tray untouched outside the door.

Hermione downs the squash and then slips down to the second floor with her empty glass. The hallway is empty, and drifting up the flights of stairs, she can just catch the waft of laughter and conversation. She finds the bathroom again and pees, and washes her face; she's haggard and her

eyes are puffy around, her lips patchy and dry. A deep, grinding tiredness weighs down her bones; mental and physical. She's struggling to stay upright, her aching head a metronome that scatters her thoughts, her stomach churning with nausea that she thinks is as much from stress as it is from the squash.

She considers having a shower in the ancient-looking over-tub system because scalding hot water sounds amazing, but discards the idea – she doesn't have a change of clothes yet anyway. Or a wand, she recalls randomly. They hadn't taken her to get a wand. Maybe they don't trust her with one. She misses the feel of Malfoy's in her hand – almost as familiar to her now as her own broken one – not that it ever worked very well. With a sigh, Hermione fills her water glass and creeps back up the narrow, steep staircase, bolting the bedroom door behind her.

At nine o'clock, there is another knock on her door. Hermione struggles back up out of the nest of blankets and pillows she's made in the corner of the room between the dresser and the eaves, feeling dizzy and aching down every bone. She doesn't bother to ask who it is, just wrenches the door open. It's Harry. His lips part as he looks at her, and Hermione wonders miserably just how terrible she looks. She feels like a zombie. Glassy-eyed and stumbling, her skin like paper.

"What?" she asks, realising belatedly how terribly abrupt that sounds. Harry's eyes skitter past her, probably taking in the stripped bed. A wrinkle of confusion slashes between his brows, but he seems to think better of mentioning it.

Instead, he holds up a small vial filled with purple liquid. "Dreamless Sleep," he says by way of explanation, and Hermione sighs. She supposes it's her only option, although she hates it; it makes her wake with a feeling of ominous dread, as though she did dream, but she just can't remember it. It makes her feel helpless. Controlled. She takes the vial from Harry's hand.

"Thank you."

"You didn't touch your food," he says, and they both look down at the plate beside the door.

"I wasn't hungry," she lies and Harry's expression tightens. He frowns and adjusts his glasses, a crease between his brows and his mouth unhappy.

"Hermione." Her name is a reproof and a plea, and she bites her tongue, hand tight around the vial of Dreamless Sleep, fear crawling up her spine.

"Don't." Hermione snaps it, her heart thrumming in frantic panic.

"You need to eat, Hermione," Harry says, confusion muddling his unhappiness.

"Tomorrow," she deflects, her hand on the doorknob. "I feel too sick right now." Making up excuses, and unlike Malfoy, Harry buys it, nodding sympathetically.

"Fair enough. It's been a hard day for you." He fidgets. "I understand that all of this is a real shock to you. I know it's going to take time before you start to get back to normal, and we need to be patient," he says, and Hermione stands there tensely, wondering who he's been talking to. Is that what Lupin told him, or has he been discussing her with other people? "But I'm just glad to have you home, 'Mione. And you're so strong, I know you'll be okay," he adds, green eyes bright and earnest, filled with trust in Hermione's capabilities, and she has to suppress a burst of wild, bitter

laughter. She doesn't think she'll ever be okay again. She's not sure that the Hermione that Harry thinks he's looking at even exists after everything she's been through. Everything she's done.

"I don't think so," she says numbly, tiredness making her honest. She doesn't care anymore.

Harry frowns, not understanding. "What?"

"I'm not going to be okay, Harry," she says, fingers white-knuckled on the doorknob, and then shuts the door on him. The Hermione Granger that Harry knew died with the slide of Malfoy's cum down her bloodied thighs. She presses her back to the door and her free hand to her mouth and makes a muffled, quiet scream into it, her muscles shaking with the force of the tension running through her. Hermione wishes now that someone else had done it. Had raped her. Crabbe or Goyle Senior, or even Voldemort himself. Anyone but Malfoy. She can't take this horrible, desperate need for Malfoy's comfort when the reason she needs it is because of what he did. It's going to drive her insane.

"Hermione..."

"Just go away!" she yells through tears, her breath starting to heave. She wants Malfoy. It's a litany in her head, pointless and fucked up, and wringing her out.

"I don't want to leave you like this," Harry says through the door, and Hermione chokes on a sob, wiping her face and yanking the door open. Face to face with Harry, she swipes her cheeks, sniffing sharply as her nose begins to run, and Harry's eyes look suspiciously watery, a tremble to his chin. He clears his throat, swallowing thickly. "Christ. 'Mione. I can't just leave you like this," he says helplessly, waving a hand at her. The state of her. Hermione inhales and then exhales shakily, trying to wrestle back some control over herself. She knows how she must look. Like a crazy person who belongs in a padded room, in a straitjacket, her hair a lank, stringy tangle and her face sticky with snot and tears.

"I'm fine, Harry."

"No, you're not."

"No, I'm not," Hermione admits. "But I'll survive. I just – need sleep," she says, only half a lie. She holds up the vial. "And right now, I plan on taking this and going to sleep." That part is true. As much as Hermione hates the idea of potion-induced sleep, she knows that she needs it. She can't keep going forever without it. The human body doesn't work that way, and Hermione is already on a knife-edge of total collapse. And the Order won't let her see Malfoy if she's a complete wreck instead of only half of one, she thinks, panic frittering in her mind. If she wants to see Malfoy, she knows she has to keep it together. Or at least pretend to, while everyone watches her with prying eyes, asking probing questions that rip the scabs off her wounds and just make it harder to pretend.

Harry stares at her for a long moment. He looks stricken. "I didn't think it would be like this."

"Sorry to disappoint." It's mean, but it feels good to say.

"I didn't mean it like that! 'Mione!" His hand flies out to slap against the door before she can finish swinging it shut. His eyes are hollow and grieving, his lower lip trembling, and he runs his fingers through his hair in frustration, every millimetre of his body exuding an impotent frustration, and Hermione knows she's being unfair on him. It's *Harry*. He loves her, and he *cares*, and she's standing here a broken ruin who won't eat, and he can't stand it. Hating that he can't make it better

for her. She'd be the same if their positions were reversed, Hermione knows it. He's searching for words when she speaks.

"I know you didn't. I'm sorry, Harry," she says with lips that feel numb and clumsy. "I – I am not doing well," she admits. Looks down at her feet. "I don't know how to exist without him, Harry," she whispers. "I'm so scared. I know I'm safe but –" She shakes herself, cutting off the flow of consciousness that had been about to spill from her mouth like vomit; visceral and messy. Bitter. Unhelpful. She forces a smile to her lips that feels wholly foreign, hugging herself with one arm, the other hand still on the doorknob. "I – I should sleep."

"It'll be okay, 'Mione," Harry says earnestly, and all Hermione can think is how stupidly naive he is. "You know that, right?" He reaches out and she flinches away on instinct, causing him to jerk his hand back as though she's scalded him, running his hand through his hair instead, tugging at clumps of it.

"Sorry," she whispers.

"No. No, that's my bad. I keep forgetting." Harry bends and picks up her dinner tray. "Um. I'll see you in the morning, then?"

Hermione nods and murmurs agreement, swinging the door shut and turning away from it without another thought. The vial of Dreamless Sleep is warm in her fingers now. If she doesn't drink it, Hermione knows she won't sleep, and if she doesn't sleep tonight, then tomorrow will be impossible. So she uncorks it and tips it down her throat before she can think too much about it, thinking instead about Malfoy in his stone cell, lying on the basic cot and staring at the ceiling, that livid bruise marring his pale face. The Dreamless Sleep is bitter, like so many potions are. The empty vial falls to the floor, unimportant, and Hermione makes it to her nest of blankets and pillows before the effects begin to creep up. Limbs growing clumsy and eyelids heavy, spidering fingers of sleep wrapping gossamer around her brain, dragging her down into heavy, black nothingness.

It feels like dying.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

Thank you again to my amazing beta Pidanka, who has done an incredible job ♥

Five

Draco presses his fingers to his lips, remembering the feel of hers. Soft and dry, and so tentative. He closes his eyes, remembering the smell of her and the way she'd felt in his arms – too cold, and too thin, all bones and angles pushing into his soft spots as she'd clung desperately to him. Birdlike, her heart thrumming madly and her breath shallow, and Draco hates Potter and Weasley for taking her from his arms when she'd so clearly been on the brink of shaking apart, and he'd felt like he was helping hold her together. Hermione had been whisper-fragile and trying so damn hard, and he'd wanted to snarl at Potter and Weasley and throw them out. To take her down onto his cot, cradled in his arms, using his body to shield her from the world and everyone and everything making demands of her.

He'd thought '*mine*' and '*protect*' at the same time like some kind of animal, and neither was really true. Neither was possible. Instead, he'd had to convince her to let go of him, to detach in increments. To leave, even though she didn't want to. Even though she was scared and miserable, and wanted to stay with him. And it had ripped his heart out. She couldn't sleep. Draco inhales short and rough and holds it, trying not to cry as he remembers the small, broken way she'd admitted it. She should be sleeping in his arms, where he can soothe her nightmares away and make her feel safe if she wakes gasping and lost in memories.

It's pathetic. Draco knew this would happen, though. He'd told himself for hours last night that Hermione was better off without him. That she doesn't really love him – it's just situational. That she'd be better off without him. And then, just as he'd predicted, as soon as she'd walked into the cell, he'd been at her mercy. Choking on remorse and self-loathing, but still desperate to touch her. To comfort her, yes, but if he was honest, he was desperate to cling to her for his own selfish sake. Because she is everything. She is the only thing he has, and he doesn't really even have her.

He'd told himself that he has no right to touch her. No right to her at all, because he is a loathsome monster who turned her into this ghost of herself, broken and insubstantial, flinching away from her friends' comfort because she can't stand the feeling of any hands on her except, ironically, his. The one who pressed all the bruises and hurts into her flesh. Who hurt her literally from the inside out in the worst possible way. And yet a tiny, buried-deep, monstrous part of him is ferociously glad that it's his touch that she seeks. If it were anyone else, he would want to kill them.

Draco sighs and stares at the stone ceiling, running over every second of her too-brief visit. Over and over. Every word. Every hitching almost-laugh. Every time his skin had touched hers. Every moment that shame and self-hatred had enveloped him. He hopes desperately that Hermione's coping, and he tries to believe that she is. She might be broken, but she's still incredibly strong.

And no one here is trying to hurt her. She'll be alright, he tells himself. Potter and Weasley will take care of her; the thought grates horribly even as it reassures. *Mine*, he thinks instinctively.

He finds himself wondering if every footstep, every distant noise echoing through the stones, is her.

The minutes drag and boredom creeps in, and with a squirming sense of shame, Draco ends up jerking off as he lies there, more out of a total lack of anything else to do than any kind of desire. Draco tries to remember the soft push of Hermione's lips against his as he moves his hand in short, efficient movements. But his mind ends up meandering down dark, unwelcome corridors. The way she'd looked when she'd asked him to lace her corset. The way she'd kissed him afterwards, breasts bare and pushed up on display. The cool softness of her hand on his cock in bed before she pulled it away. It's dangerous territory, but he's too fixated on chasing his orgasm to care.

Draco's breath turns shallow, skin heating, biting his own lip as he slides his hand up and down, quick and firm, head filled with images, trying to string snatches of memory together into fantasy. He imagines her on his bed – back at the mansion – curled naked beside him with their legs entangled, her arms around his neck and her breasts crushed to his chest, her mouth open and hungry as she kisses him. And then he's on the verge of coming, whole body tensed, muscles strung out, and pleasure grinding through him. And he remembers viscerally the velvet, delicious feel of her cunt gripping his cock while he lies above her, his body bloodied and still shaking from the Cruciatus, and her weeping.

It's too late to stop himself; Draco comes with an almost pained groan, regret and a sick, sick self-disgust ripping through him, obliterating any pleasure from the orgasm. And then he's stumbling to the toilet and throwing up, cum on his left hand and trousers low on his hips, his cock bobbing there, erect still as bile burns acrid in his throat. He stands panting, clean hand braced on the wall, and he feels even more like a monster than before.

Hermione sleeps.

She wakes, pale morning light filtering in through the window. A suffocating feeling of horror lays upon Hermione when her eyes open, and the memories that were bottled up by the Dreamless Sleep rise up in her mind. They're raw and brutal in her head, overwhelming, her skull throbbing and nausea gripping her. She balls up handfuls of the blankets and screams into them until her voice is cracked and raw. Rage, and horror, and an animal suffering ripping through her, tearing her open from the inside out. She's bleeding from the inside out, her memories spilling on the floor like entrails, her thoughts juddering and nonsensical. Someone must hear her because, at some point, her door goes crashing open, bouncing off the wall, and there are voices crowding into her room.

A woman talks to her, low and reassuring, but Hermione can't process anything, locked in memories, hands over her ears and face buried against her drawn-up knees. She sobs until she retches, but nothing comes up. Her sinuses ache, her nose blocked and streaming at once. There is so much to remember; fingers and bruises and ripping out Malfoy's nails and the Imperius and that soft little grunt of pleasure Malfoy made when he came inside her. She screams. That last memory makes her want to peel her skin off. It isn't fair. He didn't want to, he *didn't*. She tugs at her hair mindlessly, howling out her misery.

Voldemort ruined them. He ruined them both. He tainted everything, and yet – *she wants Malfoy*. Because she knows he won't hurt her. Not any more. Not now that Voldemort can't make him. He'll

keep her safe or die trying.

She thinks maybe she cries for him aloud, but he doesn't come. He's locked in a cell now, and she can't even be there to try to protect him like he tried to protect her.

And then magic sinks into her flesh, cool and tingling, and everything goes black again.

When Hermione wakes up again, she's lying on the bed in her tiny room with a blanket settled over her, along with a strange sense of calm. Tonks sits by her bedside, flicking through a wizarding magazine idly, her hair brown, legs crossed in front of her. She looks up as soon as Hermione shifts on the bed, and her eyes are tired. "Wotcher, Hermione," she says, cheerful and careful at once, putting the magazine aside and leaning forward attentively. "You're awake at last."

Hermione blinks at the older witch, trying to make sense of and catalogue the vague memories of whatever happened before this moment. It all feels foggy and muddled. Oh. That's right. A sense of embarrassment crawls up her, heating her cheeks. "I freaked out," she whispers, and her voice is ragged and raw, her throat burning as she speaks. She's screamed herself hoarse.

"You did," Tonks says matter-of-factly, a faint, undemanding smile on her lips. There's no real humour there though, only a deep, terribly sad sympathy. It itches beneath Hermione's skin, unwelcome. She doesn't *want* Tonks's sympathy – the older witch has no idea. She doesn't know what it was like. She doesn't know what happened. "We had to use a *somnium* on you, in the end. And a Calming Draught, which should be wearing off soon."

"I'm sorry." Hermione exhales, rubbing her hands over her face and sitting up. She feels insubstantial and hollowed out, but at least the rage has subsided, reduced to a murmur in the back of her mind. Presumably thanks to the Calming Draught. She thinks perhaps she should be angry at having her emotions controlled, but of course she's incapable of feeling anything more than irritation. Hermione grimaces as she remembers her meltdown in broad strokes, details lost to the madness of the moment. "Merlin. That's so mortifying."

Tonks waves her off. "It happens, Hermione. You've been through a lot. No one's judging you." She eyes Hermione cautiously, that sympathy printed all over her face. "I couldn't understand most of what you were saying –" Hermione feels sick. She'd spoken? She doesn't remember speaking. Her stomach lurches as she thinks of what she might have said. But Tonks is still talking, and Hermione tunes back in to: "– you want to talk, maybe it would help."

Hermione swallows, swinging her legs off the bed and pushing her hair back, trying not to think about what she'd remembered. Or what she might have said. Talking is the last thing she wants to do. If she talks about it, then she'll have to think about it, and doing that will just lead to another spiral into madness and nightmarish memory. God, she doesn't want *that*, for a multitude of reasons. The foremost being that Malfoy isn't here to draw her out of her mindless state with his presence, and his soft words, and the smell of him; his soap, and fresh sweat, grounding and safe.

"What's the time?" she asks instead of answering Tonks, the question snapping out more harshly than she meant, her voice itself a croaky, discordant thing. Tonks looks startled by the segue, and then checks her watch.

"Um...mid-afternoon. Probably about 2.30?"

"I want to see Malfoy." Merlin, she's a stuck record. Even she recognises that, but she won't apologise for it. Hermione figures after her experiences, she's allowed to be a little crazy. Tonks

shifts uncomfortably, mouth making a tight line.

"I'm afraid that's not possible right now." Hermione's stomach drops out. It's a gut punch and it makes her want to double over. "We spoke to a healer while you were unconscious, and she said it would likely be best for you to have some distance from Draco. After what has happened, you need _"

Panic rears up again, her heart thudding fast. Her breath short. "Who's *we*?" she rasps, anger sparking along with her fear.

Tonks grimaces. "Remus, Harry, and Ron," she admits reluctantly, and Hermione's rage goes up with a *thwump*, like a wildfire eating dry grass.

"Ron? You have *Ron* making decisions for me? In fact, why are any of you making decisions for me? I'm not a child. I've been of age for three years." Hermione glares at Tonks, who holds her gaze unflinchingly.

" *We* aren't, Hermione. Healer Siobhan will be. She'd like to speak to you when you're ready."

Hermione feels sick. Her palms are clammy, her breath tight and quick, sweat breaking out as she makes sense of what Tonks has said. "You can't force me to see a Healer." It comes out on a panting breath, panic seething, fingers curling tightly against her palms. She doesn't want to talk about it. Any of it.

"No," Tonks says, gaze still clear and direct, and Hermione understands why Tonks got the dirty work of informing Hermione rather than Ron, or Harry, or even Lupin. She might have been able to sway them with guilt and sympathy and careful pleas, but she knows instinctively as she meets Tonks's eyes that the metamorphamagus will be immovable. Except they *can't* force Hermione. She doesn't have to speak to a Healer if she doesn't want to. She's not a ward of the Order. They have no right to make her do anything, or stop her from seeing whoever she likes to see, concerns for her mental health or no. Hermione sets her jaw, prepared to say that as Tonks goes on.

Her next words completely dismantle Hermione's plans. "But we don't have to take you to see Malfoy either."

Hermione's jaw drops and an involuntary whimper escapes her, hand clapping over her mouth as if she can shove it back down. She pulls her hand away. Her head is buzzing, and she can hardly hear herself speak when the words come out. "You can't do that." She whoops for breath, dizzy, grabbing at the edge of the bed and getting a fistful of blanket. "You can't *do* that." She feels like she might hyperventilate.

"We can, and we will if we think it's best for you, Hermione."

"I remember that Remus thought it was best for you two to not be together," Hermione spits out in her hoarse, wobbling voice, and Tonks presses her lips together, sighing. She looks old and tired as she shakes her head, sadness and regret clouding her eyes, her hair growing mousier brown.

"Remus didn't rape me, Hermione."

It hits so hard, and it hurts so much. A judder runs through Hermione's body as she chokes down a sobbing gasp. Hearing Tonks say it like that is like knives in her sternum – so piercing and stark,

the words loud in the quiet room. Pain spikes through her, emotional translating to a physical ache in her chest, her lungs burning, her hands trembling now.

"*Don't.*" It's half gasp, half snarl, and all desperate plea. Hermione remembers the feel of him inside her. The way he'd gasped hopeless despair against her breast. The soft, stifled grunt of pleasure. All the torture and horror is suddenly haunting her, now that they're free. A spectre looming in her mind, demanding her attention every time her mind wanders. It's as though escaping the nightmare has given her subconscious permission to try to process it, except Hermione can't see a way to process all of that. She wishes she could forget. Part of her mind has considered an *obliviate* – not that she'd be likely to convince anyone to perform one – but an *obliviate* would take away Malfoy. And she refuses to lose him.

What a fucking mess.

She realises belatedly that tears are sliding down her cheeks. "Don't you dare *ever* say that again." Hermione hiccups a sob as she swipes at the tears, scrubbing her cheeks and staring furiously at Tonks. She hates the other witch right now. Can't stand the sight of her. With that calm, sympathetic expression, her mouth downturned and her eyes so sad. Fuck her, Hermione thinks ferociously.

"But he *did*, Hermione. And that's a concern. The way you are now is worr—"

"That's not how it *was* – he couldn't – *we had to!* There wasn't any other fucking choice!" Her voice slides up too loud and half an octave too high, a broken, shredded thing. She's losing it, standing now, her hair falling in lank tangles around her face, fists clenched as her chest heaves. Tonks has to understand. "Voldemort *made* him do it! He didn't want to! It *killed* him, Tonks, he –"

"Please stop, Hermione." Tonks's voice cuts through Hermione's tear-distorted gabble. The older witch's face is tight, emotions clearly held in fragile check. "I know all that. I do. But that doesn't change that it happened to you anyway. And you shouldn't have to defend the person who did it." The pity in Tonks's eyes hurts. It kills her to see the older witch look at her like that, as if Hermione is some mewling, pathetic wreck. And she probably is.

"But..."

"You should have a shower and breakfast, and then see the Healer," Tonks says, and Hermione lets out a harsh breath, feeling oddly punctured. Deflated. All the anger runs out of her and leaves her empty again. A seed husk. They aren't going to let her see Malfoy. It's hard to process – it hasn't quite sunk in yet; Hermione is still wrapping her head around it. Getting the taste of it, sour on her tongue. She sits on the edge of the bed, looking up at Tonks, who stands there, her hair slowly shifting greenish.

"I'm not hungry." It's her second full day without food, and her stomach is gnawing on her spine. The idea of food passing her lips makes her feel sick. Tonks eyes her worriedly and doesn't speak for a long moment.

"A shower then," she tries at last.

"I don't have any clean clothes." Hermione tugs at her shirt. Malfoy bought her this. The idea of losing it makes an irrational panic skitter over her mind. She wants to scream again, and she doesn't know why.

"Mrs Weasley put your old clothes away in the dresser," Tonks tells her gently, hair the colour of pine needles now. "And your other things are in the case on the dresser." Hermione looks over and sees it there, a squarish case in maroon leather the width of a briefcase, and realises she has no idea what could be inside it. Books? Photos? Everything from *before* seems so distant as if it's from a lifetime ago. It's hard to care. About anything.

"Okay," she says limply but doesn't move, and Tonks has to get out a change of clothes for her – underwear, jeans, long-sleeved tee shirt, and hoodie. Tonks opens the bedroom door then, and looks over at Hermione, the clean clothes bundled under her arm.

"Come on then, Hermione," she says coaxingly. "The sooner you get sorted, the sooner Siobhan – the Healer – can decide what's best."

They won't let her see Malfoy. She's lost the battle before she even tries to fight it, she knows, but she'll still have to see the Merlin-damned Healer. The bitch who has said she needs *space*. Who says she knows what's best for Hermione. What would've been best for Hermione was not to be captured and tortured, but that didn't fucking happen. She's not operating on the ideal anymore, she's operating off what *works*. What keeps her afloat, rather than drowning in the morass of her trauma, and Malfoy keeps her head out of water. Just barely.

The lack of control over her own life makes Hermione want to throw things. Her life – her sanity – is in this unknown Healer's hands, and she already hates the woman. She stands. She feels like a prisoner still. Not free at all. Just trapped in someone else's cage – and yes, it's a gilded cage, a kind one, with people who don't want to hurt her, but it's a cage nonetheless. Hermione wants to beat herself against the bars like a panicked bird. Instead, she follows Tonks quietly down to the bathroom, and while Tonks waits outside the room, Hermione has a scalding hot shower, scrubbing herself until her skin glows pink and her hair squeaks. That part of things is nice.

Hermione's bra feels uncomfortable when she hooks it on, and she frowns, fidgeting with it unsuccessfully for five minutes. The underwire digs in, and the back is too loose, and she wants Malfoy's clothes. The ones that smell of him. Because the rest of her clothes feel foreign and wrong, too. The denim of her jeans is too rough, the zip on her hoodie sticks, her t-shirt too stiff. When she looks in the mirror, her eyes are shadowed, and her cheeks hollow and gaunt, her skin the kind of pallid that looks unhealthy. As if she hasn't seen daylight in months. There are bits of dry skin on her lips, and she nibbles at one, staring blankly at herself until Tonks knocks on the door.

She gives Tonks her dirty clothes with the plea to not lose them, and the witch assures her they'll be on her bed that evening. It's hard to trust that, but Tonks has no reason to lie, does she? Tonks walks her up to the empty room in the loft, letting her in to reveal a bedroom just like Hermione's but with two blue and grey striped easy chairs squashed in. One at the end of the bed, one by the side. It's clearly been set up just for this. Hermione wants to run away from it. "You'll see the Healer here. I'll let her know you're waiting." Tonks offers her a tight smile as Hermione hovers on the threshold.

"Tonks, *wait*. Is – is Malfoy okay?" It comes out very quietly as Hermione twists her fingers together nervously. She can't decipher the look Tonks gives her, but it makes her feel deeply uncomfortable.

"Of course he's okay, Hermione, I'm sure. As far as I know, he would've gotten his breakfast this morning like everyone else. And Remus was due to begin his debriefing this afternoon."

"Oh." A pause. "Okay," Hermione accepts and then walks into the room, resigned to her fate, misery making her feel leaden and numb.

"Hi, Hermione." The woman looks to be in her thirties and has a cascade of braids and an expression of warm empathy on her face as she sits in the empty chair, straightening her muted green robes. "I'm Siobhan, the Healer. I'm here to talk and see where you're at."

Hermione nods. Siobhan smiles faintly and then refers to her notes. "I hear that you were held prisoner for three months." She stops and waits. Hermione presses her lips together, refusing to be drawn. After a few seconds, Siobhan nods and goes on, choosing her words carefully. "You were, hmm...held with Draco Malfoy, a Death Eater and agent for the Order, this says. Is that correct?"

Hermione stares at her hands in her lap. There's a hole in the cuff of her left hoodie sleeve, just big enough to work her right index fingertip into. She does. Her hands are cradled together stiffly, tension trembling in them.

"I've been told that you suffered trauma and abuse while held prisoner. Much of it at Draco Malfoy's own hands."

The words prompt Hermione to break her silence at last, which is probably Siobhan's intent, and she hates herself for doing it, but she can't leave Malfoy undefended. "He *protected* me," she says sharply, tone brittle and voice hoarse. The Healer looks down at her notes, nodding and scratching her quill over paper.

"I understand that, Hermione. And I'm sure you feel that he did –"

"He did!" It bursts out furiously, Hermione's fist slamming down onto the arm of the chair with an abruptness that startles herself. Siobhan eyes her quietly and waits as though she's counting to three in her head.

"And that's a valid way to feel. But it's clear that he also abused and ra– *hurt* you in some very severe ways," Siobhan says, and Hermione is so relieved that the Healer didn't say exactly *what* Malfoy did that she doesn't argue or yell at the witch. "As well as allowing harms to come to you, I believe?" She looks down at her notes, and then shoots Hermione a faint, apologetic smile. "I'm not working off of much information here, I'm afraid."

"He had no choice," Hermione says, trying to be calm out of appreciation of the Healer's delicacy. "We're lucky we both survived at all, and that's entirely thanks to Malfoy. He did whatever needed to be done to get us both through that hell as intact as possible." She surprises herself with how coherent she sounds. She pauses and then adds: "I hurt him too, you know."

"Would you like to tell me about that?"

No, Hermione wouldn't. But she does. "I – I electrocuted him. I beat him. I burned him until he was *crying*, like a child, in agony and – and then I flogged him until my arm ached and his back was – was." She takes a hitching, shuddering breath and digs her nails into the flesh of her palms, tears welling over her lower lids and sliding fat down her cheeks. She doesn't look at the Healer. "I don't think he even knew what was happening by the time I started pulling his fingernails out. He was sobbing, and screaming, and begging me for mercy. And then I kept going." Hermione leans forward in her chair, hair falling around her face, and the Healer leans back instinctively, holding her paper and quill in front of her defensively. "Do you know how *hard* it is to yank out a

fingernail? I was surprised." She feels angry and sick, pressing a fist against her belly and trying not to vomit.

Siobhan looks ill, dark skin taking on an ashen undertone, and Hermione takes a weird satisfaction in that. "I broke him," she says, "because Voldemort told me to. I hurt him worse than he ever hurt me himself. Does that make me a monster, *Healer*?" There's a sharp edge to the title, Hermione flinging it at the witch like an accusation. She doesn't believe the witch will be able to *heal* her.

Siobhan swallows hard. "No," she says at last. "But it does mean it may not be healthy for the two of you to see each other, for a time. Now that you're safe and don't need to cling to that interdependence."

"No." It's a flat denial.

"I'd like to talk to you more, Hermione," Siobhan goes on, pushing her braids back, "but at this point, I would definitely recommend you take some space apart from Draco."

"No," Hermione says again on an exhale, starting to breathe shallow and fast again, hands such tight fists that her knuckles ache, an odd pressure in them.

"From what I know, both of you have clearly become deeply entangled with each other. It's understandable in the situation you were in." The Healer sounds like she means to be comforting. Hermione isn't comforted. "Trauma bonding is one term for it. I would venture you've become very emotionally interdependent, and added to that is the complication that he was – in a very real way – your captor, and hurt and abused you. And of course," Siobhan adds, "you hurt him too, as you've said. So I think –"

"No." The refusal grinds out of the depths of Hermione's chest, hardly sounding like her at all.

"I think twenty-eight days," Siobhan says, and Hermione thinks *twenty-eight days*? It may as well be a lifetime. She can't do it. It isn't fair.

"I think fuck you," Hermione snaps out before she can think about it, heartbeat bird-quick, adrenaline pumping through her. She thinks, in the seconds after, that she never would've said that *before*. This is another way that she has changed. One of the less terrible, perhaps, but she doesn't know how to handle it. Siobhan just eyes her calmly, pausing a moment before going on.

"That's all right, Hermione. I understand you're afraid. I know it must feel very scary, to think about being separated from someone you've become so entangled with –"

"You don't know anything!" She's crying now despite herself, not out of distress as much as her anger. She's so *angry*, and that she can't stop herself from crying just makes it worse, fat tears streaking her cheeks as her breath judders in and out unevenly. Hermione rubs at her cheeks with the cuff of her hoodie and tries to shove the tears back down, furious at her weakness. It takes an effort, but she holds back the protest of *I love him* that wants to escape her; it won't help.

"– But twenty-eight days is traditionally considered the time it takes to build a new habit and break an old one. I think that if over the next month you can find your feet without Draco, and manage to begin building a new normal, then I think you could see him if you still wish to."

Still wish to? Of course she'll still fucking wish to. Do they think she's just brainwashed? That it'll wear off? That she'll get over it?

"Get out," Hermione half-snarls, and Siobhan's expression never changes even as she stands; calm and empathetic, dark eyes unreadable.

"I think you could find it valuable to talk to me, Hermione. I know you're angry, but you've been through a very traumatic experience, and I'm here to help."

"Will you force me to see you again? Hold seeing Malfoy over my head to make me?" Hermione says bitterly, and Siobhan looks sad as she stands in the doorway.

"No. No, I can't make you see me again, Hermione. And I will advise twenty-eight days whether you continue to see me or not. But I hope you will see the benefit in further sessions."

Hermione ignores the Healer then – she's not seeing the stupid woman again – and the woman leaves, shutting the door softly behind her. The room is quiet, finally, and Hermione pulls her feet up onto the striped easy chair, wrapping her arms around her knees. It's dark in the hollow between her legs and her body when she buries her head down and cries. Twenty-eight days, and she has to prove she can manage without Malfoy. Hermione doesn't know how she'll do it. Everything normal feels foreign to her now, and she doesn't know how to regulate herself without Malfoy's help anymore.

She wants him. She needs the composed set of his features, and the little wry twist to his mouth, and the regret that nearly always burns in his eyes. She needs the way he holds her very carefully and urgently needy at once, as if he knows he has no right to touch her but can't help himself. She needs the way he chooses his words and so often speaks with such implacable certainty, even when the words are ones she hates.

It isn't fair.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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Six

"Can I have a wand at least?" she asks, brittle, and looks at the faces around her in Lupin's office. Tonks leans against a filing cabinet, Lupin sits behind the table Hermione sat at for her debriefing, and Ron and Harry both stand in front of a wall of maps decorated with pins, strings, and little notes. Tonks and Lupin both look sympathetic but decided, Harry and Ron more distraught. They've just finished telling Hermione what she had known was coming; she can't have contact with Malfoy for twenty-eight days. Such a stupidly particular number.

Hermione hasn't argued, or shouted, or laid waste to Lupin's office like she wished to when the words hit her ears. She has taken it with the calm of a convicted prisoner on the morning of execution, or a person who has been sick for a long time; an awful, wrenching dread realised, but no sudden, shocking anger. It was expected, and she has tried to take it in stride. It's important to react well, she knows, and so she's done her best to present them with a mask that will make them happy. She's lying to them. It's so strange. There are no dangers here, but otherwise, this place, the Order – it feels very much like being Voldemort's prisoner.

She stands very quietly in front of the table, telling herself to keep it together, a new litany for her to repeat in her head. *Keep it together, Hermione*. She knows they won't be dissuaded, and so her only option is to get through it and convince them she's stable enough *without* Malfoy to be able to see him. It seems so cruel. So pointless. Because Hermione does need him, she *does*. And she knows it's not healthy, but god, what's so bad about one unhealthy thing after what she's been through? Can't she have this? Malfoy's not heroin – more like nicotine patches. Not great to be dependent on, sure, but hardly the end of the world if it keeps you together.

"Well?" She prompts as everyone remains silent, and Ron looks away, Harry shifting uncomfortably on his feet. The feeling of gut-punched disappointment is familiar now, but no less horrible. Hermione sighs. "Let me guess, I can't have a wand either?"

"The Healer had concerns you might use it to put yourself in danger. Or hurt yourself," Lupin says apologetically, and Hermione wants to slam his stupid, apologetic face into the table. Perhaps she's being unfair, but she despises the sight of him.

"I had more freedoms as a prisoner!" she says too loud but not quite a shout, flinging one arm out expressively. "At least then I could see Malfoy whenever I wanted, and I had a wand when he was in the room!" She glares at them, boiling over with an exhausted frustration. "This is fucking *bullshit*."

She slams the door behind her when she stalks out.

After that outburst, Hermione goes to her room and rips all the blankets off her bed, huddling back in the corner. She feels like a wounded animal waiting to die. She doesn't cry much, though. Just a little. And when Ron knocks on the door and says that it's dinnertime, she opens the door to him with a tray in hand and says she'll eat at the table. They walk down together, and she makes him carry the tray. They make small talk about his brothers, and Hermione smiles once at a comment he makes, even managing a chuckle, although she still flinches from his hand when he reaches out to steady her at the first-floor landing.

"Look who's joining us," he says, pleased as punch, and a hush settles over the room as he leads her in and finds a place at the table for her between him and Ginny. She can see the painting of the kneazle from this angle, and it's industriously cleaning its own bumhole; Hermione snorts inwardly – she hardly needed another reason to be put off her food. She sits and Ron places her dinner in front of her, and everyone greets her in considerate murmurs. She smiles and nods, feeling mechanical.

"It's good to see everyone," she says, and it's not really a lie. It is good, even if it makes panic flutter like bird wings in her chest and her blood run thin and dizzy. The older generation gives her muted, friendly greetings like they're afraid they'll frighten her off – which is a possibility – and Molly Weasley fetches her a butterbeer. Of the ones around her own age, Justin and Dean are smiling widely, Hannah's gaze is gentle but not pitying, and Angelina just nods at her firmly and flashes a fleeting grin. Ginny's expression is filled with tight-lipped sympathy; maybe being possessed by Riddle's diary years ago has given her a little understanding of what it's like to belong to the enemy.

The conversation swells again after a few minutes, and even though it's not as loud as it was before – out of concern for Hermione, it's still too loud for comfort. Her hands feel sweat-slippery on her knife and fork as she forces herself to eat at least a third of her dinner, and her muscles are so tense she knows she'll ache later. But she smiles at people, and listens to some short, funny little stories and nods away making the right sounds, and doesn't run off screaming. The long dining table filled with raucous people makes her think of other things, but she locks those thoughts down hard, as best she can. She refuses to think of them. But even so, she finds herself sitting tensely, thighs pressed together as hard as steel until her muscles tremble.

After dinner, she goes through to the sitting room with nearly everyone else, and while some read or play games, they all listen to the wireless. War news. Old stories. Messages of encouragement, grief, and hope from individuals trying to reach family or friends, or just throwing hope blindly into the abyss. And buried within the latter, encoded information that Lupin jots down, to untangle later using a mix of ciphers that hidden keywords earlier in the programme had pointed to, and common sense. Hermione used to help with codes before her capture.

Now she just sits on the end of a long couch and listens, knees up and a mug of hot cocoa in her hands. Hermione imagines she looks frail and tired but hopeful, and no one really bothers her. They all understand she needs time, and not to be crowded. It's 9 pm before she pleads off and says she's going to get an early night. Harry looks particularly happy as she clumps up the stairs, feeling exhausted beyond all reason, the faint smile dropping off her lips as though it's been erased. There one second, gone the next.

If they want her to play a game, then she will. It will be just like when she pretended to be Malfoy's broken, beaten slave, except that she'll have to do it far more often. That could prove difficult. But she'll try her best if it means she gets to see Malfoy.

The first thing he says as he's escorted roughly in is, "How's Granger?" before he even gets halfway across the large, sunny room that is situated two floors up from his cell. Lupin eyes him carefully from behind a large table as the wizard escorting Draco shoves him firmly down by his shoulders onto the chair opposite Lupin. It's not Creevey; Creevey is waiting outside, and thanks to him, Draco has a bruise on his right cheekbone and eyebrow just coming up; nothing too bad, but it feels hot and sore, and he thinks the skin under his eyebrow might be split. Another scar. The stocky wizard who escorted him in unchains his hands from where they're manacled behind his back.

"Hands on the table," the wizard says, and Draco bites the inside of his cheek and does what he's told. Lupin doesn't answer the question yet, as the wizard chains Draco's manacled wrists to the table. Draco takes in the space around him. The room seems incongruous for interrogation or even debriefing; probably once a bedroom, the large, sunny, paisley-wallpapered space is empty save for a large table bolted to the waxed wood floor, two chairs, and a clock on the wall.

"It's just procedure", Lupin says instead, almost apologetically, as he nods to Draco's wrists, sturdy manacles hooked to heavy iron chains now, which clink dully as he moves. He has about half a foot of chain to play with; not much.

"I don't care. How's Her— Granger." It feels safer to call her that, although more and more — even before they escaped — Draco has secretly thought of her as *Hermione*. It feels too vulnerable, too intimate, too exposing. Granger has a distance to it. When he says Hermione, he feels as though the name lays bare everything he feels. Lupin blinks at him. His mouth twitches.

"She's doing okay, considering. She saw a Healer, yesterday, and had dinner with us all last night," Lupin says at last, picking his words carefully, and Draco feels some of his worry drain from him like the tide going out. It's as though half his tension vanishes abruptly, and he wants to slump in the chair and just breathe. If Hermione's capable of facing dinner with multiple people, she must be coping. Thank Merlin. Of course, the relief comes with a stab of pain, too, because he's selfish. He pictures her sitting at the table, probably beside Weasley, talking and laughing, and maybe Weasley puts his hand on hers.

Fuck. Draco doesn't even want to think of that possibility. He wants her to be happy. He knows he's not what's best for her. But the thought of her with someone else makes him wish he'd sent Hermione away without him, and then died as he'd planned. By his own hand, not the Dark Lord's. He hopes he shows none of these thoughts on his face. "Good," he says simply, and nothing else. He wants to ask more — a dozen questions swimming in his mind — but he doesn't.

"Thank you, Adrian," Lupin says to the stocky wizard. "You can go now." And then, when he's left, the door closing behind him, Lupin sits forward, fussing with the parchments on the table, laying out a self-writing quill, and shuffling file folders. "Who gave you that?" He says unexpectedly and flicks his fingers in the direction of Draco's injury, his glance flashing up, their eyes connecting. Draco smiles faintly.

"I walked into a door," he says. It surprises a snort of laughter out of Lupin.

"Come on, Draco," he says dryly when he's straightened his face. "I know it has to be one of the wizards or witches you've interacted with since you've been here, which narrows it down to five. And I can't have Order members engaging in prisoner brutality." A hard edge creeps into his tone.

"Then give them all a scolding," Draco says flippantly. He doesn't feel like ratting on Creevey. It's not like the wizard has done anything particularly brutal or cruel; this literally did come from walking into a door. A door that Creevey had slammed him into as he was hustling Draco out of his

cell, arms chained behind his back so he couldn't catch himself, yes, but Draco deserves worse. Lupin stares at him for a while, as if he's trying to see inside Draco's mind, clearly unable to figure out why Draco won't admit who did it. He stares back, expressionless. Even if Lupin knew legilimency, Draco's occlumency is impenetrable; it had to be to fool the Dark Lord. The older wizard sighs eventually and lets it go.

"Alright. Well, if you change your mind, let me know. Otherwise, let's get on with it. I know Shackbolt was your handler, but he's unavailable." Lupin says, face tired and expression mild, and Draco jerks a nod, shifting in his chair. Being manacled to the central point of the table is limiting and his chair is some uncomfortable, some flimsy folding thing. It's hard to get settled. He ends up scooting close to the table, tucking his feet back under the chair and resting his forearms on the tabletop. His hair flops down over his forehead, nearly hanging in his eyes.

"I've read his files, and as colleagues, we have spoken about you before, so I think –"

"Just get on with it, Lupin," Draco says tiredly but not rudely exactly, cutting the rambling preamble short. Lupin firms his mouth and nods. He looks old. Older than Draco remembers. The past two years have been hard and long, and Lupin is greying, more wrinkles at his eyes and around his mouth. Draco knows the past two years haven't exactly been kind on him either; the last time he saw himself in a mirror, he looked hard and haggard, and of course, now he sports a scar down the side of his face, his back is a ragged mess of scar tissue, and his front not unscathed either. But Hermione looks at him as though he hung the moon. He doesn't know how she *can*, after everything he's done, but she does. Or did. Who knows, now.

And then the debrief begins; Draco steels himself and clears his mind, trying to shut down any emotion as Lupin passes him a vial of veritaserum to drink. He hates knowing that he can't lie, and silently trusts Lupin won't be enough of an arsehole to ask him about his face again now that he's predisposed to answering. Draco thinks he might be able to resist the compulsion, but it wouldn't be worth expending the effort to protect Creevey. The man doesn't ask him.

The questions start off perfunctory; running over the past roughly two years before Hermione was dragged unconscious into the dungeons. It takes what feels like hours, although the clock on the wall has only moved from 10.32 to 11.48, and as much as Draco tries to keep himself in check, he starts to unravel under the barrage of questions and photographs of missing individuals. His self-loathing snaps its leash, prowling free and wild through his head, which is aching, his gut churning as he starts to sweat, his leg jittering under the table.

It all runs together, a blur of terrible, unforgivable, monstrous acts. He recognises too many photographs.

The first one he recognises is the worst, as Lupin lays it in front of him. A five-year-old boy, smiling and laughing in a family portrait. "Yes, I killed him," he says numbly. "They were going to give him to Rodolphus. It was a mercy." If he'd been able to, he would've kept that last part to himself, but the veritaserum makes that nearly impossible. Lupin's expression shifts slightly, grim and disgusted – but it's the pity in the older man's eyes that Draco hates. He just nods.

"The mother was also taken," Lupin says. Draco swallows hard. "When was the last time you saw her? Did you kill her?"

The compulsion is like an itch under his skin, and if he doesn't try hard enough that it hurts in his head, a throb behind his eyes, then the words don't come out diplomatic and careful but rather, just blunt. "The last time I saw her, she was being raped by Rabastan Lestrange at a revel. There were

more waiting to take their turn. I didn't stop and watch." Draco clenches his jaw and a trickle of sweat slides down his back. He feels like vomiting as he looks at the woman's reddish blonde hair and wide smile as she stands behind her son, remembering the blood and the dull glaze to her eyes, the tears streaking her cheeks as she lay limp and pliable. "I didn't kill her. I don't know who did."

Lupin's grim expression doesn't shift. The self-writing quill is copying down everything they say, but Lupin makes some extra notes with every answer Draco gives, his quill scratching on the parchment. They go through eighteen more photos before Lupin shifts back to queries about raids and bases of operation, perhaps because he senses Draco needs the break. He recognised eleven of the people, killed two himself and had seen six others die horribly, in agony.

Draco's head is pounding, his shirt is wet with sweat, and there's a persistent tic in his jaw. His hands are clammy, and he keeps catching himself unconsciously picking at his nails and the dry skin around the nail beds. His right thumb is bleeding now. Lupin offers Draco water, his throat sore from talking. And then the questions begin again, and it's not really any better just because there aren't photographs. The questions keep coming. The atrocities keep growing, more and more, a mountain of evil and horror, and Draco is crushed beneath the weight of it. He's losing it.

In answer to another question, along with a photo Lupin shuffles out of the pile – "Yes, I was there on that raid. We didn't kill Tomlin, we took him for interrogation. He lasted most of the night before he broke. I don't know when or how he died, but I assisted in disposing of his body."

Another – "They don't use that house anymore. Not since October." And then another, and another, and another. The clock on the wall reads 12.57 – it's been nearly two and a half hours.

"There was a raid in Portree in March," Lupin says, looking up from his notes. "They burned the Muggles. Did your side –"

"*They're not my side*," Draco bites out, and his voice shakes as he jerks forward, anger searing through him. His hands are shaking. Lupin apologises, that awful pity still in his eyes, and rephrases.

"Were you at the raid? Did anything of note happen? And why did Voldemort order the raid? We've never been able to figure that out."

"Yes, I was there when they made the mass pyre in Portree." He tries to run his hands through his hair, but the chain pulls up short. He can remember everything so fucking clearly. The smell. The heat. The screams. "I – I used *somnium* on six people before the fires reached them so that they wouldn't be conscious while they burned. I couldn't get them all. They screamed. They – the smoke got some of them first. They were the lucky ones. But I –" Draco knows he's going off on an incoherent ramble and he can't stop himself. He gasps for air and more words come out. "They raped them first. And tortured them, and – and the only thing I could do was try to avoid having to j-join in, and –"

"Stop." Lupin's voice cracks the air like a spell, and Draco's mouth snaps shut. He feels pathetically glad. "Have another sip of water and take a breath." Lupin spends five minutes focused on his papers before it begins again. Draco is starting to think a beating would be preferable to this.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

Seven

Hermione spends the next several days doing her best to appear like she's doing better, and thinks that she sort of succeeds. Maybe. It's hard for her to judge; she doesn't remember what normal feels like anymore. She thinks of normal, and imagines Malfoy's grim face as he walks in, smelling of smoke and stained with blood, shutting the door behind him and toeing off his boots, and the way his expression shifts as he looks at her. She thinks of him standing and staring out at the gardens, a pale statue, radiating a self-hatred Hermione can't even begin to comprehend. She thinks of waking up in the middle of the night to see him slumped over the table, having fallen asleep watching over her. She thinks of lying curled in his arms and wishing she could kiss him properly instead of trading in little touches and kisses to odd places that feel more platonic than anything.

Normal isn't something Hermione thinks she understands anymore. The person she was is dead, and now she is someone new made up out of the remnants; a blade melted down and re-forged into something that can't help but be different. And not stronger, either. She is weaker than she was before, spider-webbed with cracks, and sometimes it feels like one firm tap will send her shattering. What doesn't kill you doesn't make you stronger, and Hermione is so, so fucking damaged. But she tries her best to hold herself together without Malfoy there, and she figures she does well enough while she's around everyone else – she figures they can't expect miracles.

In the mornings, Hermione can't handle the idea of facing people, so she sits in her room until midday before she forces herself downstairs to pick at lunch with Harry and Ron, when they're not out on missions. Food sticks in her throat, and she eats only enough to make them think that she's fine, pushing the food around her plate. Hermione never thought she'd be someone who suffered from anorexic tendencies, but right now, food is the only thing she can control. She can't see Malfoy, she can't use her magic – she's impotent and isolated, and it's fucking horrible. Not eating more than the bare minimum feels like a rebellion, and the fact that everything tastes like metal and ashes doesn't exactly stir her appetite.

In the afternoons, she makes herself curl up in the sitting room, in a chair tucked away back in one corner near the bookshelf. It makes her think of her chair in Malfoy's bedroom. *Their* bedroom. If Harry and Ron are there, or anyone else, then she'll respond to questions, and pretend to read, the print a blur on the pages as she sits there, lost in obsessive, repetitive memories. Loops of Malfoy tucking her hair behind her ear. Falling asleep, his head pillowed on her knee. Laughing in the maze as he falls into the hedge. Kissing the top of her head. A kaleidoscope of tiny, happy fragments of memories.

Her mind is fixated and cracked. She watches Harry and Ron play wizarding chess, and talk about friends and Ron's family and stupid random topics like what they'd take to a desert island or fantasy Quidditch leagues, and she smiles when they look at her but says very little.

Sometimes Hermione escapes to the kitchen to make a cup of tea and makes inane conversation with Mrs Weasley about what she's cooking, or how the rest of the family are, or what Mrs Weasley is reading – she favours historical romances – which is nearly restful.

Or she ducks out onto the back porch with a hot drink and enjoys that she can walk outside whenever she likes; the cold biting into her and making her feel alive. She can spend hours out there bundled in a jacket, a hat, and mittens, until she's shivering and cold, fingertips and toes going numb despite her warm clothing. When she's outside, Hermione's mind tends to wander to other things; her parents in Australia, in the suffocating Sydney heat because it's summer there, maybe with a dental office, and a new life.

She thinks of school; how things had played out, and whether she could've changed things for Malfoy, like some intellectual exercise – if only she hadn't brushed off Harry's concerns, and had figured out what he was doing and stopped him, if only Dumbledore had told them about Malfoy. And why didn't he? She hates Dumbledore a little bit, for everything he put on them, and every way he let them down, and the way he must have known for so *long* the path Malfoy was heading down, and had never cared to save him. Malfoy had been a pawn, sacrificed to Dumbledore's *greater good*. Hermione despises the greater good. It's hypocritical and cruel.

Sometimes she rests her chin in the hollows of her palms, elbows on her knees, and imagines ridiculous things. Winning Malfoy over at school. Helping him. Seducing him away from the Death Eaters before he ever took the Mark. Kissing him in the potions cupboard, or one of the secret corridors, or empty classrooms, free of painful, horrible baggage. Just innocent, hungry kisses and shifting, searching hands.

Occasionally, she goes upstairs and pretends to nap, or has very long, hot baths in which she tends to scrub her skin nearly raw until it hurts, and red patches blossom on her arms and her thighs and breasts, stuck in a loop of *dirty dirtydirtydirty*. *Why would he ever want you? You're filthy. Mudblood. Tainted.* Violated by objects and fingers and mouths that didn't belong to him, that weren't wielded by him. While he *watched*, disgusted. She's *disgusting*, she thinks, knowing that it's an entirely, wildly irrational thing to think even as she thinks it and yet still *thinking* it.

Whatever she does, the hours tick by very slowly until dinners, which she eats with everyone else, again forcing small mouthfuls of food down, and making dazed small talk that she only hopes sounds normal. And then, after dinner, she sits in the lounge listening to the wireless for an hour before she goes upstairs, the food sitting heavy and sickening in her stomach. She gets good at making it look like she's eaten more than she actually has, and no one seems to notice how little she consumes, in reality. Hermione suspects she may qualify as anorexic, now. She also suspects the wizarding world doesn't have a medical term for anorexia – it was a surprise that they had a Healer who seemed so well-versed in psychological issues, even if Hermione does disagree with her prescription.

And that's her routine. It's not so hard the first few days, especially in the early afternoons, but gradually, the strain builds up throughout each day until Hermione feels like a pressure cooker by the end of the evening.

Then, at 9 pm every night, Hermione lies down on her side of the bed and downs a Dreamless Sleep, and then – without even really understanding why – cries until the potion yanks her down under the surface of sleep. She doesn't dream, of course, but it seems like the memories just crowd around her as she sleeps, waiting to fall upon her and devour her when she wakes, like a delayed effect. She wakes to thoughts of the snatcher in the dungeons prodding his penis against her, the

feel of a dark wizard's fingers shoved in her mouth, Malfoy screaming as she brings the lash down on his back, the pain of his bite sinking into her breast.

She learns to scream silently into her pillow, curled in a ball and waiting for a comfort that she knows won't come.

Lupin escorts Draco back to his cell, hands cuffed behind his back, leaning on the older wizard unwillingly as they go down the stairs. It was a bad one today. He's sweating and feels feverish, his feet numb beneath him, although that might be from five hours sitting chained in that damned chair. He desperately needs a piss because they didn't offer him a toilet break, and he couldn't bring himself to ask. His head feels like one giant, throbbing pulse, his orbital bones tight and sore, his jaw aching from being clenched, the pain running around behind his ears and up the base of his skull. There are small, bloody wounds at his temples.

Draco's head is thudding, crushed in a vice, and he feels like crying.

It's hours of question after question, and even when it's not him who committed the horrors that Lupin asks him about, that he has to relay to the Order member, he still has to remember it. To picture it clearly in his mind, the memory spilling from his lips ungainly and brutal, awful, disgusting horrors that he remembers standing by and watching. Not intervening. Pretending it didn't bother him in the slightest as he sat at a revel and made small talk, watching as Greyback ripped people apart, or Rodolphus raped children just metres away, or Bellatrix took people apart piece by bloody piece. Laughing and smiling as they screamed. As they died. He can't stand the memories. Who could? He thinks they may drive him insane.

He hates himself. So much. He's *disgusting*.

And then, after reviving his every nightmarish memory in abhorrent detail, they don't give him Dreamless Sleep.

It's getting harder to deal with. He's coming apart at the seams. The iron self-control he'd kept in place every day while a Death Eater is slipping and slipping, and beneath it, he is nothing but a broken ruin. At one point today Draco just stopped talking with his head dropped to the table and clutched in his hands, fingers digging into his temples, the veritaserum causing the itching compulsion to build and build to unbearable proportions. His fingers clawing at his temples helped him fight it, as sweat poured down his face and his back, and wet his chest and armpits. He'd tried to speak. Tried. But the words just wouldn't come out.

He kept thinking on a loop; *and I smiled, and said, well, just don't leave this mess on the floor, and it was a pregnant woman, it had been a pregnant woman, and they'd – they'd –*

How could Draco say the horrible, inhuman things that they'd done to her aloud?

He *couldn't*. Lupin was sympathetic but implacable. He demanded answers. And in the end, Draco gave them to him, and then vomited in his own lap, gagging and retching and shivering like a beaten dog, taking gasping, sobbing breaths into the silence as Lupin struggled with his own composure, the older man's face ashen and devastated as he *scourgified* Draco's mess, swallowing thick and hard himself.

He hates Lupin's pitying face.

It seems the lycanthrope has the dubious pleasure of being Draco's handler now. Now that he's used up and useless. Shacklebolt has no time for assets that can't be deployed; he's moved focus to his active agents it seems, leaving Draco behind in this purgatory. Leaving him to sit and rot in a stone cell, hauled out only to be questioned relentlessly, a process that he has come to fear and loathe more than Voldemort's torture. Draco is unsurprised. Shacklebolt is ruthless and effective in nature and deed, unlike the unhelpful compassion and sympathy Lupin displays. But they are two sides of the same coin.

He hobbles down the stairs like a crippled old man, stumbling because the way his wrists are chained puts him off balance. He wonders when Creevey will push him down the stairs and claim it's an accident. He imagines it will happen eventually, and while he's resigned to the possibility, Draco isn't looking forward to it. When Lupin has unchained Draco, he sits down heavily on the narrow cot like his legs have gone out from under him and squints up at the older man. He stands in the doorway silhouetted by the light, irons draped over his left arm, wand in the other hand.

"I'll have them bring you a change of clothes and a small tub," Lupin says, running his eyes over Draco, tight-lipped and unhappy. The man doesn't like causing pain, physical or mental. "You can strip-wash at least, and get clean." Draco bobs his head in a ragged nod, and sets off ringing bells of pain. *Shit*. It hurts so badly. And he can't stop *shaking*. It's pathetic. Lupin takes a deep breath. "I know this isn't easy, Draco. But what you're doing is invaluable. Aside from vital information for the war effort, you're giving families closure. And that matters. So thank you."

"Don't have much choice," Draco rasps flatly, "do I?"

"No," Lupin says, "Not really. But I feel like you'd do it anyway."

Draco shrugs. "Maybe," he says laconically, but he knows he would. Merlin-damnit, he'd do it. He fucking *hates* it – cataloguing every horror he's borne witness to, or contributed to, or committed outright, and fuck, there are so, so many. He despises every bit of it, and it makes him want to die, and he thinks that without the veritaserum, he might not be able to force himself to do it. But he knows that ultimately, given the choice, he'd take the veritaserum of his own free will and walk back into hell willingly. If he ever hopes to not be a monster, he has to.

Lupin eyes him hard and piercingly, and it feels like the man is reading his mind even though he can't be, not literally. "I think you would," he says thoughtfully, and Draco doesn't argue.

There's a question on the tip of his tongue that he's been holding back for a while. Not sure whether he should ask. Not sure if he has the right, or wants to hear the answer. He lets it slip as Lupin nods a goodbye. "When will I see her again?" he asks, quickly and breathlessly, his lungs suddenly an avalanche of shallow breaths and his chest tight, and he doesn't have to say who *her* is. "Is she okay?" There's an edge of fear he can't tamp down with the second question, heart in his throat. Surely, she *has* to be okay, and yet he's afraid.

Lupin's expression is unbearably sympathetic. "Hermione is fine. She seems to be doing remarkably well still, taking into account her ordeal." Lupin pauses. Adds, almost questioningly: "Both of your ordeals."

"Don't. I don't need your pity, dog," Draco bites furiously, lashing out without thought. The slur is greasy and bitter on his tongue, and he immediately regrets it. Lupin looks sad as he stands in the doorway, and not even a little insulted.

"Okay, Draco," he says with a quiet, tired placating tone. "But I've sat with you long enough over the past week to know how terribly what you had to do has affected you. I am sure Hermione's capture was an ordeal for you both."

"I'm fairly certain you won't feel that way after we get to that part of the debrief," Draco says grimly, a bitter smile twisting his mouth, "so save your sympathy. You'll only have to retract it."

"Sympathy doesn't equal approval of – of whatever bond has grown between you in a hostile environment," Lupin says matter-of-factly, and that latter imagery sinks into Draco's mind. "Which somewhat leads to the answer to your other question. The Healer has recommended that Hermione have some space from the interdependent dynamic that clearly exists between the two of you." Draco's empty, sickened stomach begins to sink, and twist. *No*; he doesn't want to hear the rest of this. "A month apart. Twenty-eight days, to be precise. Which means you have nineteen days left. By then, you'll already be out of here," Lupin says with encouraging brightness, as though Draco gives a single shit where he is. "We'll find an appropriate safe house for you – with conditions, of course. You won't be automatically allowed a wand, for instance."

"But after the month is up?" Draco pursues, a twitch starting in his right eyelid, tension and dread a jittering surge in his veins.

"After the recommended time is up, we'll arrange for you to meet –" Lupin pauses – "should Hermione still wish to."

Should Hermione still wish to. The words echo in Draco's head like a death knell after Lupin has left, seeding doubts deep under his flesh. He finds himself wondering if she *will* wish to as he stands naked in a shallow wooden tub filled with cold water to mid-calf, shivering as he washes himself with a cloth, his hair plastered to his head, goosebumps all over from the icy chill. Why would Hermione want to see Draco if she's doing well without him? His only value, as far as Draco sees it, is that he has been able to keep her from shaking apart. If she doesn't need that anymore, he's redundant. Which should be good.

Freezing water slides down his chest.

Draco represents all her trauma, all her pain. Her abuser, even if he was unwilling. Even if he hated it.

The fresh whip scars on his back burn and smart as he bends to wash his lower legs.

How *could* she stand to be around him? After the way he'd failed to protect her. The way he'd hurt her.

The frigid cold makes arousal unlikely, but Draco's still rough and impersonal as he palms the cloth over his dick, afraid of sliding into a repeat of the other day when he'd cum thinking of how –

He *raped* her. It would probably be best for her if she *does* never see him again, like he'd originally planned. For her to go and rebuild her life without Draco, free of him and everything he represents.

He steps out of the tub onto the cold stone floor, wrapping the towel around his waist.

Whatever has grown between them has done so in a poisonous, twisted environment, as Lupin so aptly pointed out. And how can something birthed in the rotten dark ever develop into something good, he thinks, a bitter, resentful sickness rising in him, his jaw clenching. Maybe he'll feel

differently later, but right now – head aching, shivering from cold and the day's interview, horrors fresh in his mind – Draco feels only a tired, grim despair.

Chapter 8

Eight

There's only a week to go until Christmas, and despite the war – or maybe because of it – everyone has gone overboard on the festivity. The house is filled with the spirit of Christmas. There are chains of decorations festooning every wall – popcorn, and paper, and tinsel – and mistletoe at every doorway, a wreath on each side of every door, and the scent of peppermint a wraith haunting Hermione in every room. The Christmas tree is far too big for the small front hall, and everyone has to sidle past it awkwardly to go down the hall or up the stairs. No one suggests they shrink it or move it; no, it is large and bright with lights and hung with glass baubles, paper chains, clove-studded oranges, candles, and candy canes, and everyone just works around it.

Everyone seems infected by the Christmas spirit except Hermione, who is unmoved. Inoculated against it, perhaps. She just goes through the motions every day, fighting memories and thinking of Malfoy in that tiny, cold stone cell, wishing she was crammed into it with him. She asks Lupin about him daily and always gets a variation on – "Fine, as far as I know. We're still in the process of debriefing him." The feeling of missing him is like a ghost limb; that sensation after amputation that the limb is still present, itching or tingling or hurting. She keeps expecting him to be there, and he isn't. It's worst in the mornings and at night. It *hurts*.

There are things she *likes*, of course. The lack of fear is one of them; the crushing, constant terror that had hung around her neck like a millstone is gone, leaving only traces behind. It's an alien, wonderful feeling, and one that Hermione is still getting used to. When she wakes up in the morning, she may be alone and choked by memories, but at least she isn't afraid that she'll be forced to dress in whore's garb and dragged down to a revel. And she likes that even though Malfoy is locked in a cell somewhere that she can't get to, he's safe, and he's not having to do terrible things that rip him apart. She likes that she can watch Harry and Ron and everyone else talk together and laugh, even if she doesn't know how to join in anymore.

She helps Mrs Weasley make Christmas-themed gingerbread, listens to Christmas tunes on the gramophone – Harry waltzes Ginny around the sitting room one night, makes Christmas decorations sitting at the dining room table the Muggle way because of her continuing wandlessness, and writes cards for friends that Lupin says he can try to see delivered. But it all seems a little distant; Hermione can't really *feel* it. It's as though she's experiencing the world through a tiny, foggy window, the sensations dulled. Except for the times when she's lost in memories – *then* she feels everything, and it is so much she can't stand it.

"Merry Christmas, Hermione," Harry says brightly, looking up at Hermione as she stops on the bottom step. There's the sound of a gramophone playing Christmas tunes wafting out of the sitting room, and Hermione can see from here that the dining room is filled with people. There are more people in the hall behind Harry – Fred and George are in deep conversation with Angelina by the front door – and no doubt even more in the sitting room. Harry grins, broad and hopeful, his glasses askew and his hair sticking every which way, a Molly Weasley Christmas jumper explaining his rumpled appearance.

"Merry Christmas, Harry," Hermione says in response and smiles awkwardly as Harry flaps his arms pointlessly by his sides and takes a step back. *Oh*. Right about now would be when they'd hug

if she could stand to be touched. Maybe she could stand it now, to be fair, but she doesn't feel like trying. No one has touched her since Malfoy held her in his arms in the Order's cell. It's both very lonely, and exactly how she wants it.

"Ron! 'Mione's downstairs!" Harry bellows as he rummages under the tree, and Ron comes skidding into the hall, grinning.

"'Mione! Merry Christmas!" He's developed the ginger scruff into a proper short beard, and it looks odd paired with his striped pyjamas and knitted jumper, but also a little adorable. Hermione finds herself grinning back for a moment.

"Merry Christmas, Ron."

"Here." Harry thrusts a wrapped present in Hermione's direction, and she can tell before she even opens it what it'll be. But they urge her to open it excitedly, and she pretends surprise when the jumper is revealed, playing along with the game they're all engaged in. She pulls it on over her leggings and chambray shirt; her favourite outfit, unsurprisingly. It says 'H' on it, just like Harry's, but to differentiate it from Harry's, Mrs Weasley has knitted it in wide red and gold stripes and made the letter black. It's garish and unflattering, and Hermione quietly loves it. She braves what feels like a crowd of people to go find Mrs Weasley, Harry and Ron accompanying her as welcome buffers.

Unsurprisingly, they find her in the kitchen. Perhaps more surprisingly, when they open the door, they find her boxed up against the pantry by Mr Weasley, his hands all over her, and her hair in disarray. Hermione swiftly shuts the door again, backing into the hallway by the back door, and she doesn't think Ron's parents heard them, not over the noise of the pots bubbling on the stove. She smiles to herself wistfully even as Ron rather childishly makes gagging noises. "Oh come on, Ron, they haven't seen each other in ages. It's kind of sweet." It's a little sad that she's envious of Ron's parents. And a little disturbing that she's imagining herself and Malfoy in Ron's parents' place. Her backed up against the wall, Malfoy's hands in her hair and clutching at her bum... She sighs.

Harry laughs. "God, they were really going at it." He smirks. "Careful, Ron, you might end up with another sibling." Ron rolls his eyes and thumps Harry on the arm. It's a lovely moment, the three of them together in the hallway, laughing and smiling. And then –

"It's polite to *share*, Justin!" someone chides playfully, and Hermione is ripped backwards through time. Standing very still and silent as the memory crashes over her, nails digging painfully into her palms.

Voldemort's high, clear voice before the dinner began – *I know you want to keep the whore to yourself, Draco, but it isn't polite not to share.*

She suddenly feels sick, and any idea of eating Christmas lunch is gone. All she can think of is fingers invading her, groping her, pushing into her mouth, the collar tight around her throat, the cuts and the sour taste of their sweat.

"Hermione?" Both Harry and Ron are looking at her, filled with worry, and she blinks back to herself, trying to shake off the worst of the memories. They claw and rattle in the back of her head still, but she forces them down as she has every day for the past two weeks. It's getting harder every time, trying to scrabble up from the devouring horrors without him there to pull her out. Her chest hurts, and her eyes prickle, and she finds her hand going to her throat, encircling it carefully, remembering the bite of the collar as a physical echo. Her smile is gone.

"Sorry," she says and it comes out scratchy. "Um." She feels dizzy. She feels memories, pressed into her skin. "I just need somewhere quiet for a minute."

Both boys' faces crumple slightly before Ron nods and straightens, mouth firming. "Course, 'Mione. We can go outside for a bit." The back door is right there for them to escape out of, and Harry casts a warming charm while Ron disappears and comes back a few moments later with a plate piled high with finger foods. Ron stands, leaning against the porch stair railing, while Harry sits on the bottom stair and Hermione sits on the top, arms wrapped around her middle, a phantom tightness around her throat. Hunched down. Hair falling forward around her face. She feels sick to her stomach, and the memories cling, swirling in her head like poison.

Ron and Harry are undemanding. They have learnt not to push her – the few times they have, she's either shut down entirely or retreated upstairs, unable to cope with the pressure. They pick at the plate of food and talk; light, easy conversation, the sky grey above them, the wind sharp.

"It's Christmas, for Merlin's sake! Please, Remus. Please." She hugs herself, standing crammed up by the tree, staring pleadingly at Lupin, who is unexpectedly, unacceptably implacable.

"The Healer said a month, Hermione." His eyes are sympathetic. She's pulled him away from spending time with Teddy for this – who Andromeda and Ted have brought in for the day – and yet she hardly feels guilty at all.

"It's been over half that –" fifteen long, horrible, exhausting days to be precise – and the Healer doesn't know a damned thing!" She's angry, flinging an arm out furiously, feeling too hot in her Weasley jumper. The little she ate of Christmas lunch sits uneasily in her stomach, which lurches and twists. Hermione had been so *certain* Lupin would say yes. How could he deny her on Christmas Day? But she's been pleading with him for several minutes, and he isn't budging. She'd been so *sure*.

"The Healer is concerned with your well-being, Hermione. And I trust her judgement."

"*Please*, Remus." She imbues it with all her desperation. All her need. "Just five minutes. Five minutes." That's long enough to see him. Long enough to press her body against his warm, hard one. To push her mouth against his. And this time, she won't be tentative and careful, of herself or him. She can picture it. Open-mouthed and panting, her fingers in his hair, her body arched against his. Hermione fights to suppress the little shiver of frisson that runs through her – it's not only an entirely inappropriate time and place, but it's *pointless*. Her fury spikes. She can't control her emotions well anymore. They run riot, and she is at their mercy.

"Five minutes, Remus. I just want to see him. To know he's okay."

"But he *is* okay. All prisoners will be getting a special dinner today even, for Christmas."

"Fuck the dinner!" Hermione snarls, snatching a bauble off the Christmas tree and flinging it to shatter against the front door, shocking herself. "He doesn't want *dinner*, he wants *me*." The words end in a wobbling sob as embarrassment overwhelms her anger, and Lupin repairs the bauble and sends it zipping back to the tree. And then he gives her a flat stare.

"I'm not a Healer, so I have to trust in what she says. And she says you're uncooperative, you haven't spoken to anyone since you got back, you're severely traumatised, and you have an unhealthy attachment to Draco Malfoy," he lists, gently but factually. And the hell of it is, he's not

entirely wrong. That's the infuriating, hateful fucking thing. The technicalities might be correct, and yet it's completely and utterly wrong in all of the essentials. It's factual, but it's not *true*.

There's nothing unhealthy about the careful tenderness in Malfoy's eyes as he tucks Hermione's hair behind her ear.

"But –" she tries to protest, but he holds up a finger, and she snaps her mouth shut, lips pressing painfully hard together, fingers flexing at her sides; tension shuddering through them and making them into curling claws.

"And when you first got here, I know you thought you wouldn't cope without Draco. But look at you. Here you are! You're getting better, Hermione." Lupin smiles encouragingly, and Hermione presses her knuckles to her mouth hard enough to hurt. Crushing her lips between bone and teeth. She wraps her left arm around her middle and digs her fingertips into her waist, deep and cruel. The pain is welcome. "The Healer knows what she's doing. This is just some space, to help you get back on your feet." Lupin's voice drops, and the next part he says quietly and with an infinite kindness. "After what he did to you, Hermione, you need that. You *need* some space."

Hermione stares at him wide-eyed, thinking about Malfoy's processing, and veritaserum, and whether Lupin would ask about *that*. She chooses to believe he's only talking about what she already implied because if she doesn't, she will collapse on the stairs right here. The thought of Malfoy being forced to talk about the details of those things makes her sway on her feet. She clutches the bannister. Lupin wouldn't do that. Surely he wouldn't. Or would he? Perhaps he'd just consider it part of the debriefing. He looks at her now with concern and compassion, and she can see he thinks he's doing the right thing. Tough love. Ripping off the plaster quickly. Protecting her from her own broken feelings.

Hermione feels a horrible, mortifying rage and humiliation shiver through her.

"No, I don't," she croaks. "I don't need space." But Lupin's not really listening.

"Maybe you should have a Calming Draught and go rest," he says, still filled with worried compassion. "Today's been a big day." And then Tonks calls him from the sitting room, laughter in her voice, and Hermione can see the way his attention slides away. His mind is with his wife and son now. He wants to be with them, and she can't blame him, but can't he see it's the same for her? She wants to be with Malfoy.

"*Please*," she says, small and begging, but it's never going to happen, and she knows it. Not until the time is up. Hermione could kill that fucking Healer, she really could.

She only wanted *five minutes*.

Hermione thinks as she sits curled up against her pillows, jumper flung on the end of the bed and a book that she doesn't feel like reading beside her, that perhaps they are so insistent about not seeing him because of how uncomfortable it makes them feel. Because of how much they hate thinking about the way she is with Draco Malfoy, with all the terrible things he's done – to so many others, as well as to her. They hate the way she needs him. And the Healer has given them an ironclad excuse to *not* have to deal with seeing Hermione cling to her rapist like he's the only person in the universe. Harry and Ron had agreed that, yes, they would have done the same in order to save her, but they don't really *understand*. It's all intellectual to them. Hypothetical. It makes sense, she

supposes, as much as she hates it. After all, how *could* they understand? She doesn't understand it herself half the time.

The bed is cold as Hermione slides under the covers. Malfoy is present in his absence.

She wishes now she'd told them just how badly she'd been forced to hurt Malfoy when she first arrived. How she'd tortured him. She had blood on her hands too – it wasn't just Malfoy who'd done terrible things. She had hurt him until he was incoherent and screaming, begging her for mercy, no longer cognizant of what was even happening. She had known then how it felt to be him, inflicting suffering, and even doing it only once had nearly destroyed her. It wasn't as bad as being the victim, but it still ruined the soul. It had torn her to shreds on the inside.

Since then, she's tried to tell them, but they dismiss it. Minimise it. Brush it off. All her friends see is what they want to see; that Malfoy hurt her.

The Dreamless Sleep is bitter on her tongue, the vial dropped carelessly on the bedcovers as she curls into a miserable ball. "Merry Christmas, Malfoy," she murmurs, voice wobbling and wet, and smudges a hot tear away from the corner of her eye.

She's not coming.

It had been a vain and stupid hope, but Draco had clung to it anyway. It was *Christmas*. Surely they would let her see him if she wanted to. But maybe not. Or maybe she didn't want to see him. His dinner lies untouched on the floor, and he lies on his back on the cot, staring up at the ceiling blankly. The Order have been fairly accommodating so far, though, which makes Draco fear it's more likely that she doesn't want to see him. That would be for the best, really. Only...he feels very alone.

He thinks of his parents. Draco usually doesn't let himself even consider them, but it's Christmas. Lying in his small cell, he wonders where his parents are. Whether they're even still alive, or whether his escape with Hermione doomed them to death. His last letter to his mother had been an apology, and a plea for her to run – with his father in Europe playing the part of an obedient Death Eater, his mother was alone at the Malfoy Manor. As helpless as a mooncalf if Voldemort wanted vengeance. If he'd stayed behind instead of going with Hermione, Voldemort likely would've been satisfied with merely torturing Draco to death. He should've stayed – or returned, after taking Hermione to the Order.

Because now Draco's alone anyway. Alone on Christmas Day – and with the weight of nightmarish memories, his own self-hatred, his parents probably dead, and Hermione gone, his life seems more pointless than ever. He would rather embrace oblivion than live with this.

"Merry fucking Christmas," he mutters, a lump in his throat.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

Thanks as always to my amazing beta Pidanka! ♥

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Nine

Draco catches the vial automatically, although he fumbles it slightly; a testament to the state of him after his final interview with Lupin. The worst yet, perhaps.

They'd gone over the past three months. Lupin hadn't asked much about Hermione. "I don't think she would want me knowing details of – what happened." the older man said delicately, but he had asked *some* things, and sometimes the subject of Hermione bled into other areas. Too many. It had been...difficult. Draco had found himself sliding into talking about her entirely by accident at times, the tenuous links between topics making him think of her, and what he did to her, and then the words came sliding out until Lupin stopped him.

The horrors of the dinner had come up briefly, as well as the revel where she'd been forced to torture him, and Draco had tried to choke the words back, fighting the veritaserum until Lupin told him to stop, or rephrased the question. And then there were all the small, unrelated moments that made Draco feel violated by being forced to reveal something so innocently intimate, or feel so disgusted that yet another horrendous thing had happened or been done.

He's sweating and shaky again, and there's a throbbing behind his eye sockets, a persistent tic in his jaw muscle again, and his body is stiff and sore from being chained in that damn chair. And his chest hurts from holding back the messy, pathetic sobs that threaten whenever he talks about Hermione. His pulse is fast, his heart thudding hard and discordant. In short, he's a wreck.

After the final interview, Lupin had sent him back to his cell to pack up his few belongings – a change of clothes, several books, and a pack of cards – while the older wizard finished up the paperwork and checked on available placements for Draco. And now Potter and Weasley stood in his doorway, having thrown him a vial of veritaserum.

"Drink it," Potter says, looking very set-jawed and determined as the taller Weasley lurks behind him.

Draco examines the liquid; definitely veritaserum. "I still have veritaserum in my system," he tells the two other men flatly. "If you're planning on interrogating me, you can just go ahead. Otherwise, I'll end up overdosing." A small overdose isn't dangerous, but it isn't great either, and Draco would rather not experience it. Disorientation, nausea, lack of coherency, and even less control over what one says, followed by hangover-like symptoms.

"You took it five hours ago. It'll be wearing off," Potter retorts. "Take the damn dose."

"Why?"

"Why do you think, Malfoy?" Weasley is scathing, and Draco's jaw twitches, his pulse picking up. He knows why they're here, and he knows there's nothing he can do about it. He has to cooperate. *Fuck*. It's like walking to his own execution. He already felt like shit, and now he feels worse; black spots dance behind his eyes and he sits down, staring at the vial.

"It won't make a difference," Draco tries. He's met with stony silence. "Granger wouldn't want you to know. She'd tell you if she wanted you to know," he tries next, and that scores a hit. Potter and Weasley exchange uncomfortable glances. They retreat into the corridor and have a quick, quiet conversation, heads close together. But then Potter shakes his head, and they move back into the cell doorway, Potter's grip tightening on his wand.

"Just drink the damn stuff, Malfoy," he says impatiently. So Draco takes a deep breath and then does, pulling the cork out with a squeak, the fluid sliding down his throat in one small mouthful.

"Ask your fucking questions then," he says bitterly. Potter eyes him.

"It'll take five minutes to kick in."

"Then start simple, Potter. But like I already told you, I still have veritaserum in my system," Draco snaps and rubs his hands over his face, exhausted. He feels almost numbed to the approaching ordeal. Resigned to the awfulness. He knows roughly how this will go – he can't bring himself to imagine it in detail.

"Fine. Let's just start, Harry," Weasley says, and the interrogation begins. "What happened when she was brought in by the snatchers?"

The first question isn't so terrible to start with, although Draco can already feel the extra veritaserum dose slowly kicking in. His heartbeat picks up, and he knows it can't just be adrenaline, and his head is aching, his stomach churning as he answers Weasley.

"They dragged her in unconscious. I recognised her immediately, and I didn't know why they hadn't," he says, talking too fast and unable to stop himself. "She looked so small. So vulnerable. I knew – knew what the Dark Lord would do with her. I couldn't – not her." He's breathing too quickly, hand wrapped around the empty vial. "Not her. So I thought, maybe I could hide her. At the back, with the used-up Muggles, where no one who'd recognise her would see her. Where no one bothers going."

"...used-up?" Potter mutters disgusted, and Draco's compulsion-ridden brain takes that as a question.

"Yes. The servants who were abused too much and stopped being able to do the work. The ugly Muggles. The ones who stopped reacting to the torture and became catatonic, because they weren't fun anymore. The ones who came in damaged. The ones that Death Eaters –"

"Okay, stop!" Potter snaps, and Draco stops. Relieved and filled with dread at the same time. Potter and Weasley throw him several more questions about his treatment of Hermione in the dungeons. None of them are that terrible – it seems more like the two of them want to know what Hermione went through without putting her through the ordeal of asking her. But it still feels wrong to Draco. He can see that, to some extent, the two idiots are trying to understand Hermione's ordeal so they can help her, but it still seems like prying.

"Did you really think you had to rape her?" The question hits out of nowhere.

"I didn't fucking *ask* to, Potter," he snarls furiously. "But I knew he'd make me. I know how his mind works."

"Did you enjoy it?" Weasley asks, and Draco's stomach drops through the floor.

"Fuh-fuck you. You – you can't fucking ask me that." He stands numbly in the middle of the cell, swaying on his feet as he resists the compulsion, wanting to strangle Weasley for asking that. "You can't. You –"

"*Did you enjoy it?*" Potter demands now, his face twisted in disgust and his wand aimed steadily at Draco, a wordless threat not to try anything.

"Yes," Draco says in a hoarse croak, the word ripped from his throat as he stares at his feet, unable to keep everything from pouring out in a torrent. "At first, I couldn't even get it up, but then I did, and so I – I fuh-fucked her and I hated myself for it then, and I hate myself for it now, but *yes*, she felt so good, so *good* and so *fucking* awful and she was crying, and I'd hurt her so badly, and I just kept hurting her, and I wanted to *die*, I would rather have died than do that, but I couldn't because if I couldn't do it, if I couldn't, then he was going to throw her to the others, to everyone else, and so it had to be me, it *had* to be, and I couldn't help it." He takes a gasping, wretched breath, the next words very small, strangled in guilt: "I couldn't help that she felt good."

Draco realises he's crying as Potter and Weasley's expressions shift to a kind of bewildered, devastated horror, like they realise belatedly that they've waded into deeper, darker waters than they thought. He's crying silently except for his gasping breaths, shoulders shaking, tears hot on his cheeks as he desperately wipes them away. There's a hot pain in his left hand, and when he looks dumbly down at it, he realises that he's crushed the veritaserum vial in his hand. Blood runs over his fingers in a sluggish, thin trickle. Weasley notices at the same time as Draco.

"Harry."

"Shit. Malfoy. Let me –" Potter waves at Draco's hand.

"No," Draco says, flat and numb, his voice thick with tears. "No. Ask your fucking questions. Get your fucking kicks. Invade her privacy. Ask about how *she* tortured *me*. I wouldn't have thought she had the steel in her spine, but she did it. She made me scream in a way the Dark Lord never managed to." He's furious. Angry beyond reason. "Your Hermione broke me *so well*."

"Good," Potter snarls back. "Tell me how she hurt you, then, you poor, innocent Death Eater."

"I – I didn't say I was *innocent*. I didn't say I didn't deserve it. I *did*. I deserved every bit of the kicking, and the electrical *thing* –" he still doesn't know what it was – and her burning me, and ripping my nails out –"

"Bullshit," Weasley interrupts, and Potter mutters an aside to him – *Hermione did say that, weren't you listening?*

"– and the whipping, but you're not interested in that, are you? You don't care that we were *both* forced. *Both* had to. I didn't want to do any of it any more than she did," Draco gets out fast, panting and choking on his words and hoping his tirade makes them stop asking questions. But he's not in control of what he says, a stream of consciousness now, and he can't shut himself up.

"You just want to know how *I* hurt *her*, like at the first revel. Like the dinner. Ask about *that*. About how I made her dress like a whore on a leash, and then I had to *sit there* and *watch* while they – they –" Draco breaks off, voice rising to a shout over *watch*, and then quieting over the last few. He hates himself. He needs to shut the fuck up. He *doesn't* want them to ask –

"While they what?" Weasley asks as if it were an automatic reflex, and Draco could sob at the cruelty of it, and even Potter hisses in a breath and glares at Weasley, though he doesn't say *stop*.

"Don't make me say it," Draco begs, his heartbeat a drum behind his eyes, his skull a vice crushing his brain as he pleads desperately, blood still seeping over his fingers. "Please. *Please*, I'm begging you, please *pleaseplease* they – they put things in her. In her – her mouth and her –" He gags. He's trying desperately to be vague, and bile is acrid at the back of his throat, the veritaserum killing him. "– made her lick their – their – and – and they cut her and used *imperio*, and they made her their dog, their *dog*, stupid little Mudblood *bitch* and I just had to watch, *there was nothing I could do* –" Draco's eyes beg them to understand but he sees only reflected horror "– please stop me, *please...*"

They do stop him then, or rather, Potter does. Draco stumbles to the toilet but doesn't throw up, just retches a few times before spitting and wiping his mouth with the back of his unbloodied hand. He raises his head and looks at the pair of them, feeling hatred like a pulse. "Are you getting off on this?" he asks dizzily, and they both recoil.

"Come on, Harry, let's just go," Weasley mutters, and no – Draco isn't having that. He strides across the room in two long steps and grabs Potter by the wrist before he can exit the cell. It's Draco's left hand, and the pain of the glass slivers digging in deeper is exquisite, and Potter is wide-eyed.

"Let me go, Malfoy."

"No."

"Let me the fuck go."

"No," he snarls, and Salazar's sake, he's still crying. A slow trickle like the leak of a tap, and he blames the veritaserum and Lupin's interview for making him susceptible to this because he doesn't cry in front of people. He tries not to cry at all, but definitely not in front of these two, of all people.

"Merlin's sake, I'll hex you," Potter snaps, looking unworried, because what threat can Draco pose, but annoyed.

"Please do. I don't care," he gets out numbly. "In fact, it might be a nice change." He narrows his eyes on Potter. "You're asking the wrong questions, Potter."

"What?"

"Ask me if I'd die for her. Yes, I would. I would die for her gladly," Draco says low and quick, his voice intent. Urgent. The truth slipping from his lips. "Ask me if I'd ever lay my hands on her without her consent unless it were to save her life. *I wouldn't*. Ask me if I wish it had all happened to me instead. *I do*. I'd rather it had been me being raped by – by fucking Rodolphus or Crabbe or Goyle Sr., or hell, all of them – than me doing it to her." He lets Potter's wrist go. It's blood-smeared now. Potter doesn't move away, those bright green eyes locked to Draco's, searching and intent, a frown slashing between his brows, his mouth pursed with distrust and disbelief. "I just want what's best for her. I want her to have what she wants. I want that to be *me* –" that last slips

out unintended, and Weasley scoffs "– but whatever it is, I want her to have it. I want her to be happy."

And then Draco retreats to his bed and sits, staring at his bloodied left hand. He can see a few slivers sparkling in the spider web of cuts; nothing too bad. He'll try to pick it out later. Or Lupin can. There's silence. Draco knows intellectually that he made a fairly decent point with that rambling, gasping rant, but he still feels numb. It hasn't changed his mind – he still thinks that he's a monster, and probably the farthest thing from what Hermione needs, so why would it have changed their minds about him. Just because he loves her? *Pathetic*.

He overhears them talking in low voices.

"He's telling the truth, we know that."

"I don't know if I care, after what he did."

"To be fair, he *didn't* have a choice."

"That doesn't make me feel any less disgusted. "

"Well, no, me neither. But Hermione clearly...well. She cares about him."

"I know."

The whispers go on for a minute, and then Potter's voice cuts the air, cautious and neutral. "Malfoy? Can I heal your hand before we talk?"

"No," Draco snaps back without looking up. "You can get the fuck out."

"*Reparo*," Potter snaps and Draco grabs his wrist and winces as the slivers of glass pull themselves from his flesh and reform the veritaserum vial, hanging in the air stained with his blood for a brief moment before Potter summons it. He lifts his head. "Get out," he says and watches as they shuffle out, the door shutting behind them with a hollow sound.

When Lupin returns, Draco has washed the blood from his hand, and hides the cuts by turning his palm against his abdomen as he lies on the bed, staring at the ceiling once more. Thinking.

"I'd rather not go," Draco says when Lupin says he's found him a safe house. The older man is openly confused.

"You can get out of your cell. You can –"

"Do I have to?" Draco interrupts.

"Well, no," Lupin says, rubbing a hand over his jaw. "You don't. But –"

"Then I'd rather stay." And that's it. He's decided. He sighs, an odd sense of relief and resignation settling over him. Lupin wants to know if it is some kind of attempt at penance and tells Draco he doesn't have to punish himself. That, regardless of what he did, he did, in fact, do it under the Order's directive. He's absolved, legally, of his crimes. Morally though, Draco doesn't feel absolved. Besides, a safe house doesn't sound much better than a stone cell at this point; he may as well stay.

Lupin seems concerned, even as he tells Draco he can have another two weeks in the cell, if he agrees to meet with a Healer. Draco agrees. "You can see Hermione in a week," Lupin offers, and Draco thinks the older wizard *must* be concerned to bring that up of his own accord. He huffs a humourless laugh.

After today, remembering everything he did to her in excruciating detail, Draco thinks that – seeing as he didn't stay and die – it might be best for Hermione if he just vanishes from her life. Remains in this cell, unvisited and forgotten. Letting her heal without his presence as a toxic reminder of everything that was done to her. If what they say is correct, she's recovering well without Draco there. His absence might be for the best.

Chapter End Notes

- Housekeeping!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

Ten

"How is he?" Hermione asks Lupin as he walks up the garden path from the shed; she's been waiting for him for lack of anything else to do, chin in her hands, sitting on the porch steps, all bundled up in winter garb. Coat, hat, gloves, scarf, and cosy wool-lined boots. Harry and Ron had gotten in about an hour ago, from a mission, she thinks, because instead of wanting to spend time with her, they'd disappeared up to their room, oddly silent. And then Lupin gets closer, and she sees his grim expression. She stands, feeling suddenly shaky. "Is he okay?"

"He's, uh... He's fine, Hermione, I suppose," Lupin says, stopping at the bottom of the steps, and Hermione feels cold in a way that isn't from the temperature outside. "I think – we need to talk, Hermione. Could you come through to my office?"

"We're alone." Hermione hugs herself, her bones feeling hollow and insubstantial as she stares at his sympathetic face. "So just tell me," she says, quick and hard, feeling like she's about to shatter apart. A dozen possibilities run through her mind, from one of the Order members hurting him to him having somehow killed himself in his cell, but none of them fit in with Lupin saying he's fine. "Remus, please."

"He, ah. Merlin, I'm sorry, Hermione, but he says he doesn't want to see you again," Lupin says reluctantly. He looks apologetic and weary, standing there with slumped shoulders in the snowy garden.

Hermione feels oddly hot. "Liar," she says, and the word coming out of her mouth doesn't even sound like her. Her ears are ringing and she feels dizzy, clutching at the porch railing. "Liar."

Lupin's expression is desperately sad as he looks at her. "I'm not lying, Hermione. He finished the debriefing process today, but he decided he doesn't want to leave the cell, and he said he didn't think he should see you again."

"Why?" she spits out, breathless and still in shock. It hasn't yet sunk in, she doesn't think. She feels wobbly.

"He thought, considering that you're doing so well, it would be best if he stayed away," Lupin says in an attempt at a neutral voice. He doesn't sound happy, though.

"*Doing well?*" Hermione stares at him and laughs. Bitter and humourless, the laughter hitches out of her in sobbing breaths, and tears start to fall as she plumps down on the steps, her legs giving way. Lupin reaches out, full of concern, and his hand falls on her upper arm.

"Don't touch me!" she says too loud and frantic as she flinches away and then chokes on her tears, trying to shove them down. Forcing herself to try to take slow, deep breaths. "He's being *stupid*,

Remus. You know that. He's – he's punishing himself. Staying in the cell? Cutting me off? You can't let him –"

"We can't stop him, Hermione. We don't need his cell yet, so if he wants to stay put, it's almost easier, for now. And we can't *force* him to see you," he tells her, regret and apology printed all over his face as she looks up at him through tear-blurred eyes. Hermione shakes her head, refusing to accept that, the wind cutting cold over her wet cheeks, and she smudges them with the backs of her woolly-gloved hands.

"No. *No*. You see," she says slightly wildly, a manic edge to her tone, "this is very ironic. You see, I'm not 'doing so well'. I've only been *pretending* to be so that you'll let me see him when the time is up." Hermione tries to wobble a smile at him despite her tears, and thinks she makes a horrible rictus. "I'm actually doing terribly, and I desperately need to see him," she says, brittle and stiff. "But you – you've all ruined things. You tried to help, but you meddled. You *meddled*, and you ruined something that didn't need to be fixed." She glares at Lupin furiously. "You have to tell him I'm not alright." She pauses, and then the words rush out, small and broken. "I need him. I – I love him. You have to tell him that."

"Of course. Of course, I'll tell him," Lupin says quickly, an odd pain in his voice. "I will. But he seemed fairly determined, Hermione." She isn't surprised. It seems like the sort of stupid thing Malfoy would do. He is unexpectedly stupidly noble and self-sacrificing, even when he doesn't have to be. Not for the first time, Hermione wonders if he would still be sorted into Slytherin. Probably.

"He's punishing himself."

"I know," Lupin says, sitting down beside her with a grunt. He leaves a good foot of space between them and wraps his coat closer around him. His breath makes steam clouds in the air, like a dragon. "The things he's done, Hermione..."

Her hackles go up. "He had to," she jumps in, defending him, and Lupin holds up a hand, pale blue eyes mild.

"Calm down, Hermione. I know that," he says, his tone as mild as his expression. "I've spent nearly two weeks picking Draco's brain, poring over his memories. The only way I could know the man better is if we'd used a pensieve. I think I have a fair idea of his character, after all that."

"He's a good man," Hermione says in a whisper, looking down at her interlaced gloved fingers.

"He is," Lupin agrees. "And he has a courage and determination I never would've imagined he had buried in him, when he was a student at Hogwarts. Not many people could have done what he has these past few years without breaking entirely, in one way or another." Lupin purses his mouth, thoughtful. "He bears so much horror. So much. I don't envy him." He looks ill, remembering, and Hermione doesn't think she'll *ever* want to know the extent of what Malfoy has done.

"But he's good. He's not – he doesn't deserve to bear the blame." Hermione fumbles. "It's not *fair* – he only remained a Death Eater because the Order told him to, otherwise he would've defected. He did it all, saw it all, for the Order. Because they – *we* – told him to. He shouldn't have the guilt of that on his shoulders."

"No. He shouldn't," Lupin says, elbows resting on his thighs, face unshaven and obviously exhausted, "but I doubt he sees it that way."

"No. And I know he blames himself for – for what he did to me." Her voice got very small.

Lupin makes a short, complicated sound. "I didn't ask him much about that. Just so you know, Hermione." It's a relief to hear. "But he let slip enough that – well, I understand that you both were victimised by you-know-who. But I still don't think your attachment is healthy."

Hermione nods. "Fair enough. And I don't care that you think that."

He chuckles. "Fair enough," he echoes.

She looks at him then, eyes connecting, and she tries to make him feel what she says. "But I need him, Remus. I'm not – I'm adrift, here. I'm drowning. Struggling to keep my head above water and I'm getting so, so tired. I need him. He keeps me afloat. I know it might not be healthy, but it's my reality now. Nice or not, it's just how things *are*. And I have to work with how things *are*, not how we all wish they could be." It feels weirdly freeing to be so vulnerable – so bluntly honest.

Lupin looks down at his hands, loosely laced together between his thighs and lets out a heavy sigh. "Okay. Okay, Hermione. I'll talk to him in a few days. I'll tell him you need him." He glances at her. "He agreed to see a Healer, admittedly in order to be able to remain in his cell, so perhaps she can help him with his guilt. I don't know."

"Healer Siobhan?" Hermione asks disparagingly. "I'm not sure how helpful she'll be. She wasn't very understanding when I spoke to her. She thought – well, she had an idea in her head of the situation that didn't line up with reality at all." She's unsurprised that Malfoy had to be coerced into speaking to a Healer. She imagines he feels much the same way as her; that no one who wasn't there can hope to understand.

"In her defence, none of us knew the full situation, then." Lupin shrugs. "Once I give her a summation of my notes, I have a feeling her perspective may be different."

"I hope so," Hermione says, and the reality of the situation hits her as her mind ticks over. "God. What a fucking *mess*." She glances at Lupin. "'Scuse my language."

He laughs tiredly. "No, that sounds like the right description. Godric knows life hasn't exactly been fair on you. Or him."

"But then, that's war."

"It is. And because of what he's done, we have an awful lot of valuable information, Hermione." Lupin looks intent and grimly pleased, a hard glint in his eyes. "Particularly the information on the American wizards. We're in active negotiations with the Magical Congress of the United States of America, thanks to the names he gave us. He may have gained us allies we desperately need if things go well in our communications with them." And then he looks down at his hands again, sadness in the lines around his mouth. "In addition to closure on a lot of missing persons."

"Did you tell him?"

"I have." He nods. "But I'm not sure whether it sank in."

"Probably not," she says miserably, hugging herself and folding forward over the bars of her arms. They sit in silence a moment longer before Lupin stands, his knees clicking.

"It's too cold out here for me without a warming charm. My joints are aching. I'm heading in. Coming?"

"I think I'll sit a little longer." The sky has darkened while they sat there talking, and deep-grey thunderheads have crept across the blue of the sky, blotting out the sun and casting the world in greys that make Hermione think of Malfoy's eyes. Footsteps creak on the porch, and the door bangs shut, and Hermione sighs.

"...And she says that she needs you," Lupin finishes.

"She doesn't know *what* she needs," Draco says coldly, staring at the floor as he sits on the edge of his bed. "She tried to seduce me right before I took her to be violated, and potentially *raped* by me. Because in her fucked up head, *somehow that made sense*. That if we'd already – then it wouldn't –" He can't go on, his tongue feeling thick in his mouth, an ache behind his eyes. He looks up at the older wizard, who stands by the doorway, looking haggard as always. "She doesn't know what the fuck she needs," he repeats.

"She told me to tell you that she loves you," Lupin says awkwardly, and Draco squeezes his hands into fists, nails on one hand ragged and digging into his palm, nails on his other hand not yet grown in enough. His chest hurts.

"She's better off without me. You told me she was coping, Lupin. You *said*." The words come out rasping and thick. Draco has to believe that. Because he can't be what she needs. How *can* he be? Lupin sighs and shifts on his feet.

"I thought she was. We all did. But she's told me since then that she's *not* coping. She was just trying her best to seem normal because she was scared if she didn't, we wouldn't let her see you." Lupin sounds distressed by the idea that he's caused Hermione pain. "And now you're telling her you won't see her. It's going to break her, Draco." Anger seeps into Lupin's voice, his tone tight and sharp.

"I already did that," Draco says, images that he can't banish crowding his head. They plague him constantly now as he sits in his silent cell with nothing to distract him. He's spiralled since Weasley and Potter barged into his cell. Tumbled down a rabbit hole of guilt that is eating him alive. He suffers through a constant reel of every way he's hurt her. Every way he scared her, or violated her, or struck her. Every bite, every bruise, every flinch and every sob. The way she sat catatonic on the bed after the dinner, horribly dead behind the eyes as he tried to heal her every hurt. The way she'd cringed from his hand slipping tentatively beneath her jumper as they'd kissed, the way she'd touched his dick and then had frozen in fear and disgust. "I already broke her."

"Draco... I know you have a lot of... –" The words blur together as Lupin goes on trying to convince Draco, but he isn't listening. He's lost in his own head. *I already broke her*. And he did. He took Hermione Granger, and he tore her apart. He took something from her that she'll never get back. She'll never be able to experience anything the same way as she did before; he changed the course of her life irrevocably. Tainting it. He was the instrument of her ruin. He's not the one she needs. She only thinks that because of how he broke her. How he couldn't save her.

A couple of days later, Hermione's sitting in the lounge with Harry and Ron, watching them play wizarding chess and actually managing to half read a book when Lupin pops his head into the room

and beckons to her. She flings off her lap rug and uncurls from the chair, heart beating quickly, legs shaky beneath her. She's been eating even less than usual because she feels so sick with worry, and today she's reached the point of a light-headed lack of hunger that feels oddly freeing but has left her trembly. Lupin looks too serious for it to be good news, his expression tight and strained as she crosses the room.

"What?" she asks, twisting her fingers together nervously as they stand in the hall by the front door, the Christmas tree gone now and the hall feeling oddly empty without it taking up half the space.

"Did you speak to him? What'd he say?"

"I did speak to him," Lupin says, and his tone is confirmation the news isn't good. "Do you want to go to my office?"

Hermione sighs. "No. I'm not going to fall apart, Remus," she says and hopes that's not a lie. "Just tell me."

Lupin eyes her for a second before he speaks. "He's – he's not in a good place, Hermione. I tried to convince him that you want him here, but he dismissed everything I said." He frowns, obviously frustrated. "He said – I'm sorry – but he said that your feelings were situational and would pass if he stayed away, and that it was best for him to be out of your life. That you'd be able to heal better without him."

"God!" She spits it in an angry whisper, tears springing to her eyes and fingertips pressing to her forehead in frustrated impotence. "God *fucking* dammit. He's an idiot!" Lupin stands silently as she mutters epithets to herself like a crazy person, anger making her thoughts skitter in her head. He's so stupid. So *irritating*. She can't allow it. "You can't let him, Remus. You *have* to take me to see him. When – when the Healer's stupid time limit is up," she adds, hating that the Healer has any say in what she does, or when she does it. Only four more days, though. *If* Lupin will take her to see him. If not, maybe she can talk Harry or Ron into apparating her, she thinks, her mind racing.

"I can't *force* him to see you, Hermione."

"Just take me to his cell then," Hermione says, sick to fucking death of everyone and everything. She hates the war, and Malfoy, and Lupin, and Harry and bloody Ron and – "I'll yell at him through the door if I bloody well have to," she snaps, just barely holding herself together.

Lupin snorts. "Alright, Hermione. I think I can do that."

They talk for a few moments longer about what exactly Malfoy said in detail, and small things like how Hermione is holding up, and whether Malfoy's seen the Healer yet – he hasn't – and then Hermione shuffles back to the sitting room, feeling deflated and exhausted. She plans to sink back into her chair and stare sightlessly at her book for a while, unable to face even something as simple as climbing three flights of stairs right now. Harry and Ron look up at her as she comes in. They've been odd around her the past few days. Awkward, tripping over their tongues, and shooting each other secretive looks. Hermione suspects they've read over the part of Malfoy's debriefing that's related to her. That thought makes her feel sick, and she's considered confronting them over it, but she hasn't been able to summon the strength yet.

They both aim curious, lingering stares at her, pausing in their game. Hermione sighs. She hasn't told them what's going on, keeping it to herself, but maybe it'll help. It certainly can't hurt – it could hardly be possible for things to feel worse. She pulls the rug back over her lap.

"Remus says Dra–Malfoy doesn't want to see me," she tells them quietly.

"...Oh," Harry says helplessly and shoots a sideways glance at Ron. "Why?" he asks after a moment's stifling silence, a tension in the air that Hermione doesn't understand. She frowns, picking at pillowed balls of wool on the crocheted rug.

"He thinks he's bad for me. After what he did," she mumbles, her cheeks heating and her fingers trembling. She feels an uncomfortable mixture of mortification and vivid, awful memory. "He's fixated on how – how he hurt me." The two boys look away, Ron fidgeting with a pawn he'd taken from Harry, that strange tension still thick in the air. Hermione tries to soldier on. "He can't seem to understand that he's not to blame, and he thinks I'll be better off without him." She pauses a beat. "But I won't. I can't – can't do this without him."

"Oh c'mon, Hermione" Harry says encouragingly as Ron nods. "Of *course* you can. You're doing really well."

Hermione recalls her morning – she'd woken to memories flooding in as always, and had cried into her pillow until her eyes were swollen and sore, her nose red and running, her chest aching as she'd gasped through her sobs. She'd kept thinking about the first revel, over and over, and it killed her – both what had happened, and the way it tainted the desire she felt toward Malfoy. The very real want Hermione felt for him was almost inextricably tangled up with the rape. She had felt arousal twist deliciously in her stomach at the memory of his mouth hot and needy on hers – only to remember the feel of him moving roughly over her, forcing his penis inside her with stinging, burning pain.

And then, from there, she'd thought about the snatcher who had nearly raped her, and the American dark wizards who had violated her in ways she hadn't even imagined before that evening, the only paltry mercy being that they hadn't used their penises. It had been several hours before she'd managed to wrestle the flashbacks and crying jags down enough to even contemplate getting out of bed. And then, once she was, she fled straight to the shower where she'd compulsively washed the parts of herself that they'd mauled, scrubbing hard and long enough that she had broken the skin by her left nipple. It's sore and weepy even now.

So, *doing well*? The thought is a fucking joke. Ridiculous. Hermione gives Harry a scathing look. "No, I'm *not*, Harry. I – just because I'm not falling to fucking pieces in front of you doesn't mean I'm doing okay!" It comes out slightly shrill and teary-wet, handfuls of the rug balled up in her hands. She thinks of tonight, which will probably be like every other night so far. Dragging herself numbly up the stairs and taking the Dreamless Sleep, curled in bed crying miserably until the potion drags her under. "Honestly, you have no idea."

"How could we? You don't *tell* us anything," Ron says slightly bitterly, and Harry makes a 'shut up' sound, and Hermione bites her tongue, anger thudding hot and dull in her veins.

"Well, I'm telling you *now*," she says at last, acid in her tone, and Ron looks immediately guilty. "Happy?"

"I'm sorry, 'Mione. I shouldn't have said that." He ducks his head, cheeks flushing hotly, still turning that pawn over and over in his fingers, his beard looking odd. "I just – we want to be there for you. And we can't because...because you haven't talked to us."

"Because I don't *want* to talk about it," Hermione says shortly, curled up defensively in her rug, her breathing a little fast and shallow. Adrenaline is rushing through her system suddenly, and her

fingers twist on each other too tightly, white-knuckled. "And I don't have to, with Malfoy. He understands. He was there. He *knows*. I need him. I lo—" She stops herself before she can say it and shudders out a shaky breath, swiping at an escaped tear. "But now – now Remus says he refuses to see me. And I need him. He's an idiot." She laughs tearfully. "I thought it was just you two who are so stupid when it comes to emotions, but maybe it's every male in the world.

"Oh 'Mione..." Ron breathes sympathetically.

"Maybe he's just sick of me," she mumbles, spiralling, rationality sliding away from her, slippery and ephemeral. "Maybe he doesn't want me – maybe he hates what I remind him of," she says dumbly, not really even thinking about the words coming out of her mouth. She's getting lost inside her fears. Inside the sick sense of self-loathing that has squirmed under her skin all day, despite her attempts to suppress it. She feels dirty – ashamed. It's painfully cliché, but Hermione feels it regardless; her trauma has no regard for not being cliché.

"Don't be so bloody stupid, Hermione. He said he just wanted you to be happy, preferably with him," Ron says like he's reciting something from memory, while Hermione stares at him in puzzlement, and Harry buries his head in his hands with a groan. "So that doesn't make sense. Besides, anyone would be lucky to have you, let alone someone like Malfoy. He's lucky you even want to *look* at him after –" Harry thumps Ron hard.

"Shut up, you bloody idiot," he hisses, and Hermione's empty stomach lurches. Oh no. She feels shivery and cold.

"Ron?" she asks, dangerously quiet, thoughts percolating in her mind. What Ron had quoted didn't sound like something Lupin would have written down. They've talked to Malfoy; she knows it. "How do you know what Malfoy's said?"

Ron blanches. "Um."

"We went to see Malfoy a few days ago," Harry admits, sensibly not trying to deny it. Thank Merlin; Hermione doesn't have the emotional capability to deal with trying to pry the truth out of the two of them right now. She swallows hard, a lump in her throat, and god, she feels nearly feverish, tension winding her muscles tight. She clutches the rug hard in her fists, imprinting crochet patterns into her skin.

"And you didn't tell me?" she gets out with a kind of strangled calm, her voice weirdly distorted. How dare they. How *dare* they. She knows with near certainty that it can't have been sanctioned by Lupin, or he would surely have mentioned it to Hermione. They'd gone to, what, interrogate him? Because she knows for damn sure that they didn't go for a friendly cup of tea and a biscuit. And perhaps even worse than sneaking off to grill him – they hadn't taken Hermione. The two of them exchange another of those secretive looks, and it makes Hermione want to slap the pair of them. "What did you *do*?"

It takes some time, but she eventually strings together that they'd coerced Malfoy to take an extra dose of veritaserum, and then questioned him about what he'd done to Hermione.

"And?" she says, feeling numb – numb to her bones, and leaden. If they dropped her in a body of water right now, she would sink like a stone and drown, the water closing over her. She almost feels like she's drowning now; dizzy and dissociating, her thoughts cloudy and her breath hard to catch. She thinks she may be having a panic attack. "Did he say anything interesting?" The words come

out harsh and awful, brimming with a cold anger; her breaths gasps that make them eye her worriedly.

The two look at each other again before they answer. "Stop that!" Hermione thuds her fist down on one thigh. Tears of frustration fill her eyes. The three of them used to share secrets, and now she's someone else entirely. Not part of that shared glance. Excluded. It hurts. "Just fucking answer me!"

"No," Ron says for the two of them. "Nothing interesting." He gulps and looks down at the chessboard. "Just – just how guilty he felt. How much he hated doing wh-what he had to do. How he wished he could've taken it all instead of you. How he would have died for you."

Hermione stares at them coldly. She's not sure they're being entirely honest, but whether or not they are – and whether or not those words give her a sick lurch of love toward Malfoy – they shouldn't have asked. Those are private things. Those were his private feelings. He must have hated having them ripped out of him. It would've killed him. She tries to steady her breathing. "How *could* you? You – you *violated* him. You forced him to – you shouldn't have – *how could you?*"

"We're sorry, 'Mione. We are. We both regret it, but –" Harry begins, but Hermione doesn't want to listen to their apologies. And then there's a horrified realisation dawning on her.

"What if *you* made him think I was better off without him?" Hermione feels like a stunned bird. Panicked and frozen even while her heart beats wildly and her muscles tremble and stutter, and it feels like she's *dying*. "What if *you're* the reason why he doesn't want to see me?" She finds her feet somehow, the rug falling to pool around her ankles, her fists balled at her sides. They look up at her, stricken, denying it, but it's too late; true or not, the idea is seeded in her head, and it's found fertile ground. She feels so *angry*. At everything. Everyone.

"I'm going upstairs," she says dully, cutting off Ron's attempts to both apologise and talk her around at once – a mishmash that does neither well. "I'm tired."

There's no point in yelling or arguing. They did what they did and said what they said, and Malfoy isn't going to change his stupid fucking decision just because Hermione has a screaming meltdown at Harry and Ron. Instead, she does it into her pillow. She doesn't come down for dinner.

"Hello, Draco. I'm Healer Siobhan."

He ignores her; lying on the cot in his cell as she stands in the doorway, tossing his apple into the air and catching it again, as he's been doing for the last hour or so. He's only missed twice. Draco had imagined Hermione's snorting snicker both times that he'd realised he'd missed, just in time to make a flailing, panicked attempt to avoid the fruit hitting him in the face – and failed. He thinks his jaw may bruise a little. The Healer is a slim, dark-skinned woman in pale green robes, her hair twisted up in an elegant bun. He can see her out of the corner of his eye. *Slap*; the apple hits his palm, and he sends it arcing back up.

"I'm here to escort you to a more comfortable space to talk."

"I'm fine here," he says. *Whoosh, slap. Whoosh, slap.* It's rhythmic and almost soothing. He's aware of Healer Siobhan's eyes on him. She seems uncertain. Good.

"Well, erm –" She turns and murmurs to someone out of sight, and a moment later the unseen wizard passes her a chair that she puts just inside the doorway. "Well then, let's talk, shall we?"

"No," he tells her flatly.

There's a few seconds of silence. "Lupin informed me that you agreed to see me in exchange for remaining in this cell."

Draco smiles, humourless. "Yes. And you've seen me. You can stay if you like. But I won't be talking. I never agreed to that."

It's childish and petty, but there's something satisfying in refusing to cooperate. He has so little left to him; he'll take his control and his victories where he can. He's decided; until Lupin allows him to have his wand back so that he can fight on the Order's side, he will be uncooperative. Fighting – making that pointless attempt to make up for every monstrous, terrible thing he's done – is all Draco feels he can hope for, now. And then maybe – maybe after the war, if he's still alive, Hermione might still have feelings for him, and he'll deserve her. Finally.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

Thank you to Pidanka, who spends hours catching typos, making sure my often haphazard grammar and punctuation are whipped into shape, and making suggestions that are always a massive improvement ♥

Eleven

She stands in the doorway and stares at him. She's *beautiful*. Beautiful and too thin, her firewhisky brown eyes sunk into dark shadows, her lips bloodless and dry, her hair falling around her face, looking clean but otherwise uncared for. Draco's hands twitch at his sides as he backs up against the far wall. He itches to push her hair back off her face. To slide his hands around her waist. To kiss her right above her left eyebrow and feel the fragile warmth of her as she slides her arms around his neck and clings to him. She's angry, her brows dark slashes as she glares at him in the shirt and leggings he'd given her, feet in winter boots, a puffy jacket open over the top. She's hugging herself uncertainly.

"Remus says you don't want to see me."

He feels trapped. He *is* trapped. His throat is tight, and Merlin, he wants to go to her and grab her, yank her inside and slam the door. Hold her in here, his prisoner again, just the two of them; in the quiet safety of this cell, the outside world forgotten. Forgetting about guilt, and blame, and how much he's hurt her; just the monster and his captive, entangled together forever. It's a fleeting, mad impulse that makes him shiver with its intensity.

"I don't," he rasps, his back pressed to the stones as if he can sink through the wall and disappear until she leaves. He can't stand this. He can't stand seeing her there and not being able to touch her. It's fucking *hell*. It's dangling everything he wants in front of him, but he knows to take it would only hurt her. She's doing better without him. She doesn't need him. And it's best if she manages to make it without him. Without the man who had told her friends how good it had felt when he'd raped her. A man who can say those words shouldn't be with her. Shouldn't be *near* her. Should've died under Voldemort's wand, really. That would have been adequate penance.

"Why not?" She takes several steps toward him, shrugging off her jacket and tossing it on the end of the bed. His shoulder blades jam against the cold stone as he tries to back up further and can't, a cold discomfort spreading through him from the stones' chill. Her eyes are dark and wet, and the tip of her tongue sweeps over her lips, and his eyes are glued to that movement. He wants to kiss her, very gently, with his hand curling in her hair, lips pushing and pressing softly, tasting her on his tongue. *Fuck*, she needs to leave. Where's Potter? Or Weasley? Surely they couldn't be okay with this, after what he'd told them the other day. Panic skitters through him. His fingers flex. There's a lock of hair falling over her right eye, and he wants to tuck it behind her ear.

"Because *you* shouldn't be seeing *me*. I'm not good for you," Draco gets out, hating the strain in his voice. He swallows hard, breaking out into a sweat as Hermione sways another step closer, folded arms pushing up her breasts so that he can see the soft shadow of cleavage at the unbuttoned neck of her shirt. She isn't wearing a bra, and Draco can see the points of her nipples. And then there's the dip of her waist and the curve of her hips, the way the leggings skim over her, not hiding anything. He grits his teeth and clenches a fist as arousal flares up. If he gets an erection now, there will be no hiding it.

"Don't be stupid. Don't –" her voice cracks "– don't say that. How are you not good for me?" She sounds slightly scathing despite the wobble in her voice, challenging him, her chin jutting up. Draco wants to kiss her so badly. Or shake her. How does she not understand? Has he broken her so badly that she just can't conceive why she shouldn't cling to the man whom the Dark Lord used to torture her? Why that might be unhealthy? The guilt is suffocating. It chokes him. It's hard to think through it; it fogs his mind, cloying in his mouth, and making him feel cold and hot at once.

Draco has spent days doing nothing but thinking about what he did to Hermione, and he has tied himself up in toxic knots. He can't see past his own self-hatred – although part of him is aware that what he feels goes beyond reasonable guilt and shame, and into another level of self-loathing entirely. He blames himself for every pain she suffered, forgetting that ultimately it was *Voldemort's* fault, that he only did what he did to try to shield her from worse. He remembers only that he hurt her, and he wants her desperately, and that those two things together make him a monster. He feels dizzy.

"Because it's not healthy," he tries, weakly. For some reason, it's hard to think of a good reason, especially when she's standing there looking at him like that. Within reach, if he just swayed forward and stretched out his hand. Her eyes shining amber-gold around the pupil, her tongue pink as she licks her lips again, gnawing on the bottom one for a second before speaking.

"Please, Malfoy. You're being so fucking *stupid*. You can't –" She cuts herself off, and then her voice drops. "I love you," she says low and intent, and it hurts like a knife through the gut. "I need you."

Draco wants to say it back, but all he can think about is what he did to her. He may have been trying to protect her, but he still broke her. He *made* her want him – the *situation* made her want him. It had confused her. Because he had been safety and comfort when he hadn't been hurting her. Out of sheer terror and animal fear, she had clung to him as her protector. Her feelings were because of that. Not genuine. They *couldn't* be genuine feelings. How could they be, after what he'd done? Draco thinks now that he should have never confessed his feelings to her in the woods when they'd escaped, but he'd thought he was going to die.

I love you, he thinks. *Merlin, I love you.*

"I – I – no you don't, Hermione," Malfoy denies, using her first name, as he stands there as still and pale as a marble statue, and cold with it. Bitterness saturates his voice. "I'm the one who hurt you. Now that you're safe – I'm not who you need. You don't really love me. It's just that – that Oslo Syndrome."

A hysterical snicker escapes her. "Stockholm," she corrects, throat feeling tight and eyes stinging with unshed tears. "And I do. *I do*. I love you," she tells him insistently, as breathless as if she's just finished running a marathon. Her chest hurts. She feels too hot still, even though she's taken off her

jacket. He's an idiot, she thinks blindly. So damn *stupid*. After everything they've been through, now, when they're *safe*, he decides to try to pull away?

"Draco, please." She uses his first name too, and it feels good on her tongue. She's usually so careful to think of him as *Malfoy*; first to try fruitlessly to preserve the distance between them, and then so she doesn't accidentally call him Draco in front of the others. But maybe that risk doesn't matter so much anymore. "Please. Draco." Her cheeks heat further as she says his first name again, and his lips part, his eyelashes fluttering. "I *do* need you. You can't –"

"You don't know *what* you need," he says, and he's so cold and hard, but his fingers are trembling at his sides as she takes another step closer to him. She reaches out, wanting to feel the roughness of the stubble at his jaw, and he shudders under her touch, his jaw clenching, huffing a breath out his nose. He's like a wild animal, ready to break and bolt, his pupils dilated and ringed with moon grey, his shoulders rising and falling with his breaths.

"*I raped you*. I took you, and I held you down and beat you, and then in front of everyone, I forced my d—" She slaps him as hard as she can, cutting him off, a red handprint blazing up hot on his ashen skin. It makes a *crack* sound. She's panting, and tears are streaming down her cheeks, anger hot in her blood. But Malfoy – *Draco* – just stands there, cold and expressionless, looking far older than twenty, his grey eyes dark and blank like stones.

"Don't you *dare*," she gasps, and he twitches the corner of his mouth into a cold, horrid smile, her handprint still flaming red on his cheek.

"You're better off without me, Granger. After what I did to you. Do you really want to wake up in the mornings to the man who came in your—" she goes to slap him again, and he catches her wrist, fingers holding it almost painfully hard as he finishes, "– who came in your cunt while the Dark Lord watched? Remember that? My cum dripping down your thighs?" Draco is ashen and his voice is sharp and brittle, and she suddenly would prefer to think of him as *Malfoy* again. *Malfoy*, she thinks. Not Draco, not when he's doing this.

"Shut up!" she shouts, furious as tears start to well over, not wanting to hear it. Why is he *doing* this? Why does he have to *say* it that way? Hermione fights his grip and tries to pry his bony fingers off her wrist, panting and sobbing with effort and emotion.

"You can't even stand to hear me *say* it. That I'm the –"

"Shut up and let me *go*!"

"– who handed you over to be used as some fuckdoll by the Dark Lord's foreign guests. Who watched as they –" He keeps listing things in that icy, awful voice that sounds like he's dying, like he's already dead inside, and Hermione wants to scream and vomit and hit him all at once.

"Let me go!" She stamps on his bare foot with her booted one, and he winces and cuts off his rant, his grip on her wrist loosening. She jerks free and backpedals to the door, snatching up her jacket along the way. She stares at him. Horrified. As stunned as if *he'd* struck *her*.

"Is it because of when Harry and Ron came down here?" she asks quietly, and Malfoy's expression crumples and twists, like she's driven a blade in and gutted him completely.

"What?" he asks, just as quiet as her, and there is nothing in his voice but a stark, wounded horror. It's like the world spins to a halt. Hermione forgets to breathe.

"When they came and –" she begins to explain, staring at the red mark still bright on his pale skin.

"*What did they tell you?*" he demands nearly angrily, with a raw desperation that runs in his voice and burns hollow in his eyes. She gasps in a breath, words spilling out messily.

"Tha—that you blamed yourself. That you felt guilty, and you wished you could've taken it all for me." Hermione flushes, hoping Harry and Ron had been honest and not made things up to be kind. Malfoy looks at her intently.

"Is that all?"

Hermione frowns, bewildered by his intensity over something that, to her, seems less important than everything else they've just said. Does that mean it *is* why he's become so fixed on pushing her away? She isn't sure. "I mean, pretty much?" Something like relief crosses his face, just as Hermione is about to ask *why*, and as Ron appears behind Hermione and makes her jump with fright instead, clutching her chest. "Merlin, Ron!"

"Sorry, 'Mione. I know you told us not to come down, but I heard – are you okay?" He interrupts himself as he takes Malfoy in properly and her. She probably looks a state, and she realises she's rubbing her wrist where Malfoy had grabbed her, fading red marks imprinted on her flesh. She drops her hand quickly, sleeve covering the marks.

"I'm fine. I just –"

"*Get out*," Malfoy snarls. "Just get out. Both of you."

Hermione stares at him. She feels sick. He's supposed to protect her, she thinks stupidly. She should be in his arms right now. None of this is right. Ron touches her sleeve tentatively, and she flinches away on instinct. Both men see her flinch and react accordingly, twin expressions of pained empathy, but Malfoy sways forward as Ron quickly pulls back.

"C'mon, 'Mione. Just leave it, for now," he says softly, and Hermione follows him out with one last look at Malfoy, misery consuming her. Hoping against hope that he'll tell her to stop. To come back. He doesn't.

The days tick by, all sliding together into a grey, miserable haze, memories haunting them both. Everything just gets worse.

Nearly two weeks after her ill-fated visit to Malfoy's cell, Hermione goes on a hunger strike. Not on purpose – not really. She just suddenly loses the desire to eat altogether. And then, just a few days later, to shower. Or talk. Sometimes she slips downstairs like a wraith and watches the sunrise while she drinks a hot cup of tea with sugar; it probably helps keep total collapse at bay. And sometimes, in the evenings, she listens to the war news on the wireless from the front hall, sitting on the bottom stair. Or shuffles down the stairs some time after midnight to sit in Lupin's empty, dark office and stare at his file on Malfoy, too afraid to read it. But mostly, she's in her room, dosed up on Dreamless Sleep.

After months of just barely holding by bloodied fingernails on through constant terror and abuse, and now apparent permanent separation from Malfoy – her anchor, her support – Hermione's grip has finally slipped. Losing him was the final straw. She just *can't*. She can't do it anymore. She

won't. She wants out. Sick of the constant memories that crowd in on her mind, sick of the loneliness, sick of *forcing* herself to do everything that she does when she just wants to *not*. Sick of the effort it takes to do the simplest thing. Sick of not feeling happy even when she should. Everything makes her *so fucking sick*.

Without Malfoy's strangely stabilising presence, the fragile balance of Hermione's brittle world had slid all off kilter – and now it's fallen and smashed to pieces. Hermione has been trying *so hard* to keep it together since they escaped because she had thought she'd be able to fall apart in Malfoy's arms eventually and release the pressure. Now that she knows it won't happen, her tenuous control has shaken apart. She tried, she did. So very hard. But she couldn't keep it together any longer when she found out there will never be any relief. Any break.

She isn't suicidal, Hermione thinks to herself as if from very far away, as she becomes aware that the Healer is asking her that one afternoon as she lies on her bed, eyes shut and hands over her ears. She wouldn't mind if she died right now, but she doesn't want to kill herself. She just wants it all to *stop*. She wants the world to stop, and go away, and leave her be, unbothered and vacant, everything else fading away. A husk. A shell of a person, locked in memory. Depression isn't a word that occurs to her, nor is breakdown.

By the fourth day, Hermione just lies in her bed half the day, a miserable ball of unwashed human, shivering despite the blankets and drinking far more Dreamless Sleep than she should in an effort to block out the world altogether. She's careened into depths she can't climb her way out of, memories cocooning her like a acromantula saving her up to eat after first injecting her with all of its venom. Nearly catatonic, she ignores Lupin's warnings that they'll have to have the Healer force-feed her if she won't eat, and Ginny's occasional pep talks and impatiently cheerful company, and Harry and Ron's pleading attempts to talk her back around.

Five days pass. They do force-feed her, in the end. She was already far too thin, having lost weight since her return, and she can't afford to lose anymore. Hermione thinks they won't, *surely* not, until they *do* – and then a mindless panic takes her because it reminds her of *things*, and she screams and fights and throws most of it back up again. The next time they threaten her with it, she cries quietly and tries to eat, but nothing wants to stay put. The misery and stress have made her stomach uncooperative, and she manages to keep down very little even when she's actually trying.

"Go tell Malfoy," she overhears Lupin say just outside her door as she slides back into the grip of Dreamless Sleep the morning of the sixth day; not that she's aware of the days. Everything is just a haze of dead sleep, and waking nightmares. "If he doesn't turn up knowing how she is, then he doesn't actually give a damn."

Tonks then – "Tell him to stop being such a bloody martyr. And that he can hardly make things *worse*. He's got no excuse."

Hermione thinks: *he won't come*.

Draco raises a brow at Potter and Weasley, who stand taking up all the space in his doorway, having crashed through the door like a pair of mating dragons, making it rebound off the wall nearly hard enough to splinter. They look angry, both of them, and Draco wonders what prompted it. He says nothing, just gives them a curious look as he buttons his shirt; they'd caught him dressing after a strip-wash over his sink. He is glad they hadn't burst in just two minutes earlier.

Something has them riled, though, and Draco's mind pages through memories – there are so many things he's done that could have prompted their ire. He's clenching his jaw, tension buzzing through him as he prepares to snap something scathing in response to whatever they say, when Weasley just begins "Hermione –" in a tone that makes Draco's blood run cold, and his muscles go oddly weak with terror.

"*What?*" he snaps out, hard and sharp-edged, a horrible fear looming in the back of his mind, frozen on the spot as he stares at Potter and Weasley, button halfway through the buttonhole. "Is she –" But no; the two other men look strained and angry, but not devastated. Hermione has to be alive, at least, Draco tells himself, something awful stirring in his belly. The last thing he'd said to her; *get out*. He hadn't told her he loves her. He'd pushed her away by saying cruel, terrible things. He regrets *everything* with a sudden acuity that rocks him to his core.

"You need to come," Potter says, green eyes intent. "No fucking around and playing the martyr, Malfoy. Hermione's – well, she's had a breakdown, we think. She's not eating, and she's taking Dreamless Sleep all the time. She won't talk. Won't do fucking *anything*." Potter scrubs a hand through his mop of hair. He looks like hell. "We think..." It's like the words are being dragged out of him unwillingly. "We think you might be able to help. God knows why, but we think she wants *you*."

"Well. None of *us* are helping," Weasley says bitterly under his breath, and Draco stares at them both, trying to process what they've dumped on his lap as he automatically does up his last two buttons. Hermione needs him. She's not okay. She's bad enough to drive Potter and Weasley to seek Draco out for help. And he's just spent over a week telling himself that he needs to not give into the selfish, gnawing desire to see Hermione, for her own sake. When it turns out that perhaps his absence has hurt her. *He's* hurt her. Again. *Fuck*. The world has warped on him. It makes a horrible kind of sense; even when Draco tries to do the right thing, the self-sacrificing thing, it turns out to be wrong. A familiar guilt sinks into his bones, along with the adrenaline and the fear. His misguided attempt to do the right thing has only hurt her further.

He looks dumbly down at himself; in shirtsleeves and trousers, no shoes or coat because he doesn't *have* any right now. Weasley glares at him. "Are you going to make us beg? Or –"

"*Fuck*. Shut up, Weasley, of course I'll come," Draco snaps – as much as he'd like to hear Weasley beg, he's not fucking around when it comes to Hermione. "Did you bring shoes at least?" Potter and Weasley exchange a glance that makes it clear that no, neither of them had thought of that, and Draco accepts that shoes and a coat won't be in his future, despite the winter weather. The stone floors are cold on his feet as he strides along behind the two others through the long basement cell block, Potter leading the way.

"How is she? How bad...?"

"She's okay, physically," Potter says, the pace brisk as they head down the long stone corridor. "When we left, she was sleeping, I think. She needs to eat properly, but she's not in critical condition or anything."

"When did she last eat?" Draco asks, mind working. For the past week, he's sat mouldering away in his dim cell. Rotting in the dark. It had felt fitting. The only thing he's been planning has been how to convince Lupin to give him his wand back and let him fight – Lupin has told him he thinks Draco should be assessed by the Healer before he's allowed to do so. Draco found *that* unacceptable. So he's been waiting and hoping that Lupin will change his mind, and every time he

sees the older man, he argues that he doesn't need to be emotionally sound to fight anyway. No one ever assessed him while he was a double agent. Lupin has been unconvinced, so far.

Either way, it's been mind-numbing and depressing to sit in his cell with little to do except run over and over things that are best not thought about. But now Draco has a purpose outside himself again, and it kicks his stagnating mind into clear, sharp focus. Hermione *does* need him. It's like he's been given permission to lift his self-denial without feeling guilty for it. There's a wild, stifled thrumming in his chest – something that feels a little like hope. It's tempered by his more immediate worry.

Weasley looks over his shoulder at Draco. "The last time she ate of her own free will was six days ago," he says as Draco pulls even with him, walking at the other man's shoulder as they crest the stairs into the wood-panelled upper hall, Potter still several paces ahead. "Not that she was eating much before then either."

"Free will?" Something dark stirs in Draco's gut as he cuts his eyes sideways to look at Weasley.

"We had to force-feed her," Weasley answers, and without even thinking, Draco grabs him and slams him up against the wall, left arm across the man's throat.

"What?" he snarls, his head filled with images of Hermione fighting them while they – they – *fuck*. He can't bear the thought of it. "How dare you. How *dare* you –" Draco doesn't know what he's trying to achieve; he's not thinking, just *angry*. He should've been there. He should've shielded her from that. If he had been there, they never would have gotten the chance to force her. He thinks of her weeping, struggling, helpless. He *remembers*. All the ways he hadn't protected her, all the things he couldn't shield her from, and this is yet another fucking failure added to the pile.

Potter is trying to drag him off Weasley, as Weasley swears under his breath, trying to shove Draco off him. Draco's lost in his own head. Taking out his own guilt and blame on Weasley; unfair and unhelpful, and not under his control right now. He remembers how Hermione had reacted to him just mentioning force-feeding when she'd been refusing food during her time at the manor house – the sickened, helpless fear in her wide, dark eyes. "Don't you think she's had enough forced on her? How the fuck did you think that would help? You stupid fucking –"

"Malfoy! Jesus, calm down!" Potter grabs him by the arm and tries to wrench it back, but Draco is intent and filled with blinding anger, shouting at Weasley.

"Don't hex him, Harry," Weasley croaks, "just –"

There's a brief, violent scuffle before Weasley clocks Draco in the jaw hard enough that he staggers back shaking his head dazedly, hands on his knees, gasping and trying to pull himself back together. Weasley is coughing, deeply and painfully sounding, slumped back against the wall, mirroring Draco's position.

"You fucking – you force-fed her? You should have gotten me *days* ago," Draco pants as he straightens, glaring at Weasley, furious.

"We didn't think you'd come," Potter says, and Draco scoffs as he looks at him – glasses knocked askew and wand in hand, staring at Draco suspiciously.

"Bullshit," Draco snaps, shoving his hair back and glaring at the shorter man.

"Fine. We didn't want to have to involve you if we could avoid it," Potter admits sullenly.

"Considering what you've done to her." Hearing someone say that hurts just as much every time, like driving a needle beneath his nails. Draco would've thought he'd become desensitised over time; he hasn't. "You all right, Ron?" Potter asks, as Draco stands silently rubbing his jaw, struggling to keep his expression blank even as guilt digs under his skin.

"Yeah." Weasley sounds a little hoarse, but he straightens and nods, pushing off from the wall and giving Draco a dark look. "What the hell, Malfoy?"

Draco clenches his jaw. Grits his teeth. "Sorry," he bites out, knowing it has to be said. "I lost it." Weasley looks wide-eyed, startled at the apology.

"But you deserved it," Draco adds immediately, anger still smouldering under the surface, trying to be calm and communicate reasonably. He can't help Hermione if he doesn't keep it together. He takes a deep breath and counts to five. Exhales. When he speaks, he nearly sounds normal. "I can't believe you stupid git tried to force her. She did something like this before I got her out. When things are bad, Granger shuts down. And trying to force her out of it is the *worst* fucking thing you can do. She can't distinguish between that and –" He cuts himself off, thinking the rest in a slew of awfulness. "It all feels the same to her."

"Well, at least she started eating a bit again after that, so it did *something*," Weasley says unhappily.

"Because she's so fucking terrified you'll do it again," Draco snarls and feels like strangling Weasley again as he follows Potter down the hallway, Weasley keeping pace beside him still, rubbing at his throat. The idea of Hermione being cowed into obedience makes him feel sick.

"It's still eating! And what's your suggestion then, genius?" Weasley challenges him as they head out the front door, Potter yanking it open. A skirl of freezing wind rushes in, and Draco shoves his hands in his pockets and hunches his shoulders against the punishing chill. The wind cuts through his shirt viciously and raises goosebumps all over him, teeth already beginning to chatter. He refuses to ask Potter or Weasley for a warming charm, and he doubts they'll offer. And they have to walk a good hundred metres to the gate before they can apparate. *Shit*. Weasley glances at him, still waiting for an answer as Draco steps out onto the icy ground.

Draco shivers, muscles wound as tight as springs from the cold, his joints aching, and cheeks burning from the wind. "We need to make a stop before you take me to Granger," he says in answer. "Do either of you dolts have Muggle money?"

They don't. But it turns out they aren't opposed to using a *confundus* on an unwary Muggle, and coaxing his wallet off him in an alleyway off the high street they apparate to. The Muggle keeps offering them his phone, and keys, and generally being difficult. He has no cash, only his bank card, and he doesn't remember his PIN. Weasley is taking point with the Muggle, after Potter's frustration got the better of him and led him to go stalking off and kick a shop's skip.

Draco watches them with amusement. "This is so illegal. And unethical," he says through chattering teeth, grinning without much humour. As funny as this is, Hermione is waiting. "I didn't think the Order would approve of preying on unwary Muggles."

Potter shoots him a *look*. Unamused. Draco just hugs himself and shivers. Potter has finally cast a warming charm, but it's not a very strong one, in Draco's opinion; Draco's feet are half-numb, and

as the wind picks up, he's feeling colder. Potter notices – "D'you want his coat?" he asks, nodding to the Muggle.

"No." *Yes*, he thinks. But – "He'll freeze. Look at him," Draco waves a hand at the Muggle, who is currently trying to give Ron his wedding ring. Potter eyes Draco thoughtfully as if he'd thought Draco wouldn't care about a Muggle catching hypothermia. He admittedly doesn't care much about Muggles; their lack of magic makes them seem somehow unimportant. But he has seen enough of them suffer and die to know he wishes them no harm.

"True, Malfoy. Come on, Ron. Have you got his PIN yet?" Potter asks the redhead impatiently, and Weasley shoots him a long-suffering look.

"What do *you* bloody think, Harry? That I'm still chatting to him because I'm having a great time?"

Draco snorts. Weasley glares.

It takes another five minutes, but then they have the Muggle's card and PIN, and Potter gives the man orders to go sit in a nearby café for an hour, to give the *confundus* time to wear off. "Just send him home, Harry," Weasley says, and Potter shoots him a look.

"He might have to drive to get home, Ron. I'm not having him on the roads in that state. He'll kill someone. Or himself." Draco knows nothing about driving, but silently agrees the Muggle is probably incapable of doing anything much at the moment. He goes wandering off dazedly at Potter's encouragement, heading for the café. "Right," Potter says, once they've watched the man disappear inside, out of the cold. "Let's go."

They find what Potter calls an ATM a little further down the high street, and he withdraws £50 from the man's account – he explains the system briefly to Weasley, and by proxy, Draco, but it all sounds like gobbledygook to him. And then Potter snaps the man's card in half and shoves it in a slot in the machine, looking guilty. Draco stands there impatiently as Potter gives the weird paper money a forlorn look, his feet still freezing, hunched and shivering while Muggle passers-by give him weird looks.

"Hurry up," he tells the two others dourly, eager to get away from the staring Muggles, out of the cold – and more importantly, to Hermione's side. "We need to find a McDonald's first. Preferably *before* I get frostbite. Your warming charm is shit, Potter."

Potter rolls his eyes. "I don't practice it a lot. I usually just wear a coat," he says defensively, and Draco curls his lip.

"Well, so would I, except you two geniuses forgot to bring me one. *Or* shoes." He tries shoving his hands under his armpits for warmth. It helps a little. "It doesn't matter," he mutters, looking around. He sees no McDonald's, not that he'd know what one looks like. At the mansion he'd just told the house elves what to get, and as far as he knew, they sent out Muggleborns to buy the food. He frowns to himself, frustrated. They're wasting time.

"Well, we didn't think we were going on a bloody shopping expedition," Weasley snipes, and Draco finds himself wanting to strangle the redhead again. He hasn't brought them out here for his own amusement. It's for Hermione.

"I think there's one this way, two streets down. Come on," Potter says, and Draco falls in behind him, gritting his teeth, impatience burning through him.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

Thank you to Pidanka for raising an eyebrow at my weirder turns of description, and saving us all from the horrors of fish scale eyes ♥

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Twelve

There's something different this time when Hermione claws her way out of sleep. Before she's even opened her eyes, she's thinking of laughing with her dad and sun-hot vinyl seats, ice-cold coke sliding down her throat, Malfoy's toes bumping against hers under the table, and his grin, the white-blond hair falling over his eyes, and sweetness rich and dark on her tongue. Scent memories are bright in her mind. So vivid that they crowd out the other memories. The bad memories. Hermione frowns and struggles to make sense of it, still muzzy and half-fogged with sleep.

She wriggles out of her nest of blankets and opens her eyes to see Malfoy sitting there, on the side of the bed that should be his. *What?* He's leaning back against a stack of pillows with his legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, his face turned toward her. He's in a pale grey shirt with the sleeves rolled up and black trousers, and his hair is shoved back off his face messily. A few strands stick up. He's halfway to a beard and it looks weird, dark blond at his sharp jaw, the same shade as his eyebrows. His eyes are hollow and darkened beneath, sad, and his mouth is a thin, worried line as he watches her.

Hermione assumes she's dreaming, somehow. But she took Dreamless Sleep.

Hallucinating? Has the lack of food finally driven her mad?

"Draco?" she asks in a hoarse mumble as she untangles from the blankets and struggles upright, her hair a wild, frizzing tangle and her mouth dry, her eyes sore from crying too much. He can't actually be there. He can't. She smells McDonald's and chocolate, and newspaper and vinegar, and butter chicken, and –

"Hi Granger," he says, soft-rough and entirely real, and Hermione chokes on a sob. She's across the bed in a flash, legs still trapped in the blanket but upper body pinned to Malfoy, arms wrapping around his neck and clinging so tightly it hurts. His hands come up, one rubbing her back soothingly, and he's warm and lean and wrapping her up, and she finds herself crying. Tears soak through his shirt while he pets her hair and tries to finger comb through the tangles. He's so *real*. He's actually *here*. Her nose runs and her sinuses ache, her eyes sore and swollen as the sobbing hitches out of her, like a valve has been twisted and the pressure released.

"It's okay, Hermione. You're okay," he tells her eventually, and she pulls back enough to thump him.

Sudden and angry, her fist landing *smack* on the juncture of pectoral and shoulder as a white-hot anger erupts from deep in her gut. *Smack*, she does it again, and then scramble-struggles up out of the blankets so that she sits astride him. His hands are on her, steadying her, and he's talking to her in a low, worried voice as she sobs and hits him again, and then shoves the heels of both palms into his shoulders so that he rocks back.

"You bastard!" She hits him again. Malfoy doesn't try to defend himself, but he stops trying to calm her; his mouth snapping shut and grey eyes steady on her face, expression blank save for a somehow pained look around his eyes. That careful control just makes her angrier. She hits him again, both fists on his chest, and his legs are warm and firm under her, and he's breathing shallowly, his hands hovering uncertainly to either side of her. His tongue sweeps over his lips, turning his face slightly away from hers, flinching as she thuds her palms against his shoulders again.

"Hermione –"

"Don't fucking *Hermione* me, you bastard. You left! *You left me!* You shut me out, and you just fucking *left me*. After everything." She stops only to take a breath; it's coming in wild, panting gulps, and her heartbeat is a runaway steam train, her blood is on fire. For the first time in days, she feels more than just a suffocating grey cloud of numb misery, as though a dementor were looming over her shoulder. No, instead, Hermione feels a red, red anger. She feels as though she's going to pulse out of her skin, her whole body inflamed. And it feels so *good*. She feels alive.

She narrows her eyes on Malfoy, right in front of her. Under her. He looks so beautiful. So perfect, all sharp angles, with his bloodshot silver eyes, and that thin scar that cuts down his left cheek put there by her whiplash, and the uneven, patchy growth of his stubble, and the way his hair looks like it hasn't been shampooed in weeks. The flare of his nostrils, the delicate fan of his lashes, and the full swell of his mouth. Hermione loves the sight of him.

And he'd left her. Left her to fall apart like an arch with the keystone removed, crumbling down on herself, helpless and pathetic. Malfoy had become her linchpin, and Hermione hates the way she needs him, and *hates* the way he's rubbed that need in her face this past week. She hates him for what he's done – *all* of it, but right now, she's thinking about how she wouldn't have fallen apart if he hadn't cut himself out of her life like a cancerous tumour.

"You had no right. No fucking right. *How dare you!* How dare you leave me after what you've done to me!"

He swallows hard, throat bobbing as he processes that, and Hermione can see the pain flash across his face. The guilt that's caught in the small press of his lips and the sharp inhale through his nose, the crinkle between his brows and the way his moon-grey eyes slide down and away from her. She's glad. She *wants* him to hurt as she smears away her tears.

"You owe me. After what you did," Hermione says, meaning all of it, and she's mean and cruel, driving the knife home and twisting it, and his chest shudders with his breath, and he won't meet her eyes. But Malfoy doesn't defend himself. He won't fight back. Hermione shoves him again with tear-sticky hands, and her thighs flex as she works to stay seated on his lap. She's pathetically shaky and weak right now, from hunger and shock both. "You – you aren't allowed to go off and hate yourself," she chokes out, her voice so strangled that she doesn't even sound like herself.

"Hermione. *Granger*. I'm sor—" Malfoy begins, his hands still hovering uncertainly by her sides and his gaze unsure on hers – the set of his features eloquent with regret and guilt and bottled pain –

and she slaps him across the mouth harder than she means to. But she's so *angry*. In a way, this is almost worse than when he'd – hurt her at the revel, or let her be hurt at the dinner, she thinks vaguely, trying not to remember it. Because then she'd known it was necessary, life or death, and he'd had no choice. But this time, he'd *chosen* to hurt her. To run away and hide.

"Don't you dare apologise!" she snaps, shrill and choked, smearing tears down her cheeks again with the backs of her wrists, his skin flaring red around his mouth as she peers at him through blurry, sore eyes. "You just ran away to wallow in guilt," she accuses in gasping snarls. "You went and hid and soaked in self-pity because you couldn't stand to look at me and think of what you'd done. You're just a *coward*." She stares him down, panting with emotion, and watches his face darken.

"I'm not a fucking coward, Hermione," he says, low and smooth. "I'm many things, but not that."

She knows she's found a button to press, so she presses it with wild impulsiveness, driven on by the desire to... *what?* she thinks in a distant corner of her mind. To infuriate him? Maybe. Malfoy's eyeing her carefully as her mind ticks over, as if he can read her thoughts. "Coward," she goads and pushes him again.

"Salazar's sake, stop that. You've had your payback," he says, half angry, mouth twisting and eyes narrowing. "Stop hitting me now, Hermione."

"Make me," she taunts and goes to slap him again, and this time he catches her wrist and then suddenly the world goes sideways, and she's on her back on the bed, and he's over her. Heavy and hot, and her mind is filled with the – the revel, and his body hot on hers, blood smearing both of them, her breasts aching from being mauled, bite marks searing, a pain between her legs...

"Hermione," he says urgently. "Hermione." And his weight is gone and she's on her side instead, and he's nose to nose with her, his hand sliding gently down her arm. "Shit, Hermione. Breathe." She realises she's not, so she does, a great, gasping whoop of air. "I'm sorry. You said to stop you, and – I – I'm sorry." She just stares at him silently, breathing. She can still smell takeaways, like she's having a stroke. His pupils are huge, and this close, he's cross-eyed. She yawns; adrenaline comedown.

"I'm sorry for everything," he's saying, his hand smoothing over her hair now, their noses just barely touching. She can feel his breath warm on her cheek. She thinks disconnectedly that she'd like to kiss him. "I'm sorry for everything. And you're right. I *was* hiding. I *was* wallowing in guilt. But I thought it was for the best. I thought you were better off without me."

"Well, I'm fucking *not*," she cries indignantly, pushing herself up on one elbow and glaring down at him.

"Well, I see that now," he says mildly, a wry smile flickering at his lips, and Hermione feels that urge to kiss him again. So she does. On the cheek, her lips to Malfoy's prickly stubble right by the corner of his mouth, and he's warm and, well, *prickly*, and he freezes like he has to consciously stop himself from moving his head those two centimetres and turning the kiss into a proper one, a soft almost-whimper escaping his lips. "Merlin, Granger," he breathes, rough and uneven.

"I love you," Hermione says seriously while she has the nerve, looking down at his face. His pupils are dilated, lips parted as if in anticipation. He bites his lower lip, and she can see the indecision on his face. "Tell me," she orders him, demanding. She feels oddly petulant. Insistent. Maybe it's the joy that's bubbling up in her chest, bright and full and pushing out the grey, numb misery. It's like

he's painted her world in colour again, and while she's still a mess, she feels *alive*. As though a patronus is shimmering around her. She lays her hand along Malfoy's cheek, running her thumb along the jut of his cheekbone, her eyes locked on his. "Tell me."

He sighs, and some of the tension he's holding runs out of him. "I love you," he says like a confession. Like he's admitting a murder. Saying something he has no right to say, as if he'll be dragged off and thrown back into a cell for saying it. "I do. Maybe I shouldn't. Maybe I'm – I'm influencing you, or taking advantage, but I do."

Hermione pushes her hand through his hair now; it feels dry and greasy at once under her fingers. She suspects he hasn't had shampoo in his cell. Her fingers tighten on a fistful of the white-blond locks. "You aren't going to try to run off again, are you?"

Malfoy winces and detaches her fingers. "Ouch. Careful, Granger. And no. I'm not leaving again." He pauses. "I'm here with you until you decide you don't want me to be anymore." The statement is simple honesty, falling from his lips like a promise, a hint of pain running beneath his words as he looks up at her from his sprawl on his side. He means it and Hermione feels warm inside. Safe. He's brought her safety back to her. She sinks back down on her side and curls up into him, forehead pressed to his chest and hands seizing fistfuls of his shirt. She yawns again, feeling Malfoy's fingers card gently through her hair. "Hey, don't go to sleep yet," he says, all forced lightness. "I brought you lunch. McDonald's. And all the rest of what you like. Fish and chips. Muggle sweets. An Indian takeaway."

Oh God. He's gone and gotten her Muggle food again. It's so sweet and so thoughtful that Hermione wants to cry. Instead, she smiles against his chest, a wobble to her lips, feeling so warm. So happy. Blissful. "I thought I was having a stroke," she murmured.

"What?" Malfoy sounds bewildered; she realises belatedly he probably doesn't understand.

"I thought I was imagining that smell," she clarifies. It's still thick in the air, warm and delicious, and Hermione's stomach gurgles finally. Malfoy makes a *hmm* noise and detaches himself from her with that fluid, predatory grace he has and moves to the dresser, where Hermione sees sitting two large trays piled high with Muggle fast food and sweets. *Oh God.* It looks so good. He places the two trays in front of her as she shifts to sit tailor-fashion, and they make slight dips in the bed; they're so laden. For the first time in weeks, Hermione feels hungry. Ravenous.

Malfoy settles on the bed beside her, stretching out again all long, lean, pale angles, picking up a chip and popping it in his mouth. "Eat," he tells her. Hermione eyes it all. Most of it will have to go downstairs for everyone else; there's far too much for her. Or for her and Malfoy. She picks up a McDonald's fry, nibbling the tip, and his eyes are so intent on her. The fry is still warm and salty. Greasy. Delicious. She shoves the whole thing in her mouth and snatches up the container, cramming in several more fries. Her eyes nearly roll back in her head at the taste.

"*Oh my God,*" she moans. They smell and taste *so good*. And they make her think of not just her dad now, but Malfoy when she was captured. Malfoy, being quietly, unobtrusively sweet and thoughtful. Considerate. Watching her in his bedroom with worried eyes, like every morsel of food that passes her lips is a bit of the burden lifted from his shoulders. He's looking at her that way right now, she realises. Leaning back on the pillows on 'his' side of the bed as though he's always been there, the food between them, his posture all cat-like laziness but his eyes molten silver and heated on her. She feels somehow both shivery and warm under his gaze, the hairs on the back of her neck prickling.

Hermione pokes a toe out, prodding Malfoy's pale, bony feet, with his long, knobbly toes, feeling playful, and he smiles faintly at her as he unwraps a block of Cadbury dairy milk.

"What?" he asks tolerantly, as though he can sense her mood; a childish happiness still swirls in her chest. She's giddy with it. She knows eventually the giddiness will pass, and reality will seep back in – albeit tempered by Malfoy's presence – but right now, Hermione's enjoying her reprieve. She feels happy and hungry for the first time in weeks.

"Nothing," she says and pokes him again, smiling to herself as she starts picking at a piece of crispy battered fish, and he shoots her a bemused, pleased look that looks somehow vulnerable. The corner of his mouth hitched up, eyes warm as the ashes of a fire. There's still a cold edge to him – perhaps that's just *Malfoy* – and he's still exuding worried, awkward guilt, but Hermione can already sense he's more relaxed. Being free has unwound some of his tighter knots. She supposes that not having to watch his every move, not constantly worrying about being pegged as a spy and slowly tortured to death, and not constantly worrying about Hermione has helped. He only has his self-hatred and guilt to contend with now. And, she supposes shamefacedly, his worry about her, although a lesser worry than it was.

"How on earth did you get all this?" she asks him, still eating the piece of fish with greasy fingers, feeling more human by the second. "Did Harry take you? Did he even *have* Muggle money?"

Malfoy smirks a little. "Yeah, Potter and Weasley took me. And no, they didn't have Muggle money." He pauses and his mouth twitches into a grin for a second – a flash of white teeth, eyes crinkling at the corners. "They *confunded* a Muggle," he begins, and Hermione shoves the trays down the bed just enough that she can edge closer to him, listening raptly, just soaking up the sound of his voice and the amusement he's trying to suppress as he tells the story.

Hermione picks at her food until she says she's not hungry – and then Draco tries to convince her to eat more. Coaxing, not threatening. She's smiling and occasionally voicing the ghost of a laugh, but he can see the fragility radiating off her, both emotional and physical. She's on the edge and shaky with it, and he knows this sudden burst of energy she's showing can't last. It's likely adrenaline fuelled from the shock of seeing him, and once it passes, he expects she'll crash. But he'll be here when she does. He'll hold her while she cries, and wash her face, and remind her that things really are going to be okay. Because they got out, and no one is ever going to hurt her again.

Draco will flee around the world with her, running like a selfish coward, and the Order can go to hell before he lets her get taken or hurt again.

"They force-fed me," she says at one point while she stares at the half-eaten Big Mac she holds, a wobble in her voice, and Draco wants to hex them all. *Damn the Order*. They've both ruined themselves for the precious fucking Order. He knows deep down that they need the Order if they're going to win the war, but right now, he hates them more than a little.

"That won't happen again," he says, and he means it. "But I need you to try to eat as much as you can for a while, Granger. You're skin and bones." She is. Hermione's all knobby bones and angles, and Draco just wants to feed her until she's padded and soft again, her cheeks rounder and the hollows under her eyes filled in, the curves of her body lush and her thighs well-covered instead of the sticks they are under her bagging leggings. She's painful to look at. She looks as bad as she had toward the end of her time in Voldemort's dungeons – maybe even worse because Draco thinks she's even skinnier than then.

"I'll try," Hermione says, dark eyes uncertainly happy as she shoves a spoonful of Viennetta in her mouth and makes a hum of pleasure. The sound affects him more than it should, as does the smear of cream just above her top lip. He feels unspeakably guilty for the way he wants to kiss the cream off her lip and lick into her sweet mouth. She's hardly in any state to even *think* about that kind of thing. But Draco's body doesn't realise that; when she swipes away the cream with her index finger and sucks it clean, it becomes hard to think straight for a moment. *It's been a long time*, he automatically thinks wryly, and then feels sick because the last time he'd done anything sexual with another person was with her at the revel. It's been a long time since he wanked, Draco amends in his head, glad Hermione can't read his mind. It wouldn't be a safe place for her to be.

When she's finally eaten so much that she complains of her stomach hurting, Hermione sounds almost drowsy. Draco nestles her back into bed and clears away the trays of food before climbing under the covers himself and tucking her up against his chest. She feels too light, like a bird, all brittle, hollow bones, and it makes his chest hurt and guilt twist in his gut. He knows she wouldn't be this bad if he'd come to her as soon as he'd been allowed. She's like this because of Draco, and that thought cements his decision; that if leaving her has caused this, then he's going nowhere until she orders him away. Whether he deserves her or not, he can't deny her what she wants.

He dares to kiss the edge of her forehead, and Hermione sighs happily, her hand coming up, clutching at his shirt, two fingers sneaking in between the buttons to make tentative contact with the bare skin of his stomach. She smells like illness and sweat, her hair lank under Draco's hands as he tries to finger comb out all the tangles, and she clings to him, all elbows and knees. Her breath is warm on his chest through his shirt, and he keeps playing his fingers through her hair, listening to her breathing shift from shallow and quick to slow and deep, as sleep gradually snares her.

That night Hermione curls up in bed like always, but she's not alone, and it's strange how everything feels different because of that. The sheets feel silkier, the blankets warmer, the pillows softer. The small loft room itself feels somehow more welcoming; enclosing her cosily instead of closing in on her, feeling like a dim, safe haven instead of a gilded cage. Malfoy is in pyjamas the Order provided, and he smells faintly of clean soap as she nestles against him in the bed, making her vaguely aware of how long it's been since she last showered. Hermione knows she can't smell as good as him. But she's too weary to do it right now, and Malfoy doesn't seem to care.

Their evening was spent with Hermione drifting in and out of a dozing stupor, like a snake who's eaten an entire pig – like she'd seen in nature documentaries as a small child. She's stuffed full, and she's safe, and she's *exhausted*. The Dreamless Sleep doesn't give the same quality rest as natural sleep, Hermione thinks, and so despite spending so much time unconscious, she hasn't really slept properly in weeks. She suspects that now that Malfoy's here and she feels safe, her exhausted body is trying to catch up on much-needed rest.

It's a struggle to keep her eyes open, and for now, Hermione accepts that. Gives in to it as Malfoy tucks her under the covers with gentle, careful movements as he lies propped up on one elbow next to her. His strong, elegant hands arrange the covers around her with a thoughtful kind of care, like a parent tucking in a child, Mark visible with his sleeves rolled up, black and vivid. He treats her as if she is made out of something fragile and breakable, and he is nestling her in cotton wool. His hair falls forward over his tired grey eyes, his stubble glinting gold in the lamplight, the scar cutting down his cheek a thin purple seam, and Hermione feels bad she did such a poor job mending it. His expression is serious – grave and worried, and somehow flayed raw – and his lips are soft when he tentatively kisses her forehead.

She makes a hum of pleasure at the touch of his skin, and the corner of his mouth tips up slightly. It counts as a smile, she thinks sleepily and smiles back. "I love you," she murmurs, letting it all spill out. "I love you, Malfoy." There's no need to hold her feelings close any longer. No need to keep them hugged to her chest like a precious secret. Voldemort isn't going to make him hurt her, or her hurt him, or – or take her away from Malfoy for his own sick purposes. They're both safe and now they're *together* and safe, and – and – "I'm not letting you go again, you know," she mumbles blurrily. "I don't care. I meant what I said before." Her hand creeps out from under the blankets and snares his wrist.

He makes a wet huff of laughter. His eyes gleam wetly, pools of quicksilver, and then his pupils flare wide as their eyes meet, the black of them devouring his irises, leaving a thin ring of silvery grey. His gaze is steady and wanting. "I know, Granger," he says softly, pushing a lock of hair back off her forehead, the tip of his tongue sweeping over his lips. "I know. I'm not leaving you. I swear it." His voice is pained as he says the words, and Hermione knows he still thinks he shouldn't be with her. *The idiot*. He still thinks she'd be better off without him.

"I don't trust you," she says drowsily, blinking as her eyelids droop. They feel so heavy, as though a ten-ton weight is sitting atop them. "You lie," she accuses.

Malfoy winces. "I'm sorry, Granger. I know I haven't always been honest with you –" *talk about an understatement* – but I'm being honest now. I won't leave you until you send me away." He sighs, expression conflicted; vulnerable and cold at once, the slash of his brows and the uncertain set of his mouth highlighted by the soft glow of the lamp. "I love you," he says quietly then, as though he's confessing a crime, reaching out and trailing his fingertips down the side of her face, and he looks so broken for a moment that Hermione could cry. "I love you, and I *want* you, and I hate myself for that, Granger, after what I've done. I don't deserve you."

"Well, we don't always get what we deserve, do we, Malfoy?" she asks rhetorically. "I didn't deserve any of what happened, and I still got it. And you get *me*." She yawns, eyes fluttering shut. "At least you're getting what you want," she mumbles as she wriggles closer to him, her forehead pressing against his side and her right hand settling over his abdomen – the thin cotton not much of a barrier.

He stiffens at her closeness and makes a choked sound at her words, and Hermione realises belatedly that what she said wasn't exactly kind. "It's not – Merlin, Granger, you know how to drive the knife in, don't you?" he says with a forced lightness that comes out shaky, and his arm settles carefully around her, his hand resting on her waist.

"*Mm*," she just says sleepily and loses herself to the rise and fall of his chest, the slow *lubdub* of his heart that she can feel reverberating through where her forehead is pressed against his ribs. The feel of his thumb stroking over the dip of her waist. The warmth radiating off him as though he's a heater. The world feels almost right for the first time in so long. Since before she was caught by the Snatchers. Hermione's still broken – she knows that. Still torn open and wounded, and unsure how she's supposed to put herself back together and become a person again, but for the first time in close to five months, Hermione feels both safety *and* a tentative, unfurling happiness.

She'll take it.

Malfoy's not glued to her all evening; they both need to use the loo after all and at one point, he slips out while he thinks she's dozing, to talk to Lupin. Hermione remembers waking from a sleep

too light to dream to his side of the bed empty but still warm, and the sound of low, masculine voices outside the cracked open door.

"...wish you'd have gotten me sooner. She's even skinnier than she was in the Dark Lord's dungeon, for Salazar's sake." He sounds angry, the strain of it a taut wire running through his voice. He's angry on her behalf; protective. Hermione presses her fingertips over her lips, feeling herself smiling.

"You made your feelings very clear, Draco. You didn't want to be near her. And it's not as though I disagreed with you. In truth, none of us wanted to have to involve you." Lupin sighs. "But obviously, she really does do better with you, considering she actually ate." The door creaks and the shaft of light falling into the room widens as someone peers inside. Hermione closes her eyes and lies very still.

"It helped that I got her Muggle food, I think," Malfoy admits, a careful control in his tone. He sounds casual, but Hermione can sense the tension still threaded beneath. It makes her think of the evenings he came in and said he was *fine*, even though there was barely contained horror clouded behind his dull eyes, and a tell-tale fleck of blood on him somewhere – a collar, or cuff, or a smear on his forehead. Or sometimes he was just gloved in it. Dripping it, thick and viscous, the iron tang sharp in the air. She squeezes her eyes tight shut, and tries to focus on the here and now. "...makes her think of her childhood. It helps."

"What about breakfast tomorrow?"

"I think normal food will be fine," Malfoy says wryly, and she can see him silhouetted in the gap between door and frame, tall and lean, blocking out most of the light. "But we'll see. She can't live on Muggle takeaways, though. They're shockingly unhealthy."

"Noted. I won't let Dora feed Teddy those fries after all, then." Lupin's tone turns awkward. "Molly made up the next bedroom just in case, but I assume you'll be, er, sleeping in there with Hermione tonight?"

"Yes," Malfoy says shortly, and Hermione can picture him; chin lifting and grey eyes narrowing with a kind of supercilious arrogance, his mouth taking on just the hint of a sneer, hands sliding into his pockets if his trousers have them. She smiles to herself again, fondness warming her. "Or rather, not sleeping."

Lupin makes a shocked sound, and Malfoy scoffs softly, like he's trying to be quiet so as not to wake Hermione. "Get your mind out of the gutter. I'll be staying up watching over her in case of nightmares. I don't think she should take more Dreamless Sleep, and I don't think she wants to either."

"Right." There's an awkward pause. "Well. Good night, Draco."

"Lupin." And then Malfoy inclines his head, visible in the shadow, and his bare feet scuff light on the floor as he turns and comes back in, clicking the door almost silently shut behind him. Hermione closes her eyes as he carefully climbs into the bed, the mattress dipping beneath him, cold air rushing under the blankets as he lifts them, and she pretends to be asleep. He shifts close and then his hand settles light on her head, stroking through her hair.

"How much of that did you hear?" Malfoy asks, fingers trying to pick the knots and tangles out of her bird's nest of hair for a moment before giving up, and Hermione tilts her head, peeking at him

through slitted eyes in the low lamplight. He looks nearly as tired as her as he slides down a little, getting comfortable and picking up a book from the bedside table. Hermione thinks it's the murder mystery Ginny left in here the other day.

"Not much."

"*Hm*. Go to sleep, Granger."

She doesn't need to be told twice.

Chapter End Notes

The mystery novel that Draco is reading:

The Missing Glove

A scintillating murder mystery in Delia Lewis's typical gripping style – intriguing, taut, and engaging.

Crack Auror Nilus Nilsson is investigating the brutal murder of the Rankin family, a rich, pureblood household residing in the Welsh countryside. The sole survivor – and most likely suspect – is the eldest daughter, Ellie, a beautiful, reserved young woman who was studying in France at the time.

Nilsson's gut instincts tell him that Ellie didn't do it, but all the circumstantial evidence points in her direction; a difficult family past, estrangement, and an inheritance in jeopardy. There are no traces of magic, no physical clues, and the elderly House Elf claims he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

So who really killed the Rankins?

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

Thirteen

Draco jerks his head up, adrenaline surging through him as he scrambles upright, and the book on his chest slides off onto the floor with a muted bang. Hermione is crying. Sobbing, and making awful, strangled sounds that are shockingly loud in the quiet of the bedroom. Shit. He'd fallen asleep, and now she's deep in a nightmare. *Shit*. She's curled in a ball, her forearms held up in front of her face, her knees drawn up defensively. It's harder to coax her out of the nightmares when she's been dreaming for a while; she sinks into them, drowning in the depths, and the deeper she gets, the longer it takes to pull her back to the surface. The more it hurts her. Guilt pricks at him.

"Granger." He props himself on one elbow and speaks gently but not quietly as she whimpers and sobs, wheezing gasps, her body trembling with the tension, a harp string plucked and quivering. His hand hovers above her shoulder, afraid to touch her just yet, knowing the reaction he'll get. The flinch and the cry of fear that pierce him right through. Draco hopes he can pull Hermione out of it without touching her. As it is, her sobbing is quieting to little gasps, although from what he can see of her face through her hair and the protective bars of her forearms, she's still crying. Eyebrows scrunched down and eyes screwed shut, the tears streaking her cheeks shining where they catch the low, golden lamplight.

"Granger, it's okay. You're safe. It's okay. It's just a dream. Just a bad dream."

The door clicks and then creaks, and the youngest Weasley pokes her head in, carrot hair a shining sheet nearly to her waist, pale face pinched with worry. Her knuckles are clutching the doorknob so tightly they're white. "I heard –" she gets out worriedly and uncertain, dark eyes huge and nervous on Draco, although she swallows hard and lifts her chin determinedly. She's scared of Draco, he realises belatedly, and he's surprised to find he doesn't like that feeling. "Is she – okay?"

"It's just a nightmare," he says neutrally. "She'll be fine."

Draco expects the girl to retreat after that, but she doesn't. She stays planted there in the doorway, her lips pressed into a worried line, in striped pyjamas that seem too big on her. He feels he can't tell her to piss off – like she's only staying to watch him with Hermione, like the redhead thinks he'll hurt her – so instead, he just tries to ignore the girl, focusing on Hermione. He keeps saying soothing, gentle words on a mindless loop, still hovering close but not touching, and she shivers in her sleep. Then she mutters his name, and it's not with relief or want, but with a broken fear in her voice.

The words spilling out of him stutter to a halt as horror seizes him. No. *No*, he hates this. He hates it so fucking much. It's like having his nails torn out all over again. Draco feels bile rise sharp and stinging in the back of his throat and gulps on vomit. She's dreaming about *him*. He says her name again, urging her to wake up as his hand settles on her shoulder, and Hermione shudders. Sweat shines on her skin, her cheeks flushed.

"Please," comes out next, very clearly. "*Please*, Malfoy, don't –"

The Weasley girl makes a horrified sound, and he looks up to see her covering her mouth with one hand, only her shining, dark eyes showing but still telegraphing all her disgust and horror.

"Granger. Granger, wake up!" Draco resorts to giving her a sharp shake, unable to stand the Weasley girl looking at him like that, and that finally does it. Hermione wakes. It's not a slow emergence like Draco prefers, though – a slow, gentle dawning of consciousness as she realises the dream was just that, a dream, swimming up to the surface with barely a ripple. No, instead, it's an explosion. A brutal shock to her system as she flails upright, gasping and panting, terror in every line of her body as she tries to scramble up the bed and flatten herself against the wall in a crouch, chest heaving as she drags in wet, snotty breaths.

"Granger," Draco says, on his knees now, their silent observer forgotten as he holds out both hands to Hermione in a supplicating gesture. He tries to exude harmlessness and surrender to make it clear he's not a threat. She stares at him, wild-eyed through her hair, hugging herself as she slides her back down the wall, sinking onto the pillows. "Granger, it's okay. You had a nightmare. You're safe. You're in an Order safe house. It's okay."

"M-Malfoy?"

"It's me. It's okay. We're okay. You're safe. N-nobody's going to make me hurt you again," Draco says thickly and his voice betrays him, breaking on a half-sob at the end, and the Weasley girl makes a choked noise.

Hermione shoves her hair back off her face messily with both hands – her eyes are set in bruised pits, and her thin cheeks are hectic with blotchy colour, her lips and chin are trembling with still more tears – and then she holds her arms out to him. Mute and pleading, and Draco shuffles on his knees across the bed to her because while he feels wrong for doing it, what else can he do? She needs him, even if he *is* the one who hurt her. He pulls her into his arms and she clings to him, shaking like a leaf in his arms, radiating so much heat that he worries she has a fever, all bones and sharp points as she nestles against him.

"Th-that was a bad one," she wobbles out softly and muffled, her face buried full against his chest and shoulder. Wet splotches are growing against his skin through his shirt as he strokes her hair, making a soothing little humming sound deep in his chest. "*Fuck*." She heaves a breath. "It wasn't about – it wasn't –" and they both know what she means.

"It's okay if it was," he tells her numbly, even though it isn't. It really isn't alright. It's just about the furthest thing from alright, and he remembers the feel of her beneath him, around him, slick and sticky with blood and crying, his cum on her thighs as she knelt afterwards and he stood, holding her up by her hair like a trophy, and – and Merlin, he wants to *die*. He wants to escape feeling this way, to take the only way out that's left to him, like the coward Hermione accused him of being, and just *die*. Draco wishes he could, but he won't do that to her. He can't leave her. "It's okay."

"It – it *wasn't*, though." Hermione heaves in a huge, gasping breath, almost a yawn, and lets it out in a series of hitching shudders. Her fingers dig sharply into his shoulders, bony and jabbing. He nestles her closer, still on his knees with her on his lap, his arms tight around her back. Her dream comes out in a flood between gasps. "I – I dreamt w-we didn't manage to escape, and we were in front of you-know-who, and y-you – you sacrificed yourself. Gave yourself u-u-up instead of *me*. And he – he –" She dissolved into a fresh flood of tears, soaking Draco's shirt, and he can imagine

what horrors Voldemort had done to him in her nightmares. He feels faintly guilty for feeling glad her dream hadn't been about what *he'd* done.

"Hush. It didn't happen, Granger. It's okay." He takes a shaky breath, his hand still petting ceaselessly over her hair, rocking slightly as he tries to soothe her. "I'm here," he tells her, and then, not knowing what else to say, the words slipping out soft and stumbling, a murmur against her hair – "I love you. *Hermione*. I love you."

There's a sound, and Draco twists his head and looks up. The youngest Weasley has slipped out, closing the door quietly behind her. Shame burns his cheeks; he'd forgotten she was there, so wrapped up in Hermione he'd become.

"I love *you*," she whispers her response, her fingers linking together behind his neck, her wrist bones indenting his shoulders as she tries to pull herself up and nestle her face in the crook of his neck. He shifts them both easily, his back pulling with the burning pain of too-tight scar tissue as he does, and then he's lying back on the pillows, Hermione half over him, one knee on the bed beside him and the rest of herself a shivering, too hot blanket. She drapes herself over him, wet face buried against the side of his throat and both hands clutching at his hair and face, her free leg thrown across his abdomen. Clinging more than she ever used to before they escaped. But then, things are different now.

"I missed you," she tells him, lips tickling his skin just below his ear. A pause. "I missed *this*."

"I'm here now," he says, holding her close and safe, shutting his eyes against the lamplight.

She wakes often that night. Sleep is a broken, smeared thing, dreams blurring into reality, messy and unreal. But he's always there when she finally struggles up to awareness, and his hands are warm and gentle, his voice a constant steady reassurance, anchoring her, tying her to him, and he is a welcome rock to cling to in a sea of nightmares.

She's brave enough to use him as a bed, covering him with her own body, and the rise and fall of his breathing is like a cradle rocking her, the lean contours of him are warm and firm, and his hands are soft on her hair and her back. When she looks up in her bewildered surfacing from dreams, his eyes are bloodshot, and his stubble glints gold and prickles like a hedgehog under her searching hands. There's a tremble to his lips that transmits to his hands, a certain grim exhaustion hanging about him. And he keeps her safe.

Everything is okay.

When Hermione wakes for the final time, it's a natural, slow waking in the pink-grey glow of the morning light, no nightmares clinging to her, no dream-webs to brush away. She's sprawled face down across the bed, feeling heavy-limbed and groggy, her mouth tasting like death and her eyes sore from crying. But there's a sense of peace nestled in Hermione's belly that radiates through her limbs, giving her a liquid, lax feeling that's pleasant. She's still tired, but she knows there's no way she's getting back to sleep.

Hermione shoves herself up onto her elbows and blinks, knuckling her eyes and yawning, and then looking over to her right. He's there. Malfoy is *right there*. He wasn't a dream, or a hallucination brought on by starvation and misery. He's lying on his back, fast asleep with the blankets shoved down around his hips, face turned slightly more toward Hermione and left hand curled up on his

chest, just under his chin. He looks almost sweet, his hair a ruffled mess, and his dark blond brows crinkled down a little, full lips making a pout. But there are dark circles under his eyes, and exhaustion is carved into every sharp line of him.

The bed shifts only slightly when Hermione slips out of it, and Malfoy stirs but doesn't wake. She stares down at him for a moment. He looks younger in his sleep despite the weariness that permeates him to his soul, in the white t-shirt that's ridden up, exposing the flat of his belly, a faint smattering of pale blond hairs leading down beneath his grey striped pyjama pants.

She looks at him lying there clean and beautiful and is strongly aware that she smells of sour, old sweat, her face is coated in dried tears and snot, her hair is greasy and lank, and she hasn't depilated her armpits in well over a week. She thinks she can probably slip out to have a quick shower and be back before Malfoy wakes; he's dead to the world right now.

No one else is up as Hermione heads downstairs to the tiny second-floor bathroom with a bundle of clothes. After peeing, she turns the shower to scalding and slathers her legs and armpits in depilating cream potion while the water heats. And then she steps under the hot rush, and it's fantastic. It's like a rebirth, the heat raising colour over every inch of her like a boiled lobster as she lathers a flannel with soap and scrubs herself. Washes her hair twice, rubbing her scalp firmly. Hermione feels almost human by the time she's done. She doesn't linger though, brushing her teeth and pulling on a vest and leggings fast, and then the chambray shirt, washed again courtesy of Mrs Weasley.

When she gets back up to the bedroom, her hair hanging damp around her shoulders and her feet chilled by the wood floors, she opens the door to Malfoy pacing and muttering. His head snaps up when he sees her there, and a flash of relief crosses his face, followed by the anger that comes from fear. He crosses the tiny room in a handful of steps, and his hands come up to cradle her face – barely touching her, his fingertips a whisper. The expression on his face is so intent.

"You *vanished*," Malfoy says, low and rough. "I just woke up and you were gone, and I didn't know if you'd just gone to the toilet or *what*." There's an accusing tone to his voice as he pushes a damp lock of hair back behind her ear, grey eyes catching the morning light coming through the window. His own hair is spiky-ruffled and nearly white in the light, and it looks so soft even without being properly cared for. Like cornsilk.

"I had a shower," she says, caught in Malfoy's eyes. Like rain clouds, or wood smoke, or the frost riming windows, and filled with emotions she can't untangle. "And you were sleeping. I didn't want to wake you." Hermione's hands fist in his t-shirt at his waist, and he makes a slightly startled sound at her touch. She's been very free with him since yesterday, she knows. Touching and grabbing and clinging to him. But they're *free*. She can touch him as much as she wants without either of them being worried he'll be forced to do...things. So she *will*, as long as they're both enjoying it.

"Next time, wake me, Granger," Malfoy says seriously, his hands settling properly on the sides of her face, thumbs sweeping over her cheekbones, his gaze steady on hers. And there's a tenderness in the way he's holding her, the way he's looking at her that sends warmth sinking liquid through Hermione's core. There's a tremble to his fingers, and then his tongue darts out to wet his lips, his pupils blowing wide despite the morning light on his face, and Hermione finds herself wanting to kiss him.

Her arms go around his neck, and she pushes up on tiptoes. And then, very slowly – giving Malfoy every chance to stop her, their eyes locked together – Hermione kisses him full on the mouth as they stand in the middle of her room, the dawn washing them softly. His hands slide from her face to her waist, and *oh*, his lips are so soft and so sweet as her eyes flutter shut, her own lips parting just a sliver. He smells like traces of soap and fresh sweat, his splayed fingers pressing into her skin through her shirt, and it's heady and intoxicating.

She feels light-headed. Oddly joyful. And seized by the moment, Hermione brushes her tongue daringly against the seam of Malfoy's lips and nearly melts when he makes a throaty, needy little sound and opens his mouth to her, kissing her properly. Like a dam has broken, his hands clutching her and his tongue slicking over hers with a barely contained urgency, making pleasure streak from somewhere behind her sternum to between her legs, delicious and curling-hot-wet, like he's licking pleasure into her. *Oh god.*

It feels good and clean. Pure heady delight. There are no awful, stomach-churning memories tied to a simple kiss so long as neither of them tries to take it further. Hermione's fingers push into Malfoy's thick locks, and she holds him by handfuls of hair, disarranging it entirely. She kisses him until she's breathless, sucking breath through her nose, the two of them locked together there in the middle of the room. His hands are careful, holding her as though she's made of glass as one slides up to splay across her back, but his mouth is edging toward demanding. Moving and pressing, their mouths slanting across each other with a delicate kind of greediness, and his urgency seems all tied up in threads of self-control that are snapping one by one and Hermione whimpers needily.

Her skin feels hot all over, and her nipples are so sensitive to the shifting of fabric over them, the pit of her stomach clenching with a hot want, and between her legs feels flush and swollen, and so very sensitive too. Malfoy's kiss makes Hermione *want* things that are all tangled up in horrors, and with a shudder of loss, she has to turn her mouth away, rasping her lips on his stubble, gasping in little sips of air against the corner of his mouth. He makes a sound – a broken moan – and seeks her mouth out again for a split second before he comes to his senses and lets out a sigh. Straightens enough to rest his cheek against the side of her forehead, his arms carefully encircling her.

"Sorry," he says and it comes out all hoarse and he clears his throat. Hermione smiles to herself, her arms settling around his waist.

"Don't be sorry," she says, nearly a whisper, her voice all husky and low. "That was the best thing that's happened to me in weeks."

And then Malfoy swears short and harshly under his breath and starts very gently but insistently trying to detach her from him, and Hermione doesn't understand for a moment until he steps back and she sees it. She sees his erection, jutting out against his pyjama trousers for a moment and jerks in a short, choked breath before he turns away, swearing again. "I'm sorry." He sounds embarrassed. "I didn't mean to –" He cuts off, as if he realises how pointless that is and then sits on the edge of the bed, leaning forward with his forearms braced on his thighs, head hanging down. It hides his crotch and, in part, his face.

Hermione swallows hard, throat clicking dryly. *He put that in me*, she thinks, and she remembers the pain, and the blood, and the dull, burning stretch. She wonders if it would hurt if they did it again. *When* they do it again, she corrects herself, and a wave of heat prickles over her skin; fear and desire both. Hermione doesn't know how she'll get to the point where her trauma and her desire are disentangled, but she knows she wants to. The way that kiss made her feel was enough to reaffirm that.

"It's okay," she says faintly and takes the first step, moving to stand in front of Malfoy and resting a hand on his bowed head. She grabs a handful of silky, platinum hair and tugs his head up. He looks at her as she keeps hold of his hair, all ashamed, shadowed eyes, and sharp nose, his mouth ripened by their kisses. "It is, *really*. I know that's going to happen, Malfoy. You don't have to hide it."

He gives her a wry, doubtful look, that expressive mouth twisting, his head tipped back from her grip on his hair. She lets go, but he holds her eyes. There's something very sad in them. "I don't want you to see," he says soft and small, looking back down at his hands; playing with his left-hand nails, where they're slowly growing back in. "I – I hurt you," he says very shortly and filled with a drowning shame, eerily echoing what Hermione had been thinking. But instead of feeling disgusted, she feels desperately sorry for him. She feels the need to show him she's *not* repulsed.

Hermione sits down beside him, close enough that their bodies touch; her arm against his, their legs just nudged together a little. She hadn't been expecting to have this conversation before breakfast, or today at all, but so be it. Her hand creeps out, fingers settling on his thigh, and Malfoy stiffens but allows it. She drags her fingers in idle little patterns over his leg. Little spirals and stars, his skin warm beneath the thin fabric, his jaw tense, still playing with his growing nails.

"It doesn't always hurt though, does it?" Hermione asks, and it's a silly question because she *knows* the answer; it's certainly not supposed to hurt, bar a little pain the first time, depending. But after that, sex is *definitely* supposed to feel good if nothing's wrong. And yet she asks him. And his reaction is oddly enlightening. Malfoy blushes. Cheeks flaming up, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows, mouth working briefly in a search for words before he finds them.

"I mean... I don't think it's supposed to," he says at last, awkwardness pouring off him, and Hermione realises something that makes her feel cold and shivery. She'd just assumed that Malfoy would have – after all, he'd been all over Pansy Parkinson at school. And afterwards, as a Death Eater... Well, now she thinks about it, he hadn't exactly been surrounded by willing partners while in Voldemort's service, from what little she'd seen. Hermione bites her lip, pulling her hand back from his leg and lacing her hands together nervously. Her palms are sweaty.

"Malfoy...was that – I mean, was I...your first?"

The question hangs in the air for a long moment. And then his shoulders hunch, and he looks away. "Yes," he says reluctantly.

"Oh." It's a numb little sound. Hermione's tongue feels thick in her mouth. Somehow, it makes her feel worse for him that he'd been a virgin, although maybe it shouldn't make a difference. But she'd wished at times that *she* hadn't been a virgin, so she could have had a good memory of sex as well, instead of associating it entirely with trauma and degradation. It wouldn't have made what he'd done any easier to bear, but maybe it would have made this part of things – wanting to do it again – easier. Not that she'd ever know. "I just thought –"

"No." The side of his face she can see is still flushed blotchy red.

"Oh." Her chest feels all tight as she tries to process it. Malfoy really *hadn't* known what he was doing, then. His clumsiness, his roughness...now Hermione wonders how much inexperience had impacted that. She feels sick thinking about it, her stomach roiling. They'd both lost their virginity together at Voldemort's revel, Hermione thinks, and it's bizarre and sad and awful. "I didn't realise," she whispers stupidly. Adds, "I'm sorry it was like that," and Malfoy shoots her a look that's heavy with bottled-up anger, and with that horrible shame.

"*Don't*. Don't you dare apologise to me, Granger," he snaps and she flinches back a little despite herself, which just makes the misery in his expression swamp the rest, blotting it all out except his guilt and shame. Malfoy groans and drops his head down, running his hands through his hair, radiating abject apology. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm not angry at you, I just – I don't want you to apologise when you didn't do anything *wrong*."

A frustrated tension hums in his voice, and Hermione bites the tip of her tongue hard enough for it to sting. This self-flagellation of his is starting to irk her. It was what had kept him away from her for so long. He may not have meant to, but he's punished them both with that.

"You only did what you had to do to keep me alive, Malfoy. It's not like you *wanted* to," she says sharply, a part of her hating that she feels the need to defend him like this from his own self-hatred. The air in the room feels taut and heavy.

Malfoy just makes a non-committal grunt in response, his shoulders still hunched and his whole posture radiating a bone-weary misery. "Or *did* you? *Did* you want to?" Hermione provokes, and she can tell he knows what she's doing; instead of being pushed to anger, he deflates and sighs heavily, shaking his head.

"No. Not then. And not like that," he says tiredly, rubbing a hand over his face. *Not then. Not like that*. Perhaps strangely, those words make Hermione's stomach flip with a blend of nerves and arousal. She feels the arousal more keenly right now, but she knows that if they were to actually *try* anything, the nerves would immediately win out and blossom into full-blown panic as memories close in. But eventually...eventually Hermione wants him like that, even if that *is* messed up. Her hand finds its way back to his leg, and it's his turn to flinch as she runs her fingertips in circles on his thigh again.

Hermione sighs, a soft gust of air whispering from parted lips, her shoulders slumping, eyes clouding as she tries to look into the future and imagine a time when she'll be able to do that. To let him cover her with his body again, and press himself inside her. It seems impossible. The thought makes her body thrill and quail at the same time. She wants, and she fears, and she remembers the hurt.

"Do you think you can make it not hurt, the next time?"

Malfoy stares at her with shocked grey eyes, lips parted, looking young and entirely uncertain, the ground beneath his feet quicksand slipping away, sucking him down. And in the quiet of the morning light alone in her – *their* – room, Hermione realises that, strangely, having him here makes her stronger. Because – because Malfoy's just as broken, really, and he needs her just as badly as she needs him, even if he won't admit it properly. And if he needs her, she'll be strong for him. It's the least she can do for everything that he's done for her. She wants to. She's more than just a victim; she can support him just as much as she needs his support.

She looks at him questioningly, waiting for his answer. He swallows hard and tries to find words.

"*Fuck*, Granger. You – you can't just say –" He cuts himself off, staring at her blankly, heat burning in his cheeks, and then, "*next time*?" he says, voice breaking on the words, all needy and wanting.

"Yes. I mean, I'm not imminently planning it, but...eventually, right?" Hermione feels her own cheeks heat, her fingernails still scratching nervous circles and stars on his thigh.

"I – *fuck*. I am not equipped to talk about this right now," Malfoy says, hard and sure, as if he's closing a book. He inhales, short and deep, and straightens. Discussion over. End of story. He cuts a sideways glance at her, and she sees the subtle shift as he schools his expression to a cool neutrality. "We should go have breakfast, Granger."

And he covers well, hiding all the nerves and the want and the barely contained panic running beneath his skin, papering over the cracks with skill, but Hermione knows where to look now, and she can see it. The tightness around his eyes, the faint twitch of muscle at his sharp jaw, and the tension running through his shoulders. Hermione doesn't push; besides, she feels suddenly drained and numb, like even this small exchange has stripped all the energy from her, and breakfast sounds nice.

"Okay."

It's less awkward for Draco at breakfast than he had thought it would be. For starters, instead of staring at him, they're all staring at *her*. In her pale blue chambray shirt and greyish wool leggings, hair drying loose around her shoulders. She looks frail – like someone recovering from a long illness; skin pallid, cheeks dug out to hollows, and firewhisky-brown eyes bruised around. But there's a brittle beauty to her too, and Draco finds it hard to keep his own eyes off her. But that's not why the people sitting around the table are staring. It's the way she's eating that grabs their attention.

He keeps passing her things and refilling her bowl, barely eating himself as he tends to Hermione's food. She could do it herself, of course, but he's worried and fussing, and can't help himself, pushing more on her. More porridge, more toast, more egg. By the time she sits back and shakes her head at his offer of fruit, unable to eat another bite, she's consumed two eggs, two thick buttered slices of toast, two small bowls of porridge, and a tall glass of orange juice.

No one comments on the way Hermione eats, a slightly stilted conversation carrying on around her and Draco as if it were a normal morning, but Draco notices the way they all eye her surreptitiously, mostly with relief. Potter and Weasley watch her like hawks, and Mrs Weasley, Lupin, and Nymphadora keep a close eye as well, glancing up from their own food and conversations regularly.

Draco thinks it's probably more awkward for Hermione than it is for him; re-emerging after she's been shut away in her room in that miserable, nearly catatonic state. She'd taken a deep breath before descending the last set of stairs as if to steel her nerves, clutching his shirtsleeve, embarrassment hanging around her in a cloud. Thank Merlin no one had made a fuss as they'd entered the dining room. The people already seated had said good morning, and Potter and Weasley had beamed hopefully at her, but that was all.

And now she's done, and she shoots him a faint, wan smile. "I think I need a nap, after that," she says barely audibly, rueful. But she's still weak, and rest is the best thing for her – there's no shame in that. Draco just nods, pushing his own half-eaten breakfast away without a thought, and they retreat upstairs, Hermione making awkward goodbyes and explaining in half-sentences that she'll be back down for lunch while Draco stands in the doorway, waiting silently.

Hermione does doze when they get back upstairs. Draped over him as comfortably as if he's an extension of herself, snoring softly as she drools on his chest. She doesn't sleep long or deep

enough to dream, and he lies there with eyes shut and arms carefully wrapped around her, the sun seeping through the one window and slanting over them both, soaking them in a faint warmth.

Addendum:

The Mystery of the Missing Glove

Nilus paced the room, staring at the faces assembled before him. They were an odd assortment; Ellie, dark and beautiful, with those soft, doe-like eyes, her chin up and spine straight. Fluxy, the wizened House Elf, bowed and hunched, standing on trembling legs. The family's efficient, elderly lawyer, Daniel Wright, leaning on a cane. And the local Hit Wizard, John Banks, an earnest young man with a shock of red hair, who kept sneaking warm, worried glances at Ellie. The young witch didn't seem averse to the affections he'd showed her over the past week, and Nilus smiled faintly. Young love; it bloomed in the most unlikely of circumstances.

"I have gathered you here today, because I have been a fool. Stupid. Blind!" He shot a sharp glare around the room as he paced. "But now I see. My eyes have been opened." He drew abruptly to a halt. "Such little things. Such small things that life and death hang upon. A family inheritance –" he looked at Ellie, who shifted uncomfortably. "An old, hidden hatred –" here he looked at Mr Wright who looked away, ashamed that Nilus had uncovered his secret. And then Nilus narrowed his pale eyes on Fluxy.

"Or, a missing glove," he said, voice filled with satisfaction.

"What?" Ellie asked, bewildered, and Banks moved closer to her, laying a hand on her slim shoulder reassuringly.

"Whatever does Mr Nilsson mean? Fluxy doesn't understand," croaked the old House Elf, huge eyes wet and bewildered as she wrung her hands together.

"I think you understand perfectly well, Fluxy. Three weeks before the Rankins were murdered in cold blood, Miss Ellie visited." Nilus nodded to the young woman, her hand on Banks's, where it rested on her shoulder. "It was a brief, contentious visit, and cut short after an argument that resulted in her father threatening to write her out of the will. An argument you were eager to tell me about Fluxy."

"Fluxy was only being helpful!" the House Elf burst out, but Nilus shook his head.

"When Ellie returned to Paris, she discovered she'd misplaced an evening glove." Nilus clasped his hands behind his back, adjusting his grip on his wand. "At the time, she thought nothing of the loss, until I found it yesterday in the root cellar behind a crate of potatoes, and brought it to her. She confirmed it was indeed her glove. And it was then that things became clear."

Fluxy shifted uncomfortably, bony hands still wringing together as she began to shake her head.

"It was you, wasn't it, Fluxy?" Nilus asked quietly, whole body poised. "When Miss Ellie came to visit, she somehow accidentally gave you that glove. She told me she'd brought you a present of some French sweets, in a bag; perhaps the glove fell into that gift bag when she

packed, and therefore –" Nilus kept his eyes fixed on Fluxy even as Mr Wright gasped in realisation – she gave you clothes. You were *free*. Free at last."

"No," Fluxy whispered, shaking her head frantically. "No, Fluxy didn't. Fluxy wasn't."

"And what did you do with that freedom?" Nilus pressed on. "You didn't want to kill Miss Ellie – she was the only one who'd ever been kind to you, when all others had been cruel. The black sheep of the family. Hence her near total estrangement. So what did you do?" Nilus pinned Fluxy with his stare. "You waited for Miss Ellie to be gone for some time. Perhaps you needed to build up your nerve, as well. After decades of mistreatment and fear, you may have been too afraid to do anything at first. But then, one night as the Rankins lay in bed asleep, you finally found your courage. Perhaps your hatred at last outweighed your fear. Perhaps there was one last abuse – the straw that broke the thestral's back."

He paused, his wand clutched tight as Fluxy kept tearfully denying the accusations, her whole body trembling. "And so you flitted about the house like the angel of death, and stabbed every one of the Rankins to death in their beds, brutally and viciously. From the patriarch, old Mr Rankin, right down to the littlest child. Nine souls, all dead because of you."

Fluxy's weeping denials suddenly transformed into rage. "They deserved it! They all deserved it for how they treated poor old Fluxy! But you'll never catch –"

"*Incarcerous!*" Nilus flourished his wand, and the ropes ensnared the House Elf, who shrieked and struggled as she fell to the ground. Her rage increased, passing a crescendo as she thrashed and spat hatred. And then, as the poor creature realised she was powerless, her screams gave way to sobs, and Nilus felt a touch of pity for her alongside his revulsion.

Ellie stood, and her eyes filled with tears as she spoke to the weeping House Elf, bound on the floor. "Oh! Fluxy! Why didn't you just *leave*? Why? You didn't have to do that!"

"They all deserved it!" Fluxy screamed, maddened and broken. "Every one!"

Ellie shivered with horror and turned her face away, against Banks's chest, and he wrapped his arm gently around her shoulders as he stared down at Fluxy, his own expression sorrowful. Well, Nilus thought to himself as he gazed at the heiress, being held so tenderly by the earnest young man – at least some good may have come of this horror. He sighed, remembering with a pang of grief his Olivia, and the way he'd held her so long ago. There was nothing quite like young love.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Fourteen

Five days pass in a treacle-slow, golden stretch of time that feels almost dream-like to Hermione. She sleeps long and heavy, nearly from dusk 'til dawn through the night, broken only by the nightmares that Draco's presence makes easier to bear but can't banish. She's thinking of him as Draco again; she can't keep him at arm's length anymore, and she doesn't want to, although she still calls him Malfoy aloud. In between the nightmares, Hermione has stretches of sleep that are nearly peaceful, nestled against Draco, dreamless and still. When awake, she finds herself constantly attuned to him, even more than she was during her captivity.

They spend a lot of time in Hermione's room, and there she outright clings to him. It's the best there. Like a moment between moments. They spend a lot of time sitting in silence, just being together. Sometimes she curls up against Draco and reads quietly while she's tucked into his side, and sometimes, he reads too. A lot of the time she just sits there staring into space and tries not to think, and maybe that's what he's doing too. They are not psychologically healthy people – she knows that.

Sometimes they kiss; curled in bed at night, the lamps on low, everything painted in burnished gold. And usually, when they get started, Hermione finds herself desperately, urgently wanting to do more than that carefully demarcated kissing. But whenever she tries to do more – Draco willing to do whatever she wants so long as she leads, afraid of triggering her – the reality makes her skin crawl. It makes her want to rip her skin off, sick inside it, disgusted by everything, and it turns so sour she wants to cry. Sometimes she does. So for now, they mostly just stick to kissing, soft and needy, and Hermione thinks both of them are marinating in frustration.

Other than kissing, and sitting in her frustration and feeling horribly, irreparably broken, Hermione does spend a lot more time in the sitting room now, socialising. Mostly with Harry, Ron, and Ginny, but the others too, sometimes. It's weird and awkward, but it's nice at the same time. There's not a lot to do for entertainment, so they play wizarding chess and other games, and talk about safe topics like memories of school, and Hermione's always aware of exactly where Draco is in the room. Generally, he sits in the chair she used to sit in, tucked back in a dark nook by the bookshelf with a book on his lap, his eyes flicking periodically to her. The scar on his face is deepened by the shadows, and it makes Hermione's heart ache with feelings she can't explain.

Sometimes the talk slides into darker areas, and Hermione has to remember that the world didn't stop spinning the three and a half months she was gone. And while Hermione had been held captive, Ron and Harry had kept fighting the war. They'd seen people die. They'd killed people, or Ron had, at least. And they'd feared Hermione's fate for months, the strain of knowing where she was but being unable to save her slowly grinding them both down. Filling them with guilt. Neither of them is unscathed by the passage of time; Hermione notices the worried way Ginny watches Harry when talk turns toward the war, the way Harry's expression becomes haunted, and Ron's hard and angry.

It takes time for Hermione to put things together because she doesn't feel she can ask outright, but she puzzles it out over several days. Harry has been restricted to minor missions since Hermione's capture drove home how dangerous even operations like reconnaissance could be. Against his will, he's been stuck in an organisational role, shadowing Remus for the most part. Whereas Ron has demanded to be out on the front lines of the war. Joining dangerous missions, particularly raids on suspected Death Eater houses. There's a tension between Harry and Ron, running down deep. Harry wishes he could be out there fighting, and Ron resents that he isn't. And it seems Ginny is usually the one stuck refereeing when those tensions rise too close to the surface.

When word comes in that Katie Bell has died, five days after Draco's arrival, Ron gets very angry – so, *so* angry – and Hermione wonders what happened between them while she was gone. She sits on the sitting room floor, chess pieces scattered over the carpet, watching wide-eyed as Ron rails. The anger radiating off him hits all the triggers buried in Hermione's flesh and her mind, and she feels like vomiting, scooting back until she hits Draco's leg. His hand comes down to rest on her head, fingers soothing through her hair, and some of the wire-tight tension leaves her as she watches Ron fall apart, Draco at her back.

"She wasn't supposed to be there! I *told* her! I fucking well told her –" he shouts, tearing at his hair as he stares around him, furious and lost in grief. Percy, who'd brought the news, stands silently in the doorway, awkward discomfort written all over his strained white face.

"Someone had to do it, Ron," Harry says helplessly, and Ron whirls on him.

"Then why didn't *you*?" he snarls cruelly, an accusation, and Harry blanches and stumbles back a step. Ginny is just as ashen as both her brothers, her freckles standing out starkly on her face and her expression somehow grimly set and devastated at once. The redhead steps between her brother and boyfriend, expression agonised and mouth open, but before she can speak, Ron snarls a curse and stalks out of the room, shoving past Percy.

"Ron..." Harry makes to go after him, but Ginny pushes him back, hands on his shoulders.

"No. No, Harry. You'll just make it worse," she says miserably, and Harry's shoulders slump and he pulls off his glasses, rubbing his hand over his face. The atmosphere in the room shivers with tension, heavy and awful. Miserable.

"I hate this," he mumbles and sinks onto the couch while Percy still hovers there in the doorway uncertainly. Ginny stands in the middle of the room, looking torn before moving to Harry, leaning over him as he sits there defeatedly, murmuring in his ear what are probably meant to be calming words. They don't seem to be working. Harry looks as though the weight of the world is on his shoulders, bearing down and crushing him beneath it. Like a skinny, short, black-haired Atlas, and he's only twenty; it's not fair. How is he supposed to stop the war?

"Percy, could you –?" Ginny asks after a moment, flapping a hand in the direction Ron had gone, and he shakes his head quick and definite, holding up his hands.

"Oh no. No, I don't think that'd be a good idea. Ron doesn't want *me* to talk to him. And I have to go now anyway. I have papers for Lupin, and other safe houses to visit today," he says apologetically, and Ginny makes a face at him, but he just shrugs and leaves with one last *sorry*. He's probably right. Percy isn't exactly a person one wants to bare their soul to. Hermione bites her lip. Shit. She makes the decision as she shoves herself to her feet, turning to Draco, who sighs heavily as he meets her eyes.

"I'm going to..." she says, gesturing toward the doorway, and he looks unhappy but nods as if he expected it, standing and snapping his book shut.

"Okay. I'll be upstairs then," he says and brushes his hand against hers before their fingers curl together; a subtle caress in place of a kiss. It's not enough. Despite Harry and Ginny's presence, Hermione pushes up on her toes and kisses Draco's clean-shaven cheek, their fingers still twined together. He huffs a breath on her cheek, and his fingers tighten on hers. "Be careful," he says, and she knows what he means. Ron is clearly on a hair trigger, and she isn't in any state to deal with stress. She's just as hair trigger in her own way. Going to talk to Ron at all is probably a bad idea. But no one else is going to do it.

"I will," she says as she draws away, filled with the warmth of his concern.

Hermione finds Ron sitting on the back porch, coatless and shivering slightly. He's crying. He looks up as she comes out, wiping at his face with his shirtsleeves before wrapping his arms around himself again, sniffing. She sits down beside him, wrapping her coat around her. Spring is burgeoning, a change in the weather that everyone can sense in the air, but it's still cold and damp outside. The sky is overcast, and there's a light drizzle that blows in on them slightly as they both perch on the top step, side by side in silence. Misting rain catches on Hermione's lashes and wets her cheeks, and she huddles into her coat. She should have put shoes on; she's in her socks and they're getting wet.

Ron snuffles again, wiping beneath his eyes, and Hermione takes a deep breath and tips against him. Leaning on him, her cheek pillowed on his shoulder, the material damp under her skin. It's the first physical contact she's willingly made with anyone except Draco in well over a quarter of a year, and it feels like falling. Taking a step off a cliff edge into space. Ron makes a small, surprised sound and looks down at her, blue eyes wet and red-rimmed, lashes glittering with water. Hermione takes his hand, her fingers folding around his, and he's cold and damp like the weather, but he squeezes her fingers gently. She waits.

"I know it's not Harry's fault," he says at last, voice raw with emotion. "I shouldn't have gone off like that." Hermione just holds his hand tighter, her cheek wet from his shirt, his skin chill beneath it. "I just – we'd been seeing each other a bit, me and Katie. I mean, not anything serious, really. When you're always at different safe houses, it's hard to have anything –" He breaks off and sighs. "But we...we were on a lot of the same missions, and afterwards, sometimes we'd, well –" He shoots her an uncomfortable glance as she looks up at him.

"I get the picture, Ron," she says dryly. She knows of the post-skirmish meetings that some people indulged in, when adrenaline was high and they were just glad to be alive – like an affirmation of life – and she's so terribly sad for him. "And I'm sorry."

"It just feels like we're going in endless circles, getting picked off one by one as we slowly get worn down, and I fucking *hate* it."

"Yeah." She sighs wearily. "It sucks," she says, an understatement if ever there was one, but somehow it's all there is to say.

"Can I –?" he asks and lifts his arm, and Hermione nods uncertainly; there's only one way to find out if she'll freak out or not. She doesn't. His arm around her shoulders is cold and firm, and now that she's leaning her head on his chest, Hermione can hear his heartbeat thudding in the cage of his

ribs. Her hand finds his knee, curving over the ball of it. "I'm going to miss her," Ron says after a while, and he sounds like he's crying again, the words all distorted.

"I'm so sorry, Ron. It's not fair," she says, thinking of all the things that are horribly, acutely unfair. He sighs heavily, clearly thinking the same thing.

"The whole damned *war* is unfair," he retorts, arm snug around her, cheek leaning on the side of her head, and she feels hot damp that can only be from tears. "Katie's just one person out of so many. And I'm going to miss her...a lot. And she shouldn't be dead. But it's not just Katie. We've lost so many people now, and so many Muggles have died too, and been taken, and –" He stopped. "It has to end."

"It will." Hermione is quiet but sure, a thread of hope spooling in her chest, spiderweb-thin and fragile.

"You're optimistic," he says into her hair, and Hermione smiles faintly.

"To be fair, I didn't say we'd *win*. Just that it will end." She pauses. "But we will win. We have to." She doesn't know if she believes that, but she wants to, desperately. After the past few days with Draco at her side and the black, hopeless misery that had seized her lifting, it's a lot easier to imagine. That one day soon, they could be done with all this and actually start to heal. Although how she'd do that, Hermione has no clue. She feels like even if she heals, she'll be nothing but scar tissue. Just taut, papery scarring, ugly and vulnerable. A mass of adhesions, pulling on her organs and sending ripples of pain through her forever. Hermione shuts her eyes. So maybe it's still hard to be optimistic. But she has Draco, so she knows deep down in her bones that she'll manage somehow, scar tissue or not.

They sit in silence for a while again. The air is still damp and cold, but Ron doesn't seem bothered by it, and his breath is hot on her hair.

"I missed this," he says at last, and she knows he means the cautious hug after she's spent weeks shrinking from his touch. They're both sitting very still, and he's been careful not to move his arm too much, but she feels oddly peaceful as she is; no bad memories lurching up. Not yet, anyway. He sniffs and wipes his nose again. "You seem better."

"I know it doesn't make sense to you, but Malfoy helps," Hermione says quietly. "He...he makes me feel safe."

"It doesn't make sense." Ron sighs. "And I'm sure it can't be healthy, 'Mione. I don't like it. I want that on the record. But...if it works, it works, I guess." He shrugs. "We could all be dead within the week anyway," he adds with a pained grin. Hermione guesses that's the closest she's going to get to his blessing. She'll take it.

"Thanks, Ron." She leans into him a little more, patting his knee. They sit in silence for a while longer and then Ron sneezes and Hermione sits up, sliding out from under his arm and standing up. "Come on," she says, hugging herself as she pokes him with her damp, sock-clad toes. "You haven't cast a warming charm or anything. We should go in before you catch your death."

"You go ahead." He shoots her the sad echo of a smile. "I'll be in soon. I just want to be alone for a while."

It's been thirty minutes; long enough for Draco to feel worried. He feels edgy, pacing helplessly. Weasley was a wreck, and Hermione was too fragile to be propping up the redhead in his grief, and it just was a bad situation all around. More death. Draco's so fucking *sick* of death. He paces the floor, mind spinning round and round and going nowhere fast. He wonders involuntarily how Katie Bell died. Whether it was quick or slow.

He remembers her; the way he'd nearly been responsible for her death years before, when she'd been cursed by the necklace. One of his failed attempts to kill Dumbledore during 6th year; the year it all started going very wrong. He'd been trapped and desperate, and at the time, he'd felt simultaneously sick over what he'd done, and hated her for messing things up. For contributing to his failure. Now he just feels sad and guilty. He's hurt so many people so badly. Killed so many. He doesn't know how he's ever supposed to balance that ledger without his own death.

Every day a small part of him wishes he'd stayed behind that night he and Hermione had escaped because the guilt eats at him. Particularly what he did to her. Like the twig that broke the thestral's back, the cherry on top of all his other sins. He doesn't deserve to live. Draco knows that. And he definitely doesn't deserve to be with Hermione. If the world was a just place, he'd be burning on one of Voldemort's bonfires right now, after having been tortured to death. He knows that. Most of him is glad to be alive, and he's certainly glad to have not been tortured. But part of him thinks death would be easier.

Draco thinks about death, and he paces, half of his mind always on Hermione. Wondering if he should check on her. If she's okay. If she's not okay, she might need him. But if she's fine, she'll be annoyed at him barging in on her and Weasley. He grinds his teeth and keeps pacing, caught in indecision. Every decision he could make seems wrong, so he *paces*.

Hermione's damp and bedraggled when she walks in nearly an hour after he'd left her in the sitting room, and Draco freezes mid-step. She looks cold and her hair is halfway to wet, her expression sad, but she's in one piece. In fact, her cheeks are flushed pink with the cold, highlighting the way they're not as hollow as they were nearly a week ago, and despite being teary, her eyes are bright instead of dull. He lets out an internal sigh of relief, something in his chest unwinding just a half twist, still standing there like an idiot just staring at her.

Hermione smiles at him as she pushes the door shut. Her socks leave wet marks on the wood floor and the rug, and her leggings are darkened to the knee with rain, though her shirt is dry. Clearly Weasley forgot to cast an Impervius charm. Draco frowns.

"You haven't been pacing this whole time, have you?" Hermione asks with a hint of amusement as she crosses the floor to him, pulling her fingers through her tangled hair. She stops just in front of him, and he finds himself looping his arms around her waist without consciously deciding to do so. She leans back in his arms and looks up at him, her fingers still dragging through her hair.

"It's exercise." He shrugs, keeping his expression as neutral as he can. It's true, after all.

"Did you miss me?" she asks, a faint little grin flashing her teeth. There's sadness behind the smile, but that she can smile at all is amazing. That she can stand to have him touch her is bewildering. His fingers press against her shirt, denting into the softness of her. Fuck, she feels good.

"Yes," Draco says automatically, honest without thinking. "I was worried." His mind is filled up by *her*. Her face goes all soft at his admission. She's so fucking beautiful, and in his grasp, his hands hard on the small of her back as if he has the right. It's hard to think as she slips her arms around him and plasters herself to his front. She buries her face against his chest. He dips his head and

rests his lips lightly against the crown of hers. Her hair smells nice. Like rain and shampoo. Arousal creeps up, unbidden and insistent, and entirely inappropriate. "How did it go?"

"I don't know," she says, muffled into his shirt. "Fine, I guess. I think he appreciated the company, but I didn't think of anything amazingly wise or comforting to say." She sighs, and Draco recognises the helplessness in the sound. The desperate desire to know what to do or say to make things even a *little* bit better, but coming up absolutely, uselessly empty. He's felt that way so much over the past four and a bit months. "About all I could say was how sorry I was. And that it sucked."

"That's all anyone can say, Granger," he tells her softly, tugging lightly at the straggling strands of her hair. "There's no comforting saying that'll make someone feel better when they've just found out a person they care about is dead. All you can do is be there." He grins humourlessly. "Or get them drunk."

Hermione sighs again. "I know. And I can't get him drunk at two in the afternoon." She pulls back enough to look up at him, mouth all twisted and eyes liquid and dark. "I let him hug me, though."

Draco feels a writhing trace of jealousy that he stamps down hard. "Well, that's good, isn't it?" he ventures because she's told him how she's been avoiding touching people. Not that it hasn't been painfully obvious. She's even been avoiding Teddy Lupin when his parents bring him to HQ. "Progress."

Hermione shrugs and nods. Sighs again. "I guess. Yeah. And I suppose at least he wasn't alone." There's a wobble in her voice. She doesn't tell him what they talked about, or whether Weasley and Katie Bell had been an item, or anything more at all. And he doesn't ask. If she wants to tell him, she will. "I can't believe Katie's dead," she says at last, hands playing with the buttons on his shirt. "So *many* people died just while I was...gone." The last word comes out in a whisper. She sniffles and wipes her face. "Katie. Demelza. Zacharias. Alicia... Everyone keeps *dying*. It's not *fair*."

"No. It's not." He tucks a lock of hair behind her ear; even weighed down by the rain it gets everywhere. "I'm sorry, Granger." He can't relate, really; he didn't particularly know or like any of the people she's listed. Draco's sick of death – of seeing it, of causing it – but none of it touches him in the way it does her. They're her friends. People she cares about. People, she's lost. "I'm so sorry." Hermione's blinking back tears, and he wipes away one that escaped with his thumb. She sniffs and looks down at herself, still held loosely in the cradle of his arms.

"Ugh. I'm all wet." She wrinkles her nose. And with that, Draco figures Hermione's done talking about anything serious, and he's not going to push her. She's maintaining a fragile balance, and he's not about to jeopardise that. He kisses her temple instead.

"Do you want me to get you a towel?"

"I'm not that wet." She pulls fresh clothes out of the dresser and then plops on the edge of the bed, holding out a foot and wiggling her toes. "Help?"

"You don't need help, Granger," he says, an obligatory response, and she makes a pitiful face. He hides a smile.

"Please, Malfoy?" And then he's peeling off her wet socks for her as she leans back on the bed on her elbows, watching him. Draco's noticed that while Hermione might avoid touching others, she takes every chance she can to exchange touches with him. Maybe she's trying to desensitise herself.

Or maybe she's just enjoying the fact that they can touch without fear they'll have to hurt each other. It makes him think of all the times she changed his bandages when they were at the manor. All the times he touched her then, in small, careful ways.

Either way, he's not complaining, exactly. He loves all the little touches. He just wants *more*. He's *ravenous* for more, no matter how much he tries to bury his arousal somewhere deep down.

He's an utter bastard for it and he knows it, but Draco wants to do so many things to her. Obscene, unwelcome things. But he can't stop thinking about them. It's been nearly a week of tentative kisses, and he hasn't jerked off once; he's afraid of what memories his mind will drag up at the moment of climax, so his showers have been cold and short. He's a twenty-year-old man, and Hermione keeps pushing for more and then pulling back when she realises she can't handle it, and that's *fine*, he understands it – except it's leaving him frustrated as hell, and while his mind understands, his body doesn't.

Her feet are pale and pruned, and he wrinkles his nose teasingly as he strips her first sock off. "Gross, Granger." It's a fucking lie; Draco would probably suck on her toes right now if she let him, and he's not even *into* feet. He just so desperately wants part of her under his tongue, in his mouth, like some kind of oral fixation. He imagines things he can't do, involuntarily stripping her in his mind. *Fuck*. Draco bites his tongue sharply and focuses on the pain, afraid he's going to spring an erection just from touching her feet, which would be inappropriate *and* embarrassing.

And Hermione's eyeing him shrewdly, a weird expression on her face. "*Really?*" she asks, disbelieving, and Draco belatedly realises he *is* halfway to hard, and it shows. *Shit*. Shame worms through his belly, and he feels the weird need to apologise. She covers her face, and her shoulders shake, and he realises with intense relief that she's laughing. "My *feet?*"

He's not sure what to say but settles for a vague honesty. "More my imagination." It comes out a little rough and low, and she drops her hands from her face, chewing her lip as she looks up at him.

"Oh," is all she says after a second, and her voice is a little shaky, her smile mostly gone. But she doesn't seem unhappy.

Once her second sock is off and dropped forgotten on the floor, Hermione lifts her hips and shoves her leggings halfway down her thighs without warning. *Merlin*. Draco doesn't know where she thinks she's going with this impromptu striptease, just that he's probably going to end up in a cold shower feeling like an asshole – but oh *fuck*. Her thighs are creamy and soft looking, leading up to her cotton knickers. They're red, and have lace trim along the top band, and a little satin bow. He gulps. His fingers twitch at his sides as he crouches there, staring dumbly.

Draco wishes he hadn't told her that he was a virgin before...*then*; he feels like it's put him off balance somehow. He averts his eyes as she slides her leggings further down, dragging a hand over his face. She gives him whiplash. "Salazar's sake, Granger, what are you doing?"

"You don't have to look away, you know," Hermione says, and then a hint of bitterness creeps in as she sits up and yanks her leggings off over her feet. "You've seen it before."

"*Granger*." Whiplash, and fuck, it *hurts*. He swallows hard. "Granger, *don't*." It's a plea, not an order. She sighs and sits forward, elbows on her thighs as she slumps and presses the heels of her palms against her eyes.

"Sorry. Sorry, I know that's not fair," she says, all tight and miserable, and he hates that she's apologising. He grabs the pyjama trousers off the bed beside her and kneels at her feet.

"Don't apologise either," he says, as he slips her pyjamas over her feet and up to her knees. She looks up, eyes watery and cheeks blotchy red from more than just the cold now, and takes the trousers' waistband, shimmying them up her thighs as Draco stands and backs up a pace. "I just – I don't think that counts. It *can't*. Or I just can't..." He doesn't know how to explain. He feels stricken. Like a monster. If all the times he's seen her naked, or in that awful lingerie, or being abused – *fuck* – he cuts his thoughts off before he can spiral any further. He wants to be sick, remembering, and he wishes he could burn it out of his brain. But if those moments somehow count in their relationship, then he can't do it. Because they make him want to die. He stares at her mutely, not knowing how to communicate that without falling into a thousand pieces.

"Okay." It's a whisper. "It doesn't count." She gulps, a few tears spilling over, and she scrubs them away roughly. Angrily. "But it still happened."

"I know." Then there's a long silence in which Draco wishes very badly that he were dead before he drags himself together by sheer force of will. Hermione is sitting on the edge of the bed, small and broken, and he doesn't have time to wallow. "What do you need?" he asks her, trying to be gentle but not sure he succeeds. "What can I do?"

She wobbles a smile through her tears. "You," she says quietly, then: "Come here," and he does, and that tipping-point balance is maintained a little longer.

Days later he bumps into Potter in the kitchen late one night. It's been nearly two weeks since he left the cell. The Boy-Who-Lived is in plaid pyjamas and rummaging in the cupboard as the kettle begins to faintly whistle. He spins around with a biscuit clenched between his teeth, startled, when Draco walks in. He removes it and shoots Draco a tight half-smile, pulling down an opened packet of biscuits from behind a stack of tins. "Hi," Potter says awkwardly, putting the biscuits on a tray with two cups. His hair is sticking up more than usual, his pyjama shirt buttoned wrong, and he's clearly making a midnight snack; Draco assumes for him and Ginevra. Probably post-coital. Gross.

"Potter." Draco considers making some jibe about the midnight snack being for Ron Weasley, but doesn't. He's tired, his head is aching, and he woke from a nightmare to Hermione crying in her sleep, trapped in her own horrific dreams. He's pretty sure this one *had* been about what he'd done to her. About the night he'd claimed her.

"You're up late." Potter leans against the counter, waiting for the kettle to boil, watching Draco as he gets down two mugs.

"Nightmares," Draco says succinctly as he looks through the array of teas available. Hermione asked for chamomile. There are about two dozen Muggle teas stacked there on the bench in colourful boxes: chai, raspberry and liquorice, vanilla and pear, and it takes a minute to find the box of chamomile. "Why do Muggles have so many teas? And these aren't even teas. They're like...sad fruit juices, mostly. What even *is* cinnamon apple pie? How is that a *tea*?"

"I dunno." Potter shrugs. "Justin loves them. Every time he does the grocery shopping, he comes back with a different, weird tea. The rooibos is rather nice, though."

"What? Is that even a word?" Draco makes a face as he drops a Yorkshire teabag in his mug and chamomile in Hermione's.

"Rooibos? Yeah. It's Afrikaans, I think."

"Huh. Is there enough water in the kettle for us?" Draco misses having his wand. It makes everything so much faster and easier. He's not sure why Potter lets the kettle come to the boil in Muggle fashion; maybe he's just used to it, from growing up living with his Muggle relations. Draco digs through the cupboard while he waits. There have to be more biscuits in there somewhere, and while he isn't hungry himself, he's always trying to get Hermione to eat.

"Should be. Is 'Mione okay?"

Draco doesn't mind that Potter doesn't even consider it might have been him suffering a nightmare. He'd rather Potter didn't think of him as weak, or vulnerable. He doesn't want Potter to know that he'd jerked awake half an hour ago, drenched in sweat with a scream locked behind his clamped-shut lips. He finds a pack of chocolate digestives. No. An open packet of gingernuts. No. He shoves a few tins aside. Merlin, he can't stop picturing it.

The dinner had featured heavily; that had been almost worse than claiming Hermione, for Draco. Sitting there making small talk, laughing and exchanging pleasantries while Hermione was being violated right in front of him. Making jokes about it. Watching them use her... He feels sick to his stomach, stuttering to a halt as the memories rise up again, so fucking vivid.

"Granger's fine. She thought tea might help her get back to sleep," Draco says aloud, blandly. She hadn't told him what the dream was, but when he'd shaken her awake, she'd been terrified of him for two long minutes before comprehension finally dawned in her eyes. And then she'd huddled in a ball and cried. When he'd tentatively reached out to comfort her, she'd jerked her head up as if she could sense him and snapped a vehement *don't touch me!*

It had been ten minutes before Hermione had lifted her head and looked at him with puffy eyes and tear-stained cheeks, and asked for a cup of tea in a tiny voice. Draco honestly still wasn't sure if she wanted tea or if she was just trying to get rid of him for five minutes. He finds a packet of hobnobs. Yes. They'll do. Merlin, he feels so tired – wrung out, and useless to Hermione right now. She probably can't stand the sight of him.

"Does she still have nightmares a lot?" Potter asks, and Draco isn't sure how much the other man actually wants the details, and how much he's just trying to fill in the awkward silence.

"Can't you hear?" Draco asks shortly, being difficult. He *knows* they can on the rare occasion; like the time Ginevra had come running in. He's pretty sure they can hear anything much louder than normal speaking volume, considering neither Hermione nor Draco can cast a *muffliato*. He hates the lack of privacy. But in truth, most of the time neither of them makes much noise when they wake from nightmares; Hermione's tears aren't particularly loud, and Draco is always silent as far as he knows. So Potter probably can't hear. The kettle's whistle gets louder and Potter lifts it off the hob.

"No," he says, shooting Draco an annoyed look. "Don't be a git, Malfoy. You know we can't."

"Hnh." Draco leans back against the counter and crosses his arms, waiting for the kettle. Potter glares at him, pouring his drinks and shoving the kettle on the cork mat by the stove. He scavenges up some marshmallows to throw in the cocoa he's made as Draco pours the remainder of the water into the tea. There's just enough.

"I heard 'Mione freak out once three nights ago," he begins, and Draco remembers that night. It had been a bad one. She'd woken screaming. "I wanted to go running in because, honestly, it sounded like you were hurting her –" Draco flinches at that, cheeks flaming hot – but Ginny told me not to. That she did a while ago, and..." Potter eyes Draco "...you took good care of 'Mione. That it was 'very sweet'," he quotes, distaste in his voice, and Draco flushes hotter. Ginevra clearly shared all the details.

He glares at Potter as the other man goes on. "That's all I've heard, though. And I'm sure she's had more nightmares than that, going by how exhausted you both look in the mornings."

"Yeah," Draco allows, jaw tight, headache worsening. "Several times a night, usually. Sometimes more, sometimes less." He pauses. "Why, Potter?"

"She's my friend. I worry." Potter adjusts his glasses nervously. Shrugs. "And I don't want to bother her. She's – she's a lot better than she was before you got here, but I know she's still not great. I don't want to risk making things worse. Causing a setback."

"Yeah, don't do that, Potter," Draco says, tone so dry it's arid. Potter scowls. "Really though," he says seriously, "*don't*. Don't mention, well, anything. *I* don't even usually mention anything unless she brings it up. She's walking on a knife's edge right now, and if she falls, it won't go well."

"Understood. I'll keep not saying anything, then," Potter says with a hint of annoyance and picks up his tea tray.

"Wait. Potter –" There's something Draco should have told Potter and Weasley a while ago, but he hasn't had the chance. The shorter man pauses in the doorway, expression curious. "Thank you. And Weasley too," Draco says, prying the words out but meaning them. "For not telling Granger what I said under veritaserum."

Potter's expression stiffens and turns grim. His eyes are steady as he meets Draco's, his features so hard he could be carved from stone. "Don't thank me, Malfoy. Don't. I'm doing my best to forget we even *had* that conversation because you really do seem to be good for Hermione – god knows why – and if I think about it too much, I end up wanting to kill you," he gets out, expression sickened and features twisted in contempt. "We haven't told her because of what it would do to *her*, which is also why Ron and I are being civil to you. For her sake. It's got fuck all to do with you." Potter adds, swallowing thickly: "And yes, I *know* you didn't have a choice when it came to doing it. But that you could *enjoy* it? *Fuck*. Honestly? You make me sick, Malfoy."

Draco watches him leave without a word, frozen, a leaden feeling sinking through him. He can't argue with anything Potter said. The Gryffindor isn't wrong. There's a hollow misery dug into the pit of his stomach as he finally stirs himself to go back upstairs. When he gets up to the bedroom, Hermione's asleep again already. Curled in a ball on her side of the bed. He feels so hollow.

Chapter End Notes

► Housekeeping!

Chapter 15

Fifteen

"Malfoy?" Hermione wakes to him being gone and early dawn light slanting weakly through a gap in the curtains of the one bedroom window, the room dim and cast in soft blues and greys. Draco's side of the bed is cold, and a spike of fear slides through Hermione before her conscious mind catches up, reminding her that he's probably just in the bathroom. He's *fine*. And this is the third day in a row she's woken in the morning without a nightmare wrenching her from the depths or Draco gently coaxing her out of one. She woke in the night, but only once. It's good. Hermione feels nearly well-rested and peaceful aside from the unease slipping through her at his absence. It feels wrong to wake up not curled up close to him.

She blinks and knuckles her eyes, yawning as she shoves the fluffing masses of her hair back off her face. It's a wild, bushy tangle, and she knows she should've plaited it before bed. Maybe she'll ask Ginny to use a charm on it – probably not, though.

Maybe she'll ask Draco to detangle it; she loves the feel of his fingers on her scalp and combing through her hair. She wonders how long he'll be. He's taking forever. She lies there, staring at the plastered ceiling, the faint texture of it catching the light and holding shadows. The clock on his bedside table ticks almost inaudibly. It's only been two minutes. *Fuck*. Before Hermione can consciously think about it, she's flung the blankets back and is creeping out of the bedroom quietly. No one else is wandering the halls as she patters down the stairs, heading for the second-floor bathroom. She hopes he's having a shower and not...using the facilities, but when she gets close, she can hear the water running. Good.

She knocks on the door, leaning on the doorjamb. "Malfoy?" The sound of the water changes; she imagines him shifting under the spray, pausing to listen. "Malfoy, it's me."

"*Shit*," comes faintly through the door. There are hurried sounds: the squeak of the tub, the water cutting off, the swish of a towel, the pad of feet, and then the doorknob rattles and turns, and the door jerks open. "Are you alright?" He's standing there, eyes and mouth all filled with worry as he scans over her; in a pair of his boxers and one of his long-sleeved t-shirts with her hair wild, perfectly fine. "What's wrong?"

The towel is slung low around his hips, and there's water sliding in fat droplets over the scarred topography of his chest, flat stomach, and broad but nearly bony shoulders. And there's shampoo still in his hair. Hermione snickers, hand hiding her smile ineffectively as a foamy puff of shampoo slides down his temple, and he shakes his head in irritation, swiping it away with the back of the hand not holding the towel up. The towel slides lower around his hips, and his muscles are defined under his pale skin, nipples pink, with the occasional slash or starburst of silvery-purple scar tissue marking him, and *god*. He arches a brow at her, waiting for an answer, but Hermione's mouth is dry, and her mind has gone blank.

"Hermione?" He switches between that and 'Granger' seemingly at random, and she likes them both.

"Nothing's wrong. Nothing at all. Just – you were gone," she says. She blurts the next bit out in a rush. "Can I come in?" Hermione realises how odd that sounds as the words come out of her mouth.

Shit. He looks a little bemused, and she's about to turn tail and flee when he answers.

"Yeah? I mean, of course." Draco steps out of the doorway and waves for her to sidle past him. He shoots her a faint, amused smile and she smiles back, awkward. Happy. She's with him, and the world rebalances, finding its level. Then, "Ow, shit," he complains as he clicks the door shut and a bit of shampoo slides into his left eye, and he winks it closed and slaps the heel of his hand over it, and Hermione snickers again. She's very glad she came to find him. A warm feeling swirls in her belly, and he looks beautiful and disarmed at once, dripping wet in only a towel.

"Here, let me –" She goes up on tiptoes and carefully swipes the shampoo away with the cuff of his shirt, balancing herself with her other hand on his shoulder. Draco's warm and wet beneath her, and he smells like oranges – thanks to the shower gel – and his lips are parted and so plush, his breath minty as it wafts over her forehead. His eye is already bloodshot as she wipes away the shampoo, and his mouth hooks into a smile that makes her insides quiver. She kisses it impulsively and he makes a soft sound and responds, lips pushing into hers, his wet hand cupping her face. Eager. Wanting.

He tastes like mint too, his mouth soft and hot, a controlled desire thrumming in him. Careful, skilful kisses; brushes of tongue and pressing of lips that are so gentle but so needy. He's tense. Ridiculously tense like a wire strung taut, and his fingertips tremble against Hermione's cheek, and she *knows* he just wants to shove her up the door, greedy and forceful and verging on rough. Kissing her and touching her without having to think every second about how he does it, where he touches her, and how she's reacting. Draco treats her like she's made of glass, and she knows it frustrates him to constantly be holding back and keeping himself in check. It frustrates *her*.

But right now, he's all softness and care, and he's spinning pleasure into her like gold thread, bright and glittering and fragile. Precious. There's an insistent hum of arousal between Hermione's legs, heat squirming in her belly, and she wants him to touch her *there*. Wants his fingers sliding over wet, sensitive flesh. She slides her arms around his neck, his body wetting her shirt as she presses against him and nips lightly at his lower lip. There's a bulge under his towel, pushing into her abdomen, and a wrench of combined want and fear crash through her at once, and she whimpers. Draco pulls back, one hand still gripping his towel, the other sliding to cup the line of her jaw.

His eyes search her face. "Are you –?"

"I – yes. That was a good sound," Hermione says breathlessly, not a lie but not the whole truth either, that remembered fear blossoming through her, and Draco's gaze is knowing. He can recognise the shift, the hesitation. He drops a last open-mouthed kiss on Hermione's parted lips and draws back. Her eyes are drawn down his body to where his erection tents out the towel, obscenely blatant. They stand close enough that it still nearly touches her. He swallows audibly, and colour burns on his cheeks.

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," she tells him, and it comes out husky. Hermione hates the way her body reacts without her permission. The way it wants and shies away from him at the same time. The way she's wet and craving his fingers sliding over her vulva and circling her clit, but fear creeps up her spine at the thought. She takes a deep breath; she may not be caught in the grip of arousal any longer, but that doesn't mean she has to run in fear. "Can I touch it?" comes out before she can think twice, and then she's clarifying, "Through the towel, I mean."

"You can do whatever you want," he says tightly. "Although I don't know why you'd want to."

"It won't be too, um, frustrating?"

"Existence is frustrating, Granger," he says lightly, and there's an edge to the words that draws blood; she feels something dark and awful buried beneath them. Hermione doesn't dig right now though; she wouldn't know where to start.

"*My body* is frustrating," she says honestly, her hand creeping out and curling over his towel-covered erection before she can think twice. He sucks in a sharp breath at the contact. Both their eyes are pinned to her hand folding over the head of his cock, gripping firm, and the air feels thick. The towelling is rough, his body heat soaking through it. "I want you, very badly. How can I be so aroused and so scared at the same time? It isn't fair." Hermione squeezes gently. The tiniest groan escapes him, and she looks up, heat flaring in her belly. His eyes are molten, pupils huge as he stares down at her hand, his lips parted and breath coming shallow.

"No. No, it isn't." He sounds strangled, and a pleased satisfaction settles through her. Hermione sees potential in this – she likes the control she feels right now. It feels safe. *Interesting*, she thinks. She squeezes again. He makes a little hissing moan between his teeth, and his hips jut forward in a way that seems involuntary. Also interesting. But then, Hermione's been unintentionally teasing Draco for weeks; he'd have to have been made of stone to not be worked up. She smiles to herself – he *feels* like he's made of stone right now.

"No. *Stay still*," she tells him firmly, and his eyes flash, but he does as he's told, mostly. His grip on the towel tightens, and his other hand grabs the towel rail like it's a lifeline as she slides her hand beneath the towel. His skin is velvety soft and hot as a brand. He whimpers. His hips move and then freeze as she narrows her eyes on him.

"Sorry. Sorry," comes out in a rush, then, "Fuck. *Granger*." He says her name warningly, and then she watches his eyes flutter shut and his teeth indent his lower lip as she closes her hand around the shaft of his cock, and squeezes again. Slides; up, down. She doesn't think of who else she's touched like this. She's in the moment; nothing exists except her and Draco right now. His lashes cast shadows on his cheeks and his breath shudders. It's incredibly arousing, watching him like this. Completely open and vulnerable, any mask stripped away as she moves her hand slowly, her heart in her throat. "Oh *fuck*," he breathes, "that's amazing," and she agrees with his assessment.

Draco swallows dryly, eyes slit open and glinting as he looks down. Hermione follows his gaze and finds herself oddly confronted by the sight of his cock in her hand, the towel pushed back. Flushed darker than the rest of him, it's thick and juts from Hermione's grip, and it's slightly daunting as she moves her hand slowly up and down. She tries not to think, *no wonder it hurt*, and fails. Despite the intrusive thought, her stomach twists deliciously as his cock twitches in her hand, and he bites back a moan. She's slick between her legs as she slides her hand on his cock, and it shocks her. He pushes his hips out again.

"I said *stay still*," she snaps, "and you keep moving."

He grins at her, wicked and gleaming, and huffs a shaky laugh. "Sorry. Sorry," he apologises obediently, leaning back against the wall with a fluid kind of gracelessness, as if his bones have turned to liquid, his head knocking back against the tiles. One hand is still holding the towel and the other is fisted at his side, his shoulders moving sharply with his breaths. "You're in charge, Granger. Always. Whenever we're alone, remember? I'll do whatever you want. Always. You're in control."

Jesus. The raw emotion in Draco's voice is too much. Hermione feels like she's melting, a heady kind of arousal firing through her nerves. She's in control; she just has to remember that, and it's easier when she's the one doing things to him while he leans against the wall, looking like she's taking him apart piece by piece. Her hand keeps moving, rhythmic and smooth, and for a few minutes, Draco just slumps there, breathing unsteadily, his cheeks flushed and his hair dripping still, biting his lip as he watches her hand on his cock. And then tension shivers through him.

"*Fuck,*" he bites out and then his hand folds over hers, stilling her movements. "Wait." She looks up with a questioning frown. His thumb rubs over the back of her hand. "I – if you keep doing that, I'm going to come, Hermione. Very, very soon."

"Do you not want to?" she asks innocently, her pulse whooshing in her ears and her chest feeling tight, arousal flooding her and out-competing her nerves, and he groans, wrecked and struggling to hold himself together.

"*No.* No, of *course* I want to," he says roughly. "But I thought maybe you – you might want something a little better than wanking me off in a bathroom."

He has a point. Her hand slides away, settling open on his thigh, still beneath the towel as she thinks it over. They're standing in a tiny bathroom, and Draco still has shampoo in his hair, and it's not exactly romantic. *Does she want romantic?* Hermione asks herself. No, not really. She wants *safe*. She wants him. Hermione bites her tongue on what she wants to say because she knows it'll break the mood beyond repair. "This seems pretty good to me," she says after a heavy pause, and so much goes unsaid. He winces. "It's just you and me, and I'm in control, and honestly, I don't *want* to stop, Draco. Unless *you* want to." She looks at him uncertainly, her hand finding his cock again. He shudders when she says his name.

"No. *No.* You – I'm yours, Hermione," he says and arousal bursts hot inside her; she feels suddenly even slicker. Sopping wet. "Do whatever you want with me."

"Good," she says almost viciously, "I will," and it feels so good. She feels *powerful*. When Hermione starts moving her hand again, his cock iron hard in her grasp, he dips his head down, lips pressing against her cheekbone. Kisses her cheek. Seeks her mouth.

"Please," he murmurs, passive and trembling, everything in him still holding back, and Hermione wonders what he'd do if she told him to just do whatever he wanted. Anything at all. From the way his fist clenches white-knuckled and his hips try not to buck, and his darkly intent expression, Hermione suspects he would not be gentle. That he would fuck her hard up against the wall, his hands pressing the shape of him into her flesh, mouth speaking beautiful things to her ear, too lost in the urgency of the moment for care, or skill. She flushes hot all the way down to her chest, imagining it. He wouldn't be *rough*, just...consumed. Mindless. Primal. She can see it in his face. What he's holding back, tightly leashed.

She imagines it all unfolding in her head; he would make it good for her, but only after he'd worked that initial burning need out of his system. The weeks of accumulated frustration, desire, and need. And then he'd exhaust them both. God, Hermione wants that so badly right now as she pushes her open mouth up to his, and they kiss, a messy clash, Draco's tongue slicking between her lips and sending desire slamming down through her like a sledgehammer. She moans into his mouth, undeniably a good sound, her left hand stuttering in its motions, her right digging into his shampoo-foamy hair, the remaining bubbles squishing under her fingers.

When Draco comes finally, it's with a wordless groan, his kiss losing all cohesion and his mouth half sliding off hers, gasping against the corner of Hermione's lips as she grips his hair hard and tries her best to work him through it. His hips thrust out, his cock pulsating in her tight grip, and she feels her stomach squirm with pleasure as cum splashes hot on her knuckles, dripping down the back of her hand. Oh; it's going to get everywhere, she thinks, and then he makes a little *hnngh* sound, his breath hot on her cheek, and she doesn't care. She doesn't think about bad memories, or mess, or anything other than the way Draco is breaking apart with pleasure in her hand.

"H'mione," he mumbles as the orgasm passes, and his forehead sinks to her shoulder, resting there for a moment as he breathes heavily. His free hand finds hers, and their fingers twine together, his grip tight and a little desperate. Her other hand is rather coated in his semen, and she just knows it's dripping on the floor. Hermione wishes she had a wand; she needs to badger Remus about that. Better not tell him why, she thinks giddily. "Merlin's sake. I love you." Draco nearly slurs the words, and they're full of an achingly worshipful awe, as if she's broken his brain with the force of the orgasm, and it makes her want to laugh. She feels *happy*. Gleeful.

And incredibly aroused; she's fairly certain she's almost dripping wet. Jesus, this was unexpected and amazing. Enlightening. She's never been so glad she did anything in her life.

"I love you too," Hermione says, squeezing his fingers as he mouths at her collarbone through the shirt of his that she's wearing – sloppy not-quite-kisses, his breathing deliciously ragged. She presses her cheek against his bowed head for a moment before she sighs, her hand drying sticky. "I need to clean up," she says apologetically, and Draco lifts his head, eyes unfocused and cheeks flushed as he starts to pull himself back together, swaying back and adjusting his towel. He takes in her cum-splattered hand as she wiggles her fingers in the air and grimaces.

"Damn. Sorry. Although, I guess that's inevitable, considering." He shoots her a wry grin, a liquid, lax feel to him like she's drained all the tension from his body, and he's dreamy and sated, expression soft. It's like seeing another side to him entirely, and it makes Hermione feel all warm and fuzzy. She leans forward and kisses his mouth one last time, holding her hand out to the side. His lips are soft and plush, and he makes a humming growl in the back of his throat that sends ripples through her, and she whimpers in response, swaying against him, and he has to steady her. His eyes are molten and amused as she presses her lips together, cheeks flaming.

She backs off before she plasters herself to him again, unwinding a long strip of toilet paper and shoving it at him. "You can wipe up the floor," she says, and his smile is lazy and filthy as he takes the paper and wads it up, dropping it to the floor and using his foot to smudge it over the tiles. She scrubs her hand with more toilet paper and then washes it with soap and water. The way his cum felt on her skin makes her think of what he had to scourge off her after the dinner, once they were back in his room. She scrubs harder as memories creep in, and she takes a deep, shaky breath. They may not have penetrated her at the dinner, but that didn't mean they hadn't...reached completion.

No, Hermione refuses to let that taint this perfect moment. She wishes for a wand, again, biting the inside of her cheek hard enough to smart and looking at Draco over her shoulder as she scrubs her hand dry with the hand towel. He's holding the towel around him rather precariously, wet hair gleaming darker blond, all lean, pale muscle and bones, his cheeks still a little flushed. He's about to snag the toilet paper off the floor when he senses her eyes on him. He looks up and his smile is wicked, teeth catching the light, and Hermione forgets all about the bad memories. He looks as though he'd like to *eat* her. She blushes as he retrieves the toilet paper from the floor and leans past her to throw it in the loo, so close to her she can feel his body heat.

She feels oddly flustered in the silence, but still oh-so-pleased. She flips down the toilet lid and perches on it, cupping her chin in her hands. "I think you should finish your shower now." There's a brilliant, glorious satisfaction rolling through her now as she takes him in. Nearly naked and dishevelled, his eyes molten. Hermione feels triumph. Victory. She conquered her fear. She grins at him, and when he scrapes his fingers through his hair to slick it back and it makes a foamy sound, her grin widens. "You'd better rinse your hair before someone else wants the bathroom. We've been in here a while."

"Mm. I suppose so." His gaze drags over her; her hair a disaster and her shirt all printed wet in patches from his body. "But I don't like that I can't return the favour." Naked want burns in his gaze. "Unless I *can*...?" He arches a brow as he offers. "You could come get in the shower with me and let me use my hand." He waggles his fingers suggestively, flashing that wicked smile. "Or my mouth." Hermione bites her lip. She *wants* to, but not here. Not like this. She wants a bed to lie down on, and the knowledge that no one will interrupt them – and besides, she doesn't want to risk ruining this moment for either of them by being triggered and going to pieces. It might be too much too soon. No, it's best that they wait.

"Later," she says softly, feeling almost shy. "We can do more later. In the bedroom."

"The next time one of us gets off, Granger, it'd better be you." Draco's tone is dark and sweet, and thrums through her. He eyes her contemplatively, and she can almost see the wheels spinning in his head. "If you like control –" he sees her frown and understands; corrects himself – "*need*. If you *need* control, you can have that by sitting on my face." *Oh god*. Her insides quiver and clench with desire. "Tie my hands together if you have to," he says in a rush, and his pupils have eaten his irises, only the thinnest ring of silver left. He looks like he's drunk on the idea. "Use my mouth, Granger. Let me do something *good* to you." A note of pained desperation enters his voice, and she knows what he's thinking; all he's done is hurt her. Let him give her pleasure for once.

Her heart hurts.

Hermione thinks; sitting on his face. *Fuck*. She pictures it, and the thought sets off a cascade of arousal so intense it's shocking. Her clitoris actually *throbs* almost painfully and her insides clench hard, her breathing going to hell – shallow and unsteady – as her pulse races. That's something entirely new. She has no bad memories tied to *that*.

Oh god.

"Yes," she says, decidedly but still strangled, because she doesn't have the air in her lungs. "*Please*." It's nearly a whisper. A thrill shoots through her at the expression he's making at her acceptance. Predatory. And she knows he'll make sure she feels as though she's in control and safe – but looking at his face just now, Hermione's fairly certain that it will be Draco who's actually in control, even if she *does* tie him down.

"Good," he says roughly, and the tip of his tongue wets his lips and Hermione stares breathlessly, *imagining*. But then he flips the shower on, turning his back on her, and most of the desire drops clear out of her, stomach churning at the sight of his back. It's criss-crossed with rough, livid scarring; whiplash upon whiplash, raised and rough. Ruined. There is no part of it that is *not* scarred. And Hermione herself is responsible for a good quarter of the damage. She's tried to convince him to have it healed – or at least put scar liniment on it to lessen the severity because, honestly, she's worried about his mobility as all that scar tissue tightens – but he shuts her down and changes the subject every time.

Hermione thinks Draco is punishing himself by keeping the scars. She knows they hurt him. They're certainly painful to look at. There's something beautiful about them too, though, in a weird way. He took them to protect her. They represent his love for her, and in a twisted way, it's romantic. She loves him more every time she sees his back – which, since they escaped, has only been glimpses until now. The scars shift and bunch as he reaches out to test the water temperature. The look he throws her over his shoulder is indescribable but so, so appealing. All wicked and lazy and utterly satiated. For these few moments at least, all his stress has fallen away from him, and it lightens hers, too.

"I'm dropping the towel now." He smiles that wicked smile. "Fair warning."

Hermione doesn't look away. Chin still cupped in her hands, fingers hiding her smile, she watches the towel fall, enjoying the view – his bum is as well muscled and lean as the rest of him, and unscarred, and as he turns toward her, she catches a glimpse of his cock, half-hard between his legs – before he twitches the mostly opaque shower curtain across with a smirk, reducing himself to a silhouette. She smiles into her hands, feeling absurdly normal.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

► Housekeeping!

Sixteen

"Sometimes life feels like a...a roller coaster," Hermione says thoughtfully after breakfast, as she sits there cross-legged on the sitting room floor, playing Go Fish with Harry, the pair of them half playing, half talking shit. She smiles at how cliché it sounds when she says it aloud. Ginny snorts, lifting her eyes from her magazine to listen.

The house is fairly quiet at the moment. It's not long after 9 am, and everyone's busy with something, whether it's Remus and Tonks visiting Teddy or Hannah and Justin going grocery shopping. Or, something that makes tension shiver in the air; Ron being out on a mission. Reconnaissance – nothing that should be dangerous, but Hermione is evidence that anything could happen. Mrs Weasley is banging about in the kitchen, taking out her worry on the dishes. And Ginny's curled in a chair by the front window reading an old Witch Weekly and eating sweets, having bickered with Harry and then proclaimed Muggle card games boring, a restless air about her. The redhead is worried about her brother too, although she won't admit it.

And Draco is sitting in the chair in the corner of the room off to one side, right leg hooked lazily over the arm of it, a book in his lap that he's not really reading, radiating an air of bliss that Hermione thinks he's entirely unaware he's broadcasting. She loves it. But Harry has been casting the blond sideways glances ever since breakfast, looking unsettled, as if he's almost but not quite figured out why Draco's so unusually cheerful.

"A roller coaster?" Harry asks. "Got any twos?"

"Yeah," Hermione says to both questions as she hands a two over, and shrugs.

"Any kings?" Harry asks.

"Go fish." She's thinking about the bathroom. It's been popping into her mind constantly ever since it happened, creating a squiggly, warm glow in her stomach. Clearly, Draco's been thinking about it too, from the aura hanging around him, and the cat-like satisfaction in his grey eyes every time he looks at her.

"So why is it a roller coaster?" Harry watches her tiredly, chin in his hand and black hair shining like a raven's wing in the sunlight, in an old hoodie and jeans with shadows under his eyes. He looks like he could sleep for a week.

"Because it's scary," Hermione says, fidgeting with her cards. "And sometimes you kind of don't want to get on it. Because you just know you're going to be terrified. But if you're brave enough that you can just *make* yourself do it – well, it's still kind of scary, but usually it's fun."

She remembers the tension vibrating through Draco's body as he'd been still under her hand, muscles trembling as he held himself in check. The clumsy desperation to his kiss, as if she were water in a desert and he was dying of thirst. The blissed-out awe in his eyes after he'd spilled himself all over her hand; like he was drunk on her, intoxicated by what she'd done. Hermione shivers. Yes, it had been fun – this time, at least.

"I suppose sometimes it breaks down and the ride just doesn't go. And one time in a million, it goes horribly wrong and everyone on the coaster dies... Or someone falls to their death. But most of the time, it's actually amazing, and thrilling, and hardly frightening at all," she says, thinking aloud. She knows it might not always be that easy. But she's learning to grab the good when it comes and live in the moment. No need to borrow trouble; they have enough of that already.

Her gaze shifts, glancing back at Draco and smiling when their eyes connect. The faintest curve shapes his mouth. He's listening, and she knows he knows what she's rambling about. Her smile grows despite her best attempts to suppress it. "And then you end up being *so glad* you did it."

Harry is watching the wordless exchange between her and Draco. A horrified disgust blooms on his face as he adjusts his glasses. "Please don't tell me Malfoy's the roller coaster."

Hermione snickers, mortified and giddy at once, and has to take a second to compose herself before she answers. "Okay, Harry. I won't," she says and then nothing else, a smile twitching at her lips.

Harry groans.

Draco doesn't deserve her. He really doesn't. Hermione sleeps snuggled against him on her side, having a brief mid-morning nap – she still gets more tired than she should. Today he feels drowsy himself as he lies there in the dim room, the velvet curtains drawn, everything quiet save for her slow, steady breathing and the faint chorus of birdsong.

Her hair is tamed into a French braid, her fingers curled in his shirt, her leg hooked over his, as though she's trying to anchor herself against him at every possible point of contact, making it impossible to move. She's warm and heavy, her sharp angles beginning to soften slightly as she eats properly, and he loves it. It's part of her steady, slow pattern of improvement, and it makes him feel like he's actually being helpful.

Hermione's getting better. He's sure of it. It's slow – glacial – and sometimes it seems that for every step forward she takes in her recovery, she takes another back, but while she regresses sometimes, and while she's still very fragile, she *is* improving. Gradually, piecemeal. Draco doesn't think Hermione will ever be what she was before her capture – *I broke her*; he thinks with a sudden, brief slam of self-loathing, *I took her and tore her apart, I couldn't save her* — but she's healing.

As this morning in the bathroom showed, Hermione may be wounded and fragile, but she's still Hermione Granger; still determined, brave, and a survivor. Still fighting for what she wants. And for some reason, Salazar knows why, she wants him. Draco smiles faintly. He'll never be able to have a shower in there again without thinking of her mouth hot and eager on his, her hand fisted in his hair, and her other hand wrapped around his cock. *Fuck*. Just the thought sets him off again, arousal spiking hot. He tries to breathe slowly and evenly, not wanting to disturb Hermione in the doze she's slid into, his hand petting gently and smoothly over her hair.

Really, this morning has been as close to perfection as Draco could hope for.

What she'd done in the bathroom had been like a bizarre, incredible fever dream. Like they'd stepped sideways out of time, into some other world. A hand job halfway through a shower was the *last* thing Draco had expected when he'd gotten up that morning. He hadn't thought Hermione would want to even *try* anything like that for a long time, and he'd resigned himself to near-eternal frustration, accepting it as his due. But he isn't complaining. He feels a twinge of guilt for letting her do it in the damned bathroom like that, and a fair bit more guilt and disappointment that he hadn't been able to do anything for *her* at the time – but regardless of that, it had been incredible.

He'd come fast and hard, his heart thundering in his chest, longing to do so, so much more than what she'd allowed.

Draco swallows hard, mouth dry as he remembers.

Her hand on his dick, soft and firm as she'd ordered him to be still like she was discovering how fun it could be to play at being in charge, a breathless thrill in her voice, only faintly edged by fear. It makes sense, he thinks, fiddling with the tail of her braid as he stares down at the fan of her lashes and the plump pout of her sleeping mouth, that she'd want control. And if that is what she needs, he'll give it to her. He'll keep his own urges on a tight leash and willingly endure whatever she wants to do, even though the need to react and respond burns in him like a nearly inexorable urge. An itching compulsion that he hates having to suppress.

It isn't as though Hermione wants to do anything weird of course. She just seems to consistently spiral whenever Draco is anything other than passive. It's an issue. It's a problem they're going to have to confront and solve eventually. He wants desperately to touch her, and kiss her, and put his mouth on her breasts and her cunt, and his fingers through her hair, his hands gripping the soft curve of her arse.

It killed him this morning, holding still under her hands when he just wanted to let go and bury himself in her; his face, his fingers, his dick. Merlin, he wants to, so badly. He wants to make her scream and moan, but with ecstasy rather than pain. To take his time, and do it all *right*, and show her just how good it can be. When she touches him and gives *him* pleasure, he needs to echo it, to return it to her tenfold – but as soon as he tries, it turns sour for her. They'll need to take it slow, Draco knows that much. He can't push her.

But maybe...maybe his idea of her being in a position of control as he eats her out might work. If she has a wand, she can conjure wrist binds to eliminate the threat he represents to her subconscious mind, and then she can just sit on his face and...he stifles a groan at the thought, his fingers trembling against her back as he holds very still. He wants to try it. And he hopes he can, tonight. Because the only two things that could make today better, in Draco's mind, would be if she lets him lick her pretty cunt until she comes on his mouth, and if he finally gets permission to *fight*.

Draco has little hope that the latter will happen, but the former... He shuts his eyes and imagines Hermione in the position of control she needs – sitting over his face, her hands clutching his hair, her face all screwed up with pleasure, her juices slick on his chin as he fucks her with his tongue, and slicks it in teasing circles over and over her clit, until she finally comes apart with a throaty cry, her thighs tensing and her vulva twitching against his tongue with the force of her orgasm. *Fuck*. He's rock hard, and his pulse ratchets up, and he lies there very still, pointlessly wanting her, waiting for his overeager dick to go down again.

But Draco's smiling as his fingers drift over Hermione's back, and she stirs and mumbles something incoherent, and her hand slides further over his stomach, clutching at his side. "Tickles," she

murmurs in drowsy protest and nuzzles a cheek closer against his chest as he stills his hand, splaying his fingers gently over her back instead. His heart aches as he looks down at her, face tilted up toward him slightly, peaceful in her doze and utterly trusting as she sprawls herself over him.

It's been such a long time since he's felt simple, uncomplicated happiness that he isn't sure – but Draco thinks he might be happy.

Ron gets back safely from his mission not long before lunch, looking exhausted but unharmed. He pauses in the hall and glances into the sitting room, and Hermione sees the moment he clocks Harry sitting there with a spread of playing cards in his hand. A look passes between the two of them. Once more, there's guilt in Harry's expression, and resentment in Ron's, and Hermione is reminded acutely that there is a wedge between the two boys in addition to the gulf between her and them. When it comes to her, they're a united front, their resentment and guilt set aside, but otherwise... Hermione thinks that if she wasn't here at HQ, they may not have even spent much time together.

It's weird. *Everything* is broken.

Mrs Weasley tries to hug Ron but he waves her off; he's splattered in mud and there's a smear of blood on his cheek. With a weak flicker of a smile that Hermione thinks is aimed at her, he trudges up the stairs, his steps heavy.

"I *wish* I could be out there," Harry says miserably, a denial of Ron's unspoken accusation.

"You and me both, Potter," Draco says, a weird bitterness in his voice – a caged longing – and Hermione's head swivels as she stares at him in surprise. He never talks to others if he can avoid it. He looks as trapped as he sounds; a kind of restless need emanating off him, in the shadow-darkened charcoal of his eyes and the press of his lips, and the way his left knee jitters slightly. His right hand flexes as if he's missing the feel of a wand in his grip, and Hermione feels her stomach turn.

Draco hasn't mentioned wanting to fight before now. Not to her at least, although she supposes, being him, he could have been mulling it over for weeks. He doesn't exactly share his inner thoughts and feelings, and Hermione understands that; years as a double agent have made him entirely self-contained, and she knows that every time he opens up to her, it's as though he's ripping his heart out for her to examine. Baring his throat. But this feels like being blindsided. And the idea of him fighting terrifies her. If he fights, she could lose him. But how can she stop him if Lupin allows it?

She swallows hard. "Well, you can't. Either of you," she says sharply, and Draco's gaze on her is thoughtful, like he's trying to see straight through her.

"We'll see," he says, nearly challengingly, and Hermione bites her tongue. She doesn't have to worry, she tells herself. Lupin won't let him.

"I want a wand," she says later that day, chin up, arms folded across her chest as she stares Lupin down. Draco stands silently in the doorway behind her like a ghost, leaning on the doorjamb, ankles and arms crossed, hair falling forward over his eyes. In socks, dark dress trousers and a crisp white Oxford shirt, he looks elegant and handsome, and Hermione finds her eyes keep wanting to drift to him. She knows she still looks a little ruffled from her nap earlier, her French braid all

frizzy and coming undone, and now she wishes she'd redone it. Maybe Lupin would take her more seriously.

"Merlin, Hermione, now isn't the time. I have a meeting with MACUSA in an hour, and I need to get these papers organised. I can't find the damned dossier on Arby." Hermione isn't surprised; Lupin's office is a mess. He'd clearly tidied everything away or magically hidden it for his interview with her in here because now there are files and parchments everywhere – stacked on top of the filing cabinets, in bundles piled on the desk, even on the chairs. The large maps on the walls are covered in string, magical notes and little pegs, and the general air of the room is one of bureaucratic chaos.

"Why don't you *accio* it?"

"I tried, and it's not turning up. But I know it's in here *somewhere*. It must be trapped under something."

"What colour is it?"

Lupin shoots her a glance as he digs through a desk drawer. "Navy blue." Hermione starts looking. It's slower work without a wand, but she enjoys setting things to right. Ordering them. Finding a system of cataloguing that makes all the information required available at one's fingertips, with a minimum of fuss. "You don't have to help," Lupin says, and she shakes her head.

"No, no, it's fine. I don't mind at all." A soft sound comes from the doorway, and she looks up to see that Draco is smiling at her faintly, fondness in his eyes. He's still all loose-limbed and relaxed from the morning, even though it's after dinner now. And she still feels happy and hopeful. It's been a lovely day. She skims through it in her mind as she shuffles files about.

After lunch, she and Draco had retreated to their loft room again, and she'd sat on the bed and watched him force himself through the new exercise regime he'd adopted – *if I can't have a wand, then I can't rely on magic* – while she rambled on about Harry and Ron's rift, and how much things had changed while she'd been gone. How it felt like she'd returned to a parallel dimension. How everything was just so slightly askew. She had only been gone a bit over three months, but it felt like the whole world had tilted on its axis during that time. Not that she'd been in the right state of mind to take much notice of the changes until recently. The boys had fallen out in the past, but this felt different; more sad than angry. She was sure Draco couldn't have been less interested, but he made all the right noises at the right times and occasional, breathless comments.

He'd looked beautiful, t-shirt damp with sweat and clinging to him, in boxer shorts, although the scars on his back appeared to be giving him trouble. Hermione had thought she needed to try to persuade him to apply liniment again. Pale and lean, and becoming surprisingly muscular, she had admired him and made it clear she was doing so, to his pleasure. He'd looked unspeakably smug whenever their eyes met, making Hermione feel very normal. She'd spent all day feeling fairly normal. It was amazing.

After his exercise, Draco had showered again, and when he'd come back to the room, hair still wet, barefooted, wearing long-sleeved t-shirt and joggers, she'd crawled to the end of the bed. She reached out to him, and he'd gone to her, eyes uncertain and grave, as if he wasn't sure if she was happy or sad, but he was here for her either way. His hands had been gentle and warm on her waist, and Hermione had felt suddenly so incredibly lucky. Draco was cold and hard with everyone else. Like a knife blade; unforgiving and cutting. But with her, against everything in him that had taught him he needed to be emotionless and cruel for the sake of survival as an Order agent, he *made*

himself be soft and vulnerable. Because Hermione needed it. Gratitude had welled up in her like a spring bubbling from the ground.

Merlin, she loved him so much. She'd wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, and the sound he'd made into her mouth – the needy little groan – had nearly killed her.

Hermione bites her lip, blinking as Lupin's voice penetrates her skull and yanks her rudely out of pleasant recollections.

"Thank you, Hermione. I really need to organise all of this," he says, staring around the room in dismay. "But I'm so busy it's hard to keep on top of it all."

"Maybe I can help?" Hermione offers, feeling buoyed by her good day, her confidence high. Maybe she can actually make herself useful instead of just being a broken burden. She used to help Lupin with the paperwork and communications side of things; mostly collating and organising reconnaissance data, decoding Order messages and encoding others, poring through whatever Death Eater communiques they retrieved during raids or when intercepting owls, trying to find the messages often hidden in the documents, either magically or mundanely. It had been something almost relaxing to do in between missions, and she'd been far quicker at it than anyone else at HQ.

Lupin's smile is genuine, as is his look of relief. "That would be fantastic, Hermione. Harry's been helping me, but..." He looks around himself, the implication clear; Harry obviously hasn't been doing a very good job, and Hermione isn't surprised. She grimaces. It'll take her a week just to create an organised system, she thinks, with excitement rather than dread, and eagerness to do it fizzles in her stomach. It's everything she loves. Being helpful, creating order out of chaos, and taking control.

"I'll get started today, then," she says with a nod, "but really, Remus, I need a new wand. I feel like a squib. I can't even dry my hair when I get out of the shower. It's getting ridiculous."

He gives her a long, considered look. "Maybe you should talk to Siobhan first?"

Frustration boils up sharply, and Hermione pauses in her search for the Arby file. She's hardly a danger to herself anymore – and besides, she could hurt herself without a wand if she really wanted. She says as much as she glares at Lupin. "How about this? You find me a wand that works reasonably well for me, and I'll see the Merlin-damned Healer," she bargains as she crouches down to search under the table, and Lupin is thoughtful. Hermione hefts a heavy box of god knows what to one side and finds a navy blue file underneath, wedged in amongst a pile of dark green ones. *Aha!* She yanks the file out and sees *Arby* scrawled across it in gold.

"Fine," Lupin agrees, "that sounds good," as she straightens and holds out the file. "Oh, thank you, Hermione. That's a relief. These MACUSA wizards want every detail Draco was able to get on the American wizards that you-know-who has been in talks with." Hermione looks to Draco as her stomach churns, and her mind crowds with memories. He looks uncomfortable, no longer leaning on the doorjamb, a stiffness about him now as Lupin reminds them both of old horrors. "He's –"

"– looking to ally with them. Yes," Draco says sharply, grey eyes as unreadable as stones, gleaming like slivers of the moon as he narrows them, the tension in his jaw and down the line of his shoulders and arms, hands curling into half-fists. "MACUSA would be wise to send over Aurors to aid in the war effort. If the Dark Lord succeeds in wooing the American wizards, he'll shift his focus to the US once he's overrun Magical Britain." His voice is cold and hard, an emotionless drawl.

The thought makes Hermione shudder. If Voldemort wins, she'll kill herself. Open her wrists with her own teeth if she has to; it will surely be less painful and more bearable than what will await her as a prisoner in a war they lose. She feels ill, and she turns her face away from both men, not wanting them to see her expression. Instead she busies herself with the files she found under the table, dragging them out several at a time and stacking them all up on top of it, trying not to think. There's a box of scrolls under there, too, and sheaves of loose parchment, and Hermione is astounded that Lupin can find *anything* in here.

Then Draco speaks, slightly dry, as though he already knows the answer. "So can *I* have my wand back if I agree to speak to the Healer?"

Lupin is shoving the files into a briefcase and only spares Draco an impatient glance. "No." It's flat. Non-negotiable.

"I could fight," Draco offers and Hermione's heart and lungs are clenched in a giant fist, squeezing the air and the life out of her. She freezes in her motions, crouched there with a file in hand, a cold feeling forming in the pit of her stomach. He goes on when Lupin doesn't answer immediately: "I'm expendable."

Hermione stands and whirls on him, her heart suddenly galloping and anger boiling through her, file clutched to her chest. "You are *not*!" she half-shouts, forgetting entirely that Lupin is there. "You're not *expendable*. Don't you dare –"

He holds up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay," he says placatingly, and she thinks with a flash of fury, *you don't even mean that, you liar*. "Not expendable, then. But not as valuable as Potter."

"Bullshit!" she snaps, and is confronted by the stark realisation that if it came down to a choice, she would let Harry die to save Draco's life. It's a shift in her worldview that gives her vertigo. She would place Draco's life over anyone's. Including her own. It rocks her to her core and feels right all at once; like a dislocated joint sliding into place. "That's not *true*, that's –"

"I have to go," Lupin interrupts mildly, edging past Hermione, and she feels a flush of embarrassment that he's witnessing this. "And I don't think this conversation concerns me anymore. But no, you can't have your wand back, Draco. Not yet, anyway," he adds as Draco steps out of the doorway to let the older man pass. Draco doesn't argue, although his mouth twists with displeasure as he stares at Lupin's back, and his jaw bunches with tension. "I'll get the spare wands out of storage tomorrow, Hermione," Lupin calls as he heads down the corridor, and that makes Hermione happy, at least.

She doesn't bother saying goodbye to Lupin, though. She only has eyes for Draco. "You're *not* less valuable than Harry," she says, slamming the file she holds down on the table with a dull smack. "*Don't say that.*"

"It's true, Granger," he says with a shrug, stepping forward into the room with his hands in his pockets. "He's the golden boy. I'm just an ex-Death Eater." There's a weird flippancy to his voice that she hates, but perhaps she should just be happy he's being open with her. Framing it that way doesn't really help.

"Don't *say* that. Even if you think that's true, it's not how *I* feel." This is an argument, she realises. She's irritated with him, she realises. In a way, that just adds to her wonderfully normal day, she tells herself, trying to see it positively. Draco is – he's her boyfriend, even if they've never called each other such things, and couples argue. This is *normal*.

"You're invaluable, Draco. And not that humans *should* be objectively valued like – like dogs, or pieces of jewellery, but if I were going to value you both, you certainly wouldn't be worth *less*," she says snippily, her chest feeling tight as she begins to arrange folders by colour just to give her hands something to do. Lupin at least seems to have stuck with a colour-coded system, thank Merlin. Draco doesn't say anything, but when she looks up, he's watching her contemplatively.

"What?" she snaps, and he smiles faintly. Sadly. Standing there across the table from her, hands in his pockets, a lock of hair falling over his eyes.

"You don't have to do that, Hermione."

"Do what?" She orders the files almost viciously, and she's barely made a dent in what needs to be done. Organising all this will be fun, a part of her mind thinks absently.

"Pretend that I'm as important as Potter. Or Weasley," Draco says, as if her feelings for him are some *act* she puts on. "They've been your friends for years. I understand that you probably value them more." *What the fuck?* She could slap him for that utter shit. She very maturely doesn't. Instead, Hermione glares at the files, biting her tongue and clenching her jaw to stop her chin from trembling like her fingers already are, her chest feeling hot and tight. She swallows hard and looks up to him, aghast, angry, and bewildered. She's not sure which emotion she feels most strongly, and her heart is beating too fast.

"I'm not *pretending*. Jesus Christ. I'm *not*. You – *you* are the single most important person in my life, full stop, and I would do anything for you, Draco. So don't be a *fucking idiot*." She pauses, rounding the table in a few swift steps and stopping in front of him. "I love you," she says, putting all of her heart into it, trying to make him feel it. "So much. More than anything in the world. You need to know that. It's very important that you know that." Her eyes meet his steadily as she reaches out, hooking her fingers into his pockets, her knuckles brushing the backs of his hands.

He stares at her silently for a handful of long seconds. And then he looks away, ducking his head and pressing his lips together as if he can't take the weight of her regard. "Okay," he says at last, as if in reluctant acceptance. "Okay." And then, pulling his hands from his pockets and drawing her close, his fingers curving around her elbows, he leans in as if to kiss her cheek: "You know you're everything to me, don't you?" he asks, a murmur into her ear, his lips just brushing her skin. She nods, her hands gripping his shirt at his sides, warm with his body heat.

"I still like to hear it, though," she says meaningfully, anger not having yet dissipated from the implication that she values Draco less than Harry and Ron.

"I love you, Hermione," he says obediently, the words containing a wealth of emotion, and his lips press to her cheek.

She will never tire of hearing that.

Draco wakes with a choked gasp, tears wet on his cheeks, and dreams bloody in his mind's eye. He's on his back in a soft bed, a hand laid warm on his jaw, and Hermione's voice gentle in his ear. He swallows hard and lays his hand over Hermione's, opening his eyes to her worried face; eyes dark in the moonlight, her lips tight with distress. "Sorry," he rasps and clears his throat, embarrassed by the emotion choking him. He swipes the back of his hand over his cheeks as Hermione makes a soft, wounded sound.

"God, Draco. Don't be *sorry*." She seems terribly upset by his apology, her fingers petting along his jaw, over his ear, through his hair, and that distress just makes him want to apologise again, ironically. He refrains, chewing on the inside of his cheek to keep the words back, and the pain helps him shove down the pathetic tears that want to escape as well. They roll together onto their sides, nose to nose, as if by unspoken agreement, her right arm hooking over his left side, her eyes very grave and sad. He cards his fingers slowly through her hair; she left it loose tonight, and it's wild, silky chaos now.

He remembers the nightmare as he stares into her face. Shadowed because she faces away from the window. It had been a bloody, vicious muddle – a combination of some of the worst revels he'd attended before Hermione's capture, except she'd been present. She'd featured heavily, as the evening's entertainment. He'd started off trying to protect her while still keeping his cover; playing the possessive master. And then, as things had progressively gotten worse, he'd blown his cover wide open in a fruitless attempt to protect her. Of course it had only led to him being put up as entertainment too, and then both of them were subject to more and more depraved things. When Draco had been jerked from the nightmare he'd been hanging there, crucified – something Voldemort had actually done to him after his failure to kill Dumbledore personally – and watching Bellatrix peel the flesh from Hermione's chest inch by inch as she *screamed*, the mercy of unconsciousness denied her by a spell.

He swallows down vomit, sick to his stomach. At least he's not crying.

"I love you," she whispers, yanking him out of the dark kaleidoscope of memories and nightmares, and he focuses on her. Her fingertips graze lightly over his cheekbone, dragging along the lines of his face almost worshipfully. Trailing up his temples, along his forehead, combing a little through his fringe, and he can feel strands of hair stuck to his sweat-damp forehead. She brushes it back, her firewhisky eyes huge in her face, pupils inky pools, her lashes casting fans of shadow over her cheeks, which are no longer so gaunt.

Draco tries to drag the words out of his throat, his chest squeezing tight as he inhales. Saying it always feels like stripping himself bare, naked and vulnerable. So fucking exposed. As though he's opening his insides up for her to probe through. Putting his life in her hands. He says it anyway.

"And I love you," he tells her, and somehow the four words fall short to his ears. They aren't enough. They don't describe how he feels. As though Hermione is his beating heart walking around the world outside of him, and he feels the fierce and constant need to have her close, to protect her. She is what keeps him alive; what keeps his blood flowing through his veins. She is the reason he ran that night instead of lying down and dying. She is the reason he left his cell instead of rotting there until they finally let him fight, or let him die. She's the reason he opens his eyes every morning, and somehow finds a fragile happiness in moments he knows he doesn't deserve to experience.

Hermione smiles at him in the moonlight, and her fingers curl in the shorter hairs at the back of his head, holding him still as she leans in and kisses him. Mouth soft and lips parted, a slow press, and then she pulls back and searches his gaze. "Don't think about that," she whispers, and *fuck*, the swell of emotion in her voice is too much when directed at him. Love, trust, and an infinite tenderness that makes him feel nearly feverish beneath its weight – it's too much; it's more than he deserves. "Think about this, now. Think about me." She takes his hand and puts it on her waist, her shirt rucked up so that he's touching hot, bare skin, and she feels like silk. And it's only her waist, but he slips his hand fully onto her skin, and she just makes a soft, happy hum and pushes her lips to his again, and he feels like he's holding something precious in his hand.

Some delicate creature with its heart fluttering frantic with fear, its skin paper-thin, at his mercy.

Hermione's lips part and her kiss is hot and soft, and Draco's nightmares are obliterated under the neediness of her tiny little moans and the tentative slick of her tongue against his. Their mouths move and push in a lazy synchronicity, and there's a luxurious grace to it, underpinned by that heated, needy undercurrent. Arousal swells and his skin flushes with it as his hand slides up over her ribs, which he can still feel all too clearly. He's hard and he wants her – of course he does, Merlin, the *things* he wants to do with her, obscene and exquisite – but there's no urgency building, just a consistent hum of desire lurking in the back of his mind, pushed down for now.

Instead, Draco luxuriates in the sensations that Hermione allows him. Sweet and heady, her mouth blossoming open against his, and he drinks from her as though nectar from a flower. His tongue curling against hers and making her shudder and moan, her fingers tightening in his hair, her breathing turning ragged. He teases her, carefully and methodically, losing himself in the taste of her mouth, the wet-slick roughness of her tongue, the blunt edges of her teeth, the swollen, plump flesh of her lips, exploring her as though she is undiscovered territory he is mapping and staking claim to.

He *arouses* her and when he finally pulls back to look her in the eyes again, she's flushed pink right to her chest, panting, her eyes starry-dizzy, her lips kiss-reddened and damp, and she's making little whimpering sounds with each uneven breath, voicing the need that he's stoked in her. Draco forgets everything but her, at this moment. Beautiful and needy, her own expression absent of any fear or taint of memory, her skin so soft and hot beneath his fingers as he smooths them down her naked side. Her fingers are firm on the back of his head as she pulls him back in, kissing the corner of his mouth and then sliding over the ball of his shoulder and down his chest, she makes a noise of annoyance. "Your shirt's in the way," she says petulantly against his mouth even as her tongue glides along his bottom lip and the words come out half-formed, and they both smile against each other's mouths, kiss collapsing.

And then her hand slips under his t-shirt and slides over his abdomen, raising shivers and goosebumps in its path. "There," she says triumphantly, grinning, and he huffs a laugh as her gentle touch tingles him, his own hand spanning half her side, his fingers splayed wide. "You really are ticklish," she crows as her fingers dance down his side playfully, and he squirms despite himself. She snickers and gives him mercy, and something bright and painful swells in his chest. Salazar's sake, he loves her so fucking much.

She may be broken still, but she really *is* healing. For a while, Draco feared her experiences had done enough irreparable damage to be devastating, but she's stronger than he'd thought. There is an unquenchable, incorruptible spirit to her; despite everything the Dark Lord ordered done to Hermione, she can still grin against Draco's mouth, and laugh, and kiss him. And then her mouth slants over his again, and she makes a little *mmph* as he holds her close, paying worship with his kisses. Her hand slides over the thick scarring on his back, the feel of her fingers fading in and out as she glides over thick scar tissue.

Peace settles in his bones, fragile and tender in the small bubble of their darkened bed, in their moonlit room, alone together.

Chapter 17

Seventeen

Lupin calls Hermione through to his office in the evening, the day after she asked him about getting a new wand, while what feels like half the house is in the sitting room, listening to the radio. Even Shacklebolt, whom Draco eyes darkly. He resents the wizard for not finding a way to get Hermione out earlier during her captivity. Shit, he hates himself for *following* Shacklebolt's orders – if he hadn't had it fixed in his head that he had to stay undercover, he would've run with Hermione as soon as he'd first discovered her in the dungeons. Although if he had, would they be together now? That's a terrible thought, and one that leads him down mental pathways that result in uneasy guilt as he gets up as Hermione does, shooting her a questioning look.

Draco follows at her beckoning gesture, a battered wizarding novel in one hand. And then he watches with a hint of envy from the doorway as the werewolf unpacks a box of wands wrapped carefully in cloth, laying them all out on the newly cleared tabletop. Hermione spent part of her afternoon yesterday and today organising the mess in Lupin's office. He was fairly certain the job – which would bore the daylights out of the average person – had made her gleefully happy. Draco had tried to help here and there because it was more entertaining than just sitting there watching her arrange files. But he'd been able to see her getting irritated at the way he didn't understand her system and in the end, this afternoon, she'd banished him from the office with a laugh.

It was the first time in too long that Draco had seen Hermione react and behave so normally – like the overly organised swot that she was at heart. That she'd been at Hogwarts, years ago. Absorbed in doing something that occupied her mind, she'd been happy, for a little while. It makes him hopeful. He'd silently worried that helping Lupin out would be too much for her to take on and handle, but perhaps it would help, giving her something to do every day that keeps her mind busy.

Hermione's new wand had belonged to an Order member who'd died during a raid; not anyone Draco knew. Willow, with a dragon heartstring core, 11 inches, and flexible. An uncommon wood, with healing properties, if he recalls correctly. It seems appropriate for her right now. The wand chooses the wizard, or witch, in this case.

"It feels friendly," Hermione says as she flourishes it, hovering a paperweight in the air. "Like it wants to please."

Draco watches as Lupin packs away *his* wand carefully with the others – the one he'd received from Voldemort to replace the wand Potter had taken from him over two years ago, which he knows Potter still uses. His new one is yew with a phoenix feather core, 10 1/2 inches, flexible. Ironically, Potter had disarmed him of this one too, when Draco had tried to defect. Of course, he'd given it back so Draco could be sent back in as a double agent. He holds in a sigh as Lupin wraps it in cloth and tucks it back in the box. It's a good wand and performs better for him now than his hawthorn wand ever had.

He misses the security of having it in his hand.

"Good. Now, I'd rather you didn't let *him* use it, Hermione," Lupin says, with a nod to Draco, who arches a brow, trying to look innocent. The older wizard frowns at him censoriously. "I imagine I won't be able to stop you, though."

"I only want the wand for basic, everyday things, Remus," Hermione says as she practices a *lumos*, dodging a straight answer. "And I doubt it'd work for Malfoy anyway. His wand never worked well for me."

"Hm, well. Just remember that you owe Siobhan an appointment. She's busy the next few days at another safe house – a raid went badly – but as soon as she's free, I expect you to have a session with her. And *cooperate*. Unlike him." Lupin jabs a finger in Draco's direction and he offers a faint, unapologetic smile.

"I agreed to see your Healer, and I did," he says blandly, irritation simmering under his skin. He had bared his soul enough during his veritaserum sessions with Lupin. The idea of exposing himself willingly to a Healer on the Order's payroll is laughable. They *made* him feel the way he does; how can they help him? Anything he tells them is just as likely to be used against him in the end if they believe it'll be useful. They made him a useful monster, and they aren't sorry for that. Draco trusts the Order to keep Hermione safe so long as she's not fighting, but he otherwise doesn't trust them at all. "I don't owe you *anything*."

He holds Lupin's gaze unblinkingly, and the older wizard looks away first, with a tired sigh, as though Draco has disappointed him.

"Fine," Lupin says wearily, rubbing a hand across his forehead. "Fine." He locks the box of wands and hefts it up, cradled in both arms. "I'm heading out to see Tonks and Teddy at Andromeda and Ted's tonight –" Draco knows the toddler lives with his grandparents, but Nymphadora and Lupin seem to visit him every chance they get – "so if you have any issues with the wand, Hermione, it'll have to wait until tomorrow."

"Thanks, Remus." Hermione seems subtly different as she holds the new willow wand in her hand, wordlessly casting another *wingardium leviosa*, this time on a stack of files atop a filing cabinet, arranging them neatly in mid-air and then settling them back down. She's gained some of her power back, literally and symbolically, and Draco can see the change in her. It's beautiful. *She's* beautiful. She smiles at him as Lupin strides out into the corridor, off to see his family.

"Do you want to go outside?" she asks. "We don't have a hedge maze, but we do have a small back garden, and only a small chance of being interrupted." Her smile broadens into a grin and it's infectious; a flash of white teeth, her eyes bright, and he wants to kiss her. He keeps his face schooled to neutrality, except for the little lopsided hint of a smile he knows she loves.

"Lead the way, Granger." He's automatically affectionate but flippant, covering the thoughts whirring through his mind.

Merlin, she really is beautiful. Creamy skin and dark eyes with those amber starbursts around the pupils, the faintest hint of freckling across her straight nose, and a determined jut of jaw and chin. She's sharp and soft at once, a grin still shaping her lips. He thinks she might be giddy with excitement, and he loves it. Hermione takes his hand with her free one, her own so much smaller, and he remembers the way she tended to his injuries with those hands. While he cried silently with the pain, she did the brutal work that needed to be done: cleaning and debriding wounds, peeling stuck bandaging off weeping burns as he bit into his belt, wiping away the sweat and blood. Never flinching from what needed to be done. She tugs him along and he goes; she's stronger than she thinks.

Mrs Weasley smiles at them as they go past the kitchen; Hermione doesn't notice, but Draco sees the fondness in the witch's eyes as she looks at the two of them, and inclines his head in

acknowledgement. The woman's been nice to him, and she's not responsible for anything that happened to him, or Hermione. There's no need to be rude.

The coat racks by the back door have a variety of parkas and coats that are mostly communal; people take whatever fits. There's also a basket of hats, scarves, and gloves. The shoes aren't communal though, thank Merlin for small mercies. Draco wedges his feet into his boots – finally returned to him – as he shrugs on a black coat. He'll forgo sharing hats with half the Order; it's not cold enough for the indignity, and he doesn't bother lacing his boots, just shoving the laces under the tongue. Hermione, however, pulls on a blue parka, and a grey knitted cap, slinging a multi-coloured knit scarf around her neck. She looks very sweet all bundled up, and Draco finds he wants to kiss her quite badly. Their eyes meet and a frisson buzzes in the air, and Draco's heartbeat feels both sluggish, and too hard, a slow drum against his ribs. His hand drifts up, fingers grazing over her cheek, and Hermione looks up at him expectantly, pink tongue wetting her lips.

Mrs Weasley pops her head into the corridor. "Would you two like some cocoa?"

Draco bites his tongue and likes Mrs Weasley rather less.

"No, thank you," Hermione says politely and Mrs Weasley vanishes, but the moment is gone. Draco sighs.

"Come on then, Granger," he says and opens the door.

They watch the stars come out, sitting on the lawn, on a patch of ground Hermione's dried and warmed with a few charms. He sprawls out on his side, propping his head up on his hand, and she sits with legs folded under her, very close.

As she clearly means it to, it makes Draco think of the small clearing in the middle of the hedge maze at the mansion. Of a brief freedom, as night wrapped them in a veiling blanket, the air bitterly cold and Hermione all bundled up in gloves, cloak, and hat, pressing close against him. It makes him remember daisy chains, stolen kisses, and improbable laughter – just the two of them in a solitary bubble, the world reduced down to her, and he'd have been happy if it had frozen like that forever. If they had been the only two humans left on the face of the planet. Damn the rest of the world. Everyone else could go hang for all he cared.

She tells him that he can use her wand and never mind what Lupin said, but he tries a *lumos* while they sit there in the darkening twilight, and it sputters and flickers. He shrugs, passing it back to her. "I wouldn't trust my life to it."

It's a nice wand. It suits her somehow, looking right in her hand. Pale honey, stripped wood for most of the length, save the handle which is darker, as though it retains more of the outer colouration, though it is all polished and softly gleaming in the moonlight, Celtic markings engraved down the length. She practices charms – a flurry of colourful sparks, a stream of water, a blossoming flower, and he watches, bathing in her happiness, wishing every day could be like today. But he's a realist. He knows that while this may be a step forward in her recovery, it's not a fix.

They will go to bed tonight, and she'll have nightmares and wake up sobbing, perhaps afraid of him, and she'll remember terrible things, and she'll scrub herself raw in the shower – he's seen some of the marks she leaves, at times – and she won't magically be better. But Draco will enjoy now. This moment. Her smile.

The moon is high in the sky when Hermione finally tires of practising charms. She looks apologetic as she slides the wand into the arm holster Lupin had given her. "Sorry."

"What? Why?" Draco genuinely doesn't understand, and she shrugs, looking awkward.

"I feel a little like I'm rubbing it in," she says, and he gives her a quizzical look, still not understanding. He's just been enjoying the transitory peace of watching her.

"Because I got a wand, and you don't have yours back yet," she explains, fiddling with the snaps on her parka, and he grins a little.

"Don't be stupid, Granger. I'm just happy *you* have a wand." He lies back, staring up at the sky, and Hermione joins him, lying propped up on one elbow so that their faces are very close together. She kisses his jaw and a delicious shiver runs through him. Her pupils blot out her irises, probably from the dark just as much as arousal, but her breath is shallow and she's pressing very close against him, her left hand splayed on his chest, right over his heart.

"Why is that, Malfoy?" she asks as expected. He swallows hard, hoping she'll take this the right way as she peppers kisses along his jawline.

"It'll make binding my hands easier when you sit on my face," he says, filled with intention, voice a little rough as his hand settles at her waist, the padded parka getting in the way of feeling her soft, warm curves. His fingers press hard, the material rustling under his grip. He wants to see his fingers dent into her flesh, and it burns him that he can't. She inhales sharply against his jaw and freezes for a second, and then he feels her breathing begin again.

"God, Malfoy. That – I mean –" She sounds breathless and shaky. Unsure. She pulls back a little, meeting his eyes as she bites her lip.

Draco turns his head a little, hand coming up to fit to her cheek. He thinks of the things he'd rather forget, and of what he wants to fill his head with instead. What he wants *her* to think of; all the things he wants to do to her. Obscene, filthy, and worshipful. He wants to drink from her, to pay tribute to her on his knees, to push her onto the bed and slide his cock into the slick tightness of her in a way that would make her groan at the pleasure of it. He wants to be both a supplicant and a besieger. To take her apart in every good way, rather than the bad. Merlin forgive him, Draco wants his cum sliding down her thighs, but mingled with her juices rather than blood, her lips swollen from kisses instead of blows, her expression dazed from orgasm rather than shock.

Guilt churns in his gut. Wanting her and hurting her are so intimately entwined in his subconscious. *I only raped her once*, Draco thinks with a brief, bitter numbness – an awful sentence to be capable of thinking – and yet it has imprinted on his mind. Burned into it indelibly. It doesn't seem fair to either of them.

"I want to make you come," he says simply, keeping the rest of his messy, awful feelings locked inside. His thumb drags over her lips as she hovers there just above him, her eyes pools in the moonlight, nervousness radiating off her. "I want to make you feel good instead of hurting you."

"You *do* make me feel good." Hermione closes the gap between their mouths and kisses him, soft and lingering. He returns the kiss in kind, but an undeniable frustration seethes in him no matter how much he tries to tamp it down. She's cautious yet needy, a little whimper escaping her, and Merlin, it's not *enough*. It's never enough; Draco wants things that he can't have from her. Not yet, at least. He's a bastard for wanting what he does, and he knows that – he hates himself for it – but it

doesn't stop him from *wanting*. He wants her upstairs on the bed, stripped naked in the lamplight, hair loose and legs parted. *Exposed*.

She's delicious – intoxicating, as she leans over him, the tail of her braid tickling his throat, her fingers digging into his hair. Her smell, the little sips of breath she takes, the way she presses against him. And he hates her parka. He wants it off. Gone. It hides all her curves, a barrier between them. *Fuck*. He wants his mouth on her bare breasts, sucking on her dusky pink nipples, making her shiver and moan and arch into him. He wants to slide his hand between her legs and feel the slick wetness of arousal, to press his mouth to her sweet cunt and lick until she comes, gasping and moaning on his tongue. But most of all, he just wants to *fuck* her.

Instead, Draco kisses her very softly, matching her intensity, and his desire spikes even more, that selfish frustration a background hum he does his best to ignore. He's hard already, and when she wriggles her hand under his layers and flattens it against his abdomen, his breath stutters.

Salazar's sake, this is going to *kill* him. He traces his fingers down her hairline from forehead to jaw before sliding his hand around the back of her neck, holding her close and subtly controlling the kiss, and she allows it. His tongue darts into her mouth, and she moans. Presses closer. He clasps his teeth over her lower lip and sucks, and she shudders and makes a small, animal sound, her fingers wrenching tightly in his hair. "Ouch," he mumbles, still sucking on her lip, and she whimpers involuntarily and eases her grip off, her tongue slicking into his mouth and making *him* want to shudder this time.

It's a delicate interplay, and Draco's so painfully, exquisitely aware of everything. The chill breeze and the warm ground, the heavy, insistent press of her body, the needy little noises she keeps making as she palms her hand over his torso, the throbbing of his hopeful erection trapped in his boxers, the infuriating way nearly every part of her is covered in heavy clothing. The closest he can get to touching Hermione's skin is from the neck up and her bare hands. It's fucking *awful*. If they were in their room, at least she'd be in fewer layers, even if he couldn't do much more. Without thought, Draco tries to steer things in that direction.

"We don't have to do anything if you don't want to," he says softly into the hollow of her throat, pausing the light, wet kisses he's placing there. Her pulse is rapid, her chest heaving with her ragged breaths. "You're in control. You're *always* in control, Granger. But we could do more than just kiss if we go inside..."

She draws back and looks at him, nervous again. Uncertain, although he can see the desire in the blown width of her pupils, the way she breathes, and how she bites her lip before she speaks. "Okay," she says then, breathless and excited and nearly as soon as the word leaves her lips, he's shoving himself to his feet and pulling her up with him, his back twinging painfully as scars yank tight. "Just – just, no promises," she says as he loops his arms around her waist and kisses her nose, her cheek, her eyebrow; her puffy parka keeping his dick from pressing into her pelvis and making her uncomfortable. At least it's useful for something.

"Whatever you want, Granger," he manages to say, and he feels like he's not thinking as much as he should be, all the blood rushing from his head, redirecting. "You're the one with the wand." He feels stupid with desire. "You're the one in control."

She eyes him, and he can see the trust and *want* on her face. "I am," she says, almost like a question, and a small pain sparks to life in his chest at that. The way she can still want and trust him after everything, the way she's so uncertain. He ushers her through the doorway into the house first,

taking that extra second to adjust his dick so his erection is less blatant – the quickest adjustment ever made because then he's following her into the house and shedding his coat while she strips off her warm things.

They pass Johnson on the stairs, and she smirks at them outright as she takes in the state of them, and Draco sees Hermione's cheeks blaze up red and curses Johnson in his head. She keeps hold of his hand though, and that has to be a good sign.

And then their door closes behind him and he stands there against it, a weight hanging in the air as she turns. Her wand is in her hand. "*Muffliato*," she says with a flick, and then she slides her wand into her arm holster. He makes to step forward and she holds up a finger. "Wait." He freezes. Her eyes are dark and unreadable, but her cheeks are flushed and her fingers are unsteady as she begins to unbutton her shirt. "I don't want to do – *that*, tonight," she says softly, and he knows what she means. He nods understandingly, although disappointment is hot in his veins. He keeps picturing her kneeling over him. Even though she's still too thin, she has curves – the flare of her hips and dip of her waist, her breasts still full enough to make a good handful, and he can imagine looking up at her as she braces her hands on the wall, back arched, thrusting those breasts out, as he feasts on her cunt.

"Today has been a *good* day," she says as she unbuttons her shirt and then shrugs it off, leaving her in just a thin white vest. He can see the shadows of her nipples through the fabric. *Fuck*. His hands clench for a moment, his breath catching; in front of Voldemort, that kind of obvious tell would see him being questioned, brutally. She's made him sloppy. "I don't want to risk... I don't want to push it." Hermione looks down at her hands, fingers twisting in the hem of her vest. "I don't want to ruin a good day. But *I want you*." The last comes out on a shuddering, strangled breath as she looks up at him, and he sways forward, wanting to do what the tone of her voice says she's aching for, even if the words don't.

Draco swallows hard and stays still, rooted to the floorboards at the edge of the rug. "So what do I do?" He tries to be calm and cool, but it comes out a little ragged. "What would you ask of me?" He watches as Hermione shoves her leggings down, trying desperately to stay composed and being foiled by his damned erection. That's quite the tell as well, he thinks grimly. Her legs are smooth and slim, and he wants to bite and lick his way up her inner thighs. "I'll do whatever you want," he tells her, and she shoots him a smile that's nearly wicked, if a little wobbly around the edges.

"Yes, you will." She's standing there in nothing but a vest, knickers, and arm holster, and from her stance and expression, he can tell she feels like she has the power. She's nervous but not afraid. Draco feels like going to his knees. "Take off your shirt," she says, and he swallows and does as he's told, undoing his buttons quickly. "Trousers next," she says, eyeing his crotch, and he obeys again, his cheeks heating slightly as he pops his button through and slides the zipper down, and his dick springs free in his boxers. *Shit*.

A look of absorbed concentration slides over Hermione's face, and she gnaws on the edge of her lower lip, pupils swamping her eyes as she locks them onto his erection. "It's very obvious, isn't it," she observes breathily as he steps out of his trousers and kicks them to the side, feeling weirdly exposed in nothing but his boxers. He huffs a laugh despite himself, looking down again at the way it tents out his black shorts, resisting the ridiculous urge to cover his dick with both hands. She asked him to undress, after all. She must want to see.

"I guess it is," he agrees mildly – wryly, wondering what exactly is going on in that head of hers. "I feel like I should apologise, for some reason." And *oh fuck*, as soon as the words enter his head and

leave his mouth, he thinks of why exactly he should apologise for it. And he knows from her flinch and the way the colour drains from her face that she does too. "*Fuck*. Now I *am* sorry," he says helplessly, but Hermione shakes her head.

"Shut up," she says tightly. She's still pale and her jaw is set, but she's determined. Merlin, she has steel in her spine. Draco shuts up. She chews on her lip again and then crosses the few steps to him, their eyes locked. Her hand presses over his dick as she looks up at him, pushing it flat against his abdomen, and he sucks in a breath. *Fuck*, her hand is warm and firm, and even just that feels amazing; he's wound so tightly, like a spring.

He kisses her. Maybe he should wait for her to make the first move, but he can't. Draco doesn't touch her – keeps his hands at his sides, fingers tense with restraint – but Hermione's lips part under his, willing and pliable as he licks into her mouth in mimicry of penetration, and he feels his dick twitch against her hand. She makes a muffled sound of surprise that turns into a moan as he slicks his tongue over hers. Arousal thuds through him like a heartbeat, and he feels like the temperature in the room rises five degrees; he can feel his pulse in his fingertips.

Draco's hands come up unbidden, sliding to find Hermione's waist and cup the back of her head and she lets him, leaning into him instead of pulling away, making small, soft sounds that drive him wild. The hand not pressed against his dick is wrapped around the back of his neck, her fingers sliding into his hair, holding him down to her. Draco wants to pick her up, carry her to the bed, slide her knickers down her legs, and push his dick into her. He feels dizzy with how badly he wants to fuck her. To bury himself in her body, to lose himself inside her; all thought blotted out by the insistent, animal need to come. But he keeps himself reined in, and for a few long moments they just kiss as she holds his dick and his hair, his hands petting over her, tangling in her hair and smoothing down her back, fingertips just barely gliding beneath the band of her knickers and over her arse.

He *works* her. Fleeting touches, soft and non-threatening, working Hermione up and up carefully and tactically, until she's forgetting the last vestiges of her fear in the midst of her pleasure, her fingers curled hard around his cock as she leans heavy into him, her mouth open hungrily like a baby bird desperate for what he gives her. And he kisses, licks, and nips, his dick hard enough to ache, her moans making his blood liquid fire. She's shivering when he finally drags his mouth from her swollen lips, trembling as if from a hex, her breathing unsteady and whimpering, her fingers flexing and clutching.

"As fun as this is, it isn't going to make you come," he says low and throaty, feeling wrecked himself, brain starved for oxygen because all the blood feels like it's in his dick. *Fuck*. It's actually hard to think. "And I want you to come."

"I –" she looks at him helplessly, and she clearly wants it too, her eyes heavy-lidded, pupils swamping the amber in her irises, a flush over her from cheeks to her chest. But perhaps sitting on his face is too much, too soon.

"Why don't you touch yourself?" Draco ventures after a second's frantic thought, dipping his head to murmur the next part in her ear. "Why don't you lie down on the bed, slide your hand down your pants, and take care of yourself while I kiss you? Hold you. Nothing too intense. Just your hand, and me holding you." He slides his hand up Hermione's back as he says the last, and she makes a hum of contentment at the touch that makes his mouth dry and his dick twitch again. She's radiating uncertainty, but she nods and slides from his grip, backing across the room. And then they're

settling on the bed, and she's dragging the covers up over her hips, shy as she reclines back on the pillows.

"I feel like I'm on show."

"It's just you and me," he says, his heart thundering, forcing a faint smile. "And I promise I won't look if you don't want me to, Granger." She grins at that and nods, biting her lip again, all nerves and eagerness muddled together. He props himself up on an elbow and kisses the edge of her jaw, and she turns her head, letting out a moan as she catches his mouth with hers. A sloppy, wet clash, and he groans despite himself. He's aware, although he doesn't look, that her right hand is slipping beneath the blanket. Moving. Fuck, he wishes he could see. Wishes it was his hand. Wishes it was his mouth.

He kisses her as she rubs, little movements prompting little moans, and he catches them all with his mouth. After a few minutes though, her kisses lose all cohesion, and Draco draws back to watch her for a moment. She's obviously lost in the feeling, unselfconscious now, her lower lip caught between her teeth and her eyes screwed shut, a faint sheen of perspiration glowing on her flushed skin as her hand moves quickly in small circles. Her breasts shift with her movements, firm but soft, and Draco bends his head, closing his mouth gently over her left nipple, a dusky shadow beneath the thin cotton, and she whimpers, a little *mmph* escaping her, her back arching up.

"Oh," she says very softly, wonder in her tone as he lets his saliva wet the cotton and sucks gently. Enclosing her nipple in the heat and wet suction of his mouth and swirling his tongue over the firm bud as it tightens. Sucking, licking; sensation bursting through her. "Oh god," she murmurs, the Muggle epithet a strangled gasp as she lays her free hand on the back of his head, fingers digging into his hair. "Oh *god*." He grins, teeth grazing her nipple and making her squeak, and her hand quickens beneath the cover of the blanket. "Other – other one," she gasps, dragging at his hair, and he pushes himself up further and sinks his mouth to her right nipple. Her breast is pushed up by her arm as she reaches down her body, rubbing herself.

"Are you wet?" he asks her in a strangled voice, suddenly desperate to know, as her vest leaves his mouth dry, her nipples stark beneath the wet patches of cloth. He blows across her nipple, and she shudders and makes an inarticulate moan. His dick is so fucking hard, and he wants to jerk it. To come all over her leg. Fuck. "Tell me how wet you are right now, Hermione." It's nearly an order, a dark need running under the words and he cringes, but it doesn't seem to remind her of anything because she just shifts her arm, and he imagines her fingers sliding between her slick, wet folds and bites his lip hard.

"V-very wet," she pants, eyes shut, sweat on her forehead, cheeks red. "*Draco*. Oh god..."

"Are you going to come for me?" he asks against her breast and then sucks hard on her nipple, and a low wail escapes her throat before she replies. She sounds as though a weight is crushing her chest, dragging for air desperately.

"Y-yes –" Hermione gets out, and he moves his mouth back to her left breast, drawing her nipple into his mouth as he very gently pinches and rolls her right nipple between his finger and thumb, and she gasps in, in, in – three juddering, ragged wrenches for air as tension rips through her body, bowing her – and then she comes, with a discordant, moaning wail, her hips and legs tensing rhythmically, a *release*. An avalanche. Draco draws back a little, forgetting to breathe as he watches her, and Merlin, she's beautiful; brows all crinkled and mouth half open, tension in every line of her body, muscles in her abdomen drawing tight, her right arm trembling, her knees twitching. It's as

though she's breaking apart, the orgasm rolling through her hard like waves crashing – and then she goes limp.

He wonders how long it's been since she came. Nearly half a year?

Hermione pulls her hand free after a second and he catches her wrist. She looks at him – starry, shining, firewhisky eyes above flushed cheeks – and he looks at her hand. At her fingers, shining slick and wet. Fuck. She really was *very* wet. And before she can think to pull away, Draco shoves her fingers in his mouth and sucks. "*Mmph*, oh my god – *Malfoy!*" she protests as he hollows out his cheeks, sucking on her two fingers, slicking his tongue between them, and she makes a snorting, laughing sound but lets him. She tastes tangy and sweet at once, and so fucking delicious. It's a crime that he can't bury his face in her cunt and lap up every last drop of her juices before slowly working her back up to orgasm. Another time, he thinks dizzily as he sets her fingers free with a pop, and then grins at her.

"Fuck, you're so delicious, Granger," he says without thinking, and Hermione gives him a watery giggle, looking giddy and a little embarrassed. She doesn't answer, though. Instead, her breath hitches, and her chin wobbles, and she rolls onto her side and buries her face against Draco's chest, their legs tangled together in the blankets, her arm flinging over his waist and hooking around his back. Clinging on for dear life.

Shit. Oh *shit*. He'd known something like this might happen, but he'd hoped it wouldn't. Draco smooths his hand down her back and makes soothing sounds and inarticulate, meaningless assurances as Hermione cries as though her heart is breaking. Sobs ripped from her throat, shoulders shaking, tears wetting his chest as she *wails* her grief and her anger, and Merlin only knows what else, into his skin, her fingers clutching painfully deep at his scars.

I'm here.

Shhh.

It's okay, Hermione.

I love you.

You're safe.

I've got you.

He doesn't know if it helps.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Eighteen

The room is very quiet, so every small noise sounds so loud. Hermione shifts in her chair, and the wood squeaks, the fabric rubbing audibly. Siobhan's parchment crinkles and her robes swish as she crosses one knee over the other. The clock ticks on the wall. Christ, this is going to drive Hermione more insane than she already might be, but she refuses to talk first, aside from the hellos they've exchanged. Draco is just through the wall; that's a reassurance. They sit in the spare bedroom again, like they did the first time, and Siobhan looks tired, features strained and tight. She smiles at Hermione, though, as the silence stretches out, and then finally breaks it.

"So, how have you been, Hermione, since I last saw you?"

Hermione doesn't answer right away; she takes a breath and lets it out slowly, thinking the question over properly. A lot has happened since she last saw Siobhan. It feels as though another lifetime has passed, even though it's been just less than a couple of months. And Hermione can't sum those weeks up in any useful way and still be concise. It's been a chaotic maelstrom, and too much has happened emotionally to bother explaining to Siobhan. It's been two days since she got her new wand, though, and it's been fantastic since then compared to what it has been. She'll start there, she supposes.

"All over the place. Better once Malfoy came here," Hermione says briefly, her voice sounding too loud in the small room. She's honest. She agreed to give Siobhan a chance, and so she will. Lupin had asked again this morning if Draco wanted to see the Healer, and he'd given Lupin a scathing look and a definite *no*. She wonders if he feels uncomfortable about her seeing Siobhan. If he's worried the Healer will try to poison Hermione's mind against him. He hadn't said anything, but then, he wouldn't. All he'd done was kiss her temple before she'd entered the room and wish her luck, smiling wryly. God, she loves him.

Siobhan scribbles something with her quill as Hermione finishes, "And even better since I got a wand. I knew I missed having a wand. I hated not being able to deal with my hair magically, or use warming charms, or *muffliato*, or – well, lots of practical, everyday things, as well as being able to defend myself. You don't realise how useful something is until it's gone. But I didn't realise how different it would make me feel." Hermione looks down at her hands, twisted together in her lap. She draws her left cuff back discreetly and eyes the butt of her wand there, admiring it, before meeting Siobhan's eyes. "I feel like I got some of my power back. Is that stupid?"

Siobhan waits a beat before answering, her face blank. Non-judgemental. "No. Not at all. As a witch, your wand is, in a very real way, a physical manifestation of your power. You lost your wand right before you were taken and –" she picks the next word carefully "– hurt, repeatedly, over a protracted period of time. Being without a wand represents a helplessness to you, and a vulnerability to harm."

A shot of anger spears through Hermione as those words sink in, falling cool and neutral from Siobhan's lips. She glares at the witch, her pulse suddenly picking up speed. "Then why didn't you let me have a wand earlier? Why did you deny me one when you *knew* the effect it was having on me?"

Siobhan shifts uncomfortably. "There were other factors at play, Hermione. But we're not here to discuss that; we're here to check whether you're stable enough to keep this wand, and to see how you're feeling."

Panic fizzles up. Hermione probably should have realised that, of course, that's what this session is about. Of course. But for some reason, that's only just sinking in now. She wraps her right hand over her left forearm through her shirt, feeling the thin straps of her holster and the bulge of her wand. Part of her wants to hex the witch and run. Grab Malfoy and flee. Go find her parents in Australia. She's lost enough for this damned war. "But I *want* to discuss it," she says, voice brittle.

Siobhan sighs. "You were unstable. We were concerned you would use the wand to harm yourself or to try to apparate to Draco Malfoy." Hermione bites the inside of her cheek, thinking – *and why would running to Draco have been so terrible?*

"Malfoy let me use his wand," she says instead. "That was something that always made me feel so much safer." She meets the Healer's eyes again. "He let me use the Cruciatus curse on him." She doesn't know why she confesses to it. It's an Unforgivable. Siobhan's left eyelid twitches slightly, and her lips flatten.

"Why?"

"Why did he, or why did I?"

"Both."

"I did it because I wanted to hurt him. Because he'd just – he'd just hurt me, and I needed to hurt him," Hermione says thickly, a tight, horrible feeling building in her chest. She hates involuntarily remembering enough – *voluntarily* remembering feels like holding a hot brand to her own flesh and breathing in the stink of the smoke. It makes her sick. It makes her feel dirty. "And I think... I think he let me because he knew I needed to." She shrugs. "He gave me total control in his room unless it was something that would put us in danger, and it wouldn't be total if it meant stopping me from hurting him, would it?" she says almost defiantly.

She knows what Siobhan thinks of Draco and of Hermione's relationship with him.

The Healer sees him as an aggressor. A perpetrator. She doesn't understand what Hermione herself struggles to really, truly accept, no matter how much she knows it intellectually to be fact – that Draco is a victim, too. A victim of Voldemort and of the Order, who made him the dirty tool they wielded to keep their own hands clean while he waded in blood and filth, and of Dumbledore, who knew of his situation in the sixth year and failed to act and, perhaps most of all, his parents who first put him on the path that led him to becoming a Death Eater.

Draco was trapped between Voldemort and the Order, and when Hermione turned up in the dungeons, he had saved her when he didn't have to. He had sacrificed himself for her. He had tried to make her feel safe in an almost unendurable situation. He had done his best.

She has every reason to love him.

Not to mention that he is thoughtful, unexpectedly funny, and sweeter than Hermione could have ever imagined. And when she looks at him, desire flutters in her core. She wants him, very badly, no matter how inappropriate it may be.

"And yet he still hurt you," Siobhan says, yanking Hermione out of her thoughts. She tenses, the unfurling happiness at the thought of every reason she has to love Draco dashed to pieces by those few words. "He raped you, and degraded you, and gave you to other dark wizards as entertainment."

It's like a physical blow. Hermione hunches in her chair, aware of the way her shoulders pull forward and down, her hands locked together in front of her, sitting on the edge of the chair like she's ready to run. But then the bitch might tell Lupin to take her wand. Her mind races, scrambling. Should she lie to the Healer? Tell Siobhan what Hermione thinks she wants to know? Or will the Healer sense that; would it be best to be honest? She's panicking. And she's silent while Siobhan looks at her, sitting back relaxed in her chair with a quill in hand, waiting. Hermione wonders if a Muggle psychotherapist would be any more understanding.

"Of course he did. Even if he hadn't, we both would have been punished or killed, horribly. And I agreed that it had to be done." The words come out clipped and slightly strained. Hermione's fingers twist on each other so hard it hurts. She can nearly feel her bones creak.

"So you're saying that you consented to your own rape?"

Oh god. Hermione feels sick, nausea roiling in her belly. Her pulse is thrumming loud in her ears, and her palms are clammy, sweat breaking out at her armpits and the nape of her neck. She sits frozen, wanting to sink into the floor. To cease to exist. This is cruel. She stares at her trembling, locked hands, feeling small and stupid. How is this supposed to help?

"No! No, I – it wasn't like that. It wasn't –" Hermione has nothing – she's speechless. She doesn't know how to argue against what Siobhan has just thrown in her face. Is the Healer trying some misguided attempt to make her confront the idea that – that all her beliefs are wrong, and Draco is evil, and she is just a brainwashed victim? Because that isn't right. But she doesn't know how to answer. She didn't fucking *consent*. But Draco didn't force her. It was – "It was you-know-who. You-know-who forced us both. Neither of us wanted to. And yes, it was worse for me, then, at the revel. But Malfoy was hurt too. Worse, in some ways."

"I see," Siobhan just says mildly, and Hermione looks up in surprise. The Healer's face is neutral, but Hermione has the oddest feeling the woman is irritated. She doesn't know what the Healer is trying to achieve. The woman takes a breath and looks down at her parchment, then back up at Hermione. "Do you feel your dynamic with Draco Malfoy is healthy?"

Hermione blinks at her. "Define healthy." Siobhan shoots her a look as if to say *you know perfectly well what I mean*. "Okay, um..." Hermione genuinely thinks about it for a long moment, and finally smiles to herself, faint and wry as the answer comes to her. "Yes, actually."

"Yes?" Siobhan raises a brow.

"I know it might sound crazy, but sometimes I feel like my relationship with Malfoy is the only healthy thing I have." Hermione has nightmares every night, she's awkward with everyone else she knows – even her best friends, too many people make her panic, she can't control her own thoughts. She's a mess. "There are things about our relationship that aren't...ideal, of course. But we have respect and trust. And love." She lifts her chin, staring Siobhan down. She expects the Healer to say

something about Draco and sits ready to be on the defence, but Siobhan merely scribbles something with her quill and gives Hermione an expectant smile.

"Could you tell me more about the rest of your life then?" Siobhan says instead, tapping her quill on the paper. "How are you doing emotionally, now? If you were to compare where you are now to where you were the first time I met you?"

The rest of the session focuses on Hermione's overall well-being, and Siobhan isn't so bad when she's not fixated on Draco as an enemy. It's more of an assessment than a proper session, and Siobhan asks about her nightmares and her anxiety around touch. Whether she self-harms, and Hermione doesn't mention the way she sometimes scrubs her skin a little raw in the shower. It doesn't matter much now she has a wand and can heal the small abrasions. She asks about Hermione's eating habits and her energy levels. It's taxing, and Hermione feels raw and churned when she's done, but it wasn't as bad as she thought.

And at the end of it, Siobhan says she sees no reason why Hermione can't keep her wand.

She's standing to leave when the Healer adds, "I hope you'll think about having a proper session, Hermione."

Hermione thinks about it. She really considers it. Maybe the Healer could help. Yes, wizarding therapy was rudimentary compared to Muggle therapy, but she can't access Muggle therapy without being written off as insane, and maybe –

"I think the codependency in your relationship with Draco Malfoy is something it would be valuable for you to expl–"

"No." Hermione glares at the woman, the word a snarl. "I disagree." She stalks from the room and slams the door behind her, hard. It rattles in the frame, and she takes a vicious, childish satisfaction in the bang.

Her heart is stampeding, and she can't seem to catch her breath, but their bedroom is right there, and a moment later, she's shut in a haven of blue and gold paisley wallpaper. "Shit," Draco says mildly, worry underpinning the one word as he stands up from the edge of the bed where he'd apparently been waiting, a book sliding from his hand forgotten as his whole focus zeroes in on her. "Are you alright, Granger?" She nods wordlessly, and he goes to her.

It's not that Siobhan's wrong, Hermione thinks dryly as she curls her arms tightly around his back and nestles her cheek against his chest, staring blankly at nothing as he wraps his arms around her and tucks her close. It's just that she doesn't think it needs fixing. Codependency is the least of Hermione's problems.

"What do you need?" he asks carefully, one hand smoothing over her hair, the other splayed large, thin, and deceptively strong over her back. "What can I do?"

"This," she says in answer to both, as she so often does, and he places a kiss on the top of her head, his breath warm, and he doesn't ask any more questions. No, Hermione doesn't want to fix this.

Several days pass. Three, five. It doesn't really matter. Things go up and down, but Draco finds himself skewing toward a downward path. He doesn't hate himself any less as time ticks by. Hermione isn't really any less broken. He isn't any less of a monster. He's still trapped in his own

head, thoughts circling – vultures around a carcass, water running down a drain, mind stuck in a holding pattern because nothing has really changed. Not for Draco, at least.

Everything is more or less the same, although they haven't attempted anything that could bring either of them to orgasm again yet. Just because she did it once, it doesn't mean Hermione's not still gun-shy and skittish. She still has flashbacks, she still has bad memories swirling up, tainting the moment, and *he's* still worried about triggering something that will cause her to regress. There are things he knows they both want to do that she had forced upon her at the dinner, and while Draco isn't sure how much she remembers of it, he knows she remembers enough.

He remembers her afterwards; catatonic, her eyes dull and body trembling, dressed in that abhorrent lingerie, covered in blood seeping from shallow cuts, dark, blossoming bruises, and – and fluids. Spit, and semen, and – he wants to be sick whenever the memory lurches up in his mind, which happens all too often when arousal rises in him. He had to sit there and *watch*. It kills him. Her lips split and swollen, her whole face disfigured with bruising, between her legs bloodied and abraded raw by what they'd done.

Merlin, Draco feels like he deserves death for sitting by and allowing that. He should have tried to get her out sooner, whether or not he had permission from the Order, and whether or not it blew his cover. Instead, he did his job and stayed and exposed her to more hurt. Of course, if he'd tried to get her out while the Dark Lord was still in residence, it might just have led to them being caught in the process. Patrols were always tighter, and protocols followed more closely when Voldemort was present than when he was gone. It would've been too risky, really. He knows that.

Either way, all of that trauma, guilt, and pain has culminated in them both being almost scared of anything seriously sexual because neither of them knows what they might trigger at any moment. Both of them are afraid of setting off a cascade of awful, nightmarish memories. So, no matter what Potter and the others might think, the intimate moments Draco and Hermione engage in mostly involve nothing but snogging like fifth years. Although gradually, she's been getting bolder. Touching him; his dick, his naked torso, and pressing her lips down his throat to his chest. And she lets him touch her more too – particularly seeming to love his mouth on her pretty breasts, although always through her thin vest, for some reason. As if skin-to-skin contact would be too much.

Draco takes what he's given and tries to be thankful.

There are other improvements too – she's eating, she's sleeping a little better, she talks to her friends. Sometimes she laughs. Draco loves it when *he* makes her laugh; the way her face transforms. Eyes crinkling up, shining and liquid, grin like a benediction, her cheeks – a little fuller now – pinking with colour, the little baby curls of hair that always escape whatever hairdo she tries fluffing out around her face like a halo. She enjoys having a wand again, and she's helping Lupin in his office these days, which seems to be giving her purpose.

But while she's closeted in the lycanthrope's office, busy with paperwork, Draco is at a loose end. Mostly, he exercises. Trying to stretch out the scar tissue on his back and attain a level of fitness he hasn't been at since playing Quidditch, and then hopefully surpass it. If he can't have a wand, he needs to find other ways to be dangerous, and physicality can't hurt. And calisthenics are mindless and painful, like a meditation that punishes him.

Draco is beginning to feel like he's trapped in purgatory, the guilt scratching inside his skull like claws. Gripping his heart tightly so it pumps against a binding cage, everything feeling too full, too much, not enough. As Hermione stabilises, he begins to understand he's destabilising, as though

they're on a see-saw. She goes up, he goes down. He's slipping. The ground is turning to quicksand under his feet.

It was easier when he was in the Dark Lord's service, strangely. Draco feels terribly guilty for feeling that way, but when Hermione had been a captive, he had felt more sane and more in control than he did now. He'd *had* to be in perfect control of himself every second of the day. To keep his mind shielded every moment he was in front of any potential Legilimens, with a facade of acceptable thoughts for them to trawl through. He'd had to be made of steel; inflexible, hard, strong. To keep his emotions locked down as much as was humanly possible. Hermione had been his only weakness, and he'd needed to be in control of that too, lest his feelings for her give him away.

Any slip, any mistake, any trace of human feeling could've meant death when Draco was the Order's agent. And it had been a terrible strain – it had probably ruined him – but he'd risen to the demands put upon him. He'd shut down as much as possible, repressed the guilt, and done what he'd had to do – grimly, hating himself deep down. Now, though, no one is asking anything of him except Hermione, who only asks for his presence. Under pressure, Draco had functioned well, as though that pressure had been what had held him together. Because now that it's gone and only the guilt and self-hatred remain, he's falling apart.

A slow loss of cohesion.

An itch starts beneath his skin. He's trying his best to support Hermione. To be her anchor. The steady, immovable object she can cling to when things overwhelm her. She doesn't ask anything of him except to be there, but he tries to always present her with the front she needs. Calm, gentle, soft. Understanding, undemanding. In a way, it's like the facade he wore as a Death Eater, except it doesn't have the same stabilising effect on him. Draco wants to give Hermione a chance to start healing – as much as it's even possible for her to heal – but it's getting harder to keep it together himself.

There needs to be a way for him to atone. To pay penance. Not just for what he did to Hermione – in all honesty, what he did to her is only responsible for a small portion of the guilt he feels – but for *everything* he's done since he first went to Potter, seeking an escape. He remembers that so clearly. Running in fear, disillusioned by Snape's memories, broken and lost, and seeking safety, not yet fully mired in his role as a Death Eater. Not blooded. He had thought the Order would accept him. That he could fight on their side. But after Potter had disarmed him, the Order had held him prisoner for nearly a week in a windowless room undergoing interrogation after interrogation – much less pleasant than this recent round with Lupin – before they'd returned his wand and sent him back, against his own pleas.

They'd sent him back, giving him no choice, and it was only as their man that Draco had committed atrocities that make him think that perhaps he doesn't deserve to live. Perhaps he's crossed the line. He's unsalvageable. Too tainted, too ruined.

It's at its worst at night. That's when despair creeps in, as though Dementors are looming over him, hooded faces close and eager, drinking up his hope and leaving him a husk.

Draco dreams about staying behind the night he got Hermione out, and in those dreams his inevitable death feels like a relief, a *release*, and he cries when he wakes up *because he's still alive*.

Those nights, it's Hermione who is a comfort to him, their roles reversed. It's her who holds him close as he presses his lips together and struggles to stem the weakness and vulnerability of his

weeping. It's her fingers combing through his hair, whispering reassurances and love that he doesn't deserve. Her body is soft and warm as he buries his face against her breasts, his silent tears wetting her shirt. And she doesn't understand why he's crying. That it's because he *survived*, and now he has to *live* with it.

What really infuriates him is that now that he's free to fight for the Order honestly, to try to atone for what *they made him do*, they keep him trapped here, wandless and useless. They used him up, and now they won't let him be useful anymore, and he hates it. They've ruined him.

They made him a murderer, a torturer, a *rapist*, and now they tell him that he can't be trusted with a wand.

"Hi, Harry," she says as he knocks on the doorjamb of Lupin's office to alert her to his presence. The last time he'd come in unexpectedly, she'd stifled a scream, tried to hex him – Merlin, she was out of practice – and then burst into tears. She's still very reactive and hyper-alert, but she gets lost in her work in the office in the mornings and startles easily. Having company helps, but she's trying to be more independent because she feels like everyone expects it of her, including Draco. If she's having a bad morning but still wants to try to work, he comes down from their room and sits with her and helps her with the cryptography – which he's very good at, unlike following her systems of organisation. And usually, even if he's shut away in their room exercising or reading, he'll pop in mid-morning to check on her, with a cup of tea.

"Hi, 'Mione." Harry smiles at her, adjusting his glasses and meandering over to the table, bright green eyes curious.

Hermione pins a scrap of parchment up to the map with a sticking charm. The Order is planning a raid on a Death Eater base in the wizarding village of Tinworth and has been collating data for over a week. The mission had been what Ron was doing reconnaissance for. From the few communications they've intercepted recently, the Order suspects Voldemort is growing more paranoid and may be hiding Nagini away. It makes sense; while Voldemort may want to keep Nagini under his constant protection, having them both in the same place also makes him uniquely vulnerable. Hermione has just finished decoding a note found on an unidentified Death Eater's body, which seemed to confirm the theory. She pulls out a yellow folder and uses a sticking charm to securely affix all the related documentation to it.

"Is this to do with the mission Remus's planning?" Harry seems both happy and slightly resentful that Hermione's taken over his job as Lupin's assistant. He'd clearly disliked the paperwork and obviously hadn't been able to handle the cryptography as well as Hermione, but she thinks he feels pushed out. She smiles faintly, trying to include him as she spins the folder to face him.

"Yes. Ron found a note on a Death Eater's body written in Ogham," she says, tapping the parchment, and Harry leans forward to peer at it, scrunching up his face at the Old Irish lettering. "It was a simple substitution cipher, but in modern Irish Gaelic, so that was fun." She'd needed some reference books for that and to owl Seamus in the hopes he could help with translating the unencrypted text, which he had – a bit rustily.

"I'm glad you're back," Harry says with a wry grin.

"Me too," she says more solemnly, and Harry's grin fades as though he's just remembering. He shuffles from foot to foot.

"Well, um, Lupin just sent me in here to grab a folder on Gorman Fell? He's a Snatcher we took prisoner a while ago." Hermione's able to lay her hands on it quickly, thanks to her new organisational system, and she passes it over to Harry with a smile, trying not to flinch when their hands touch. She does though, and he notices, eyes sad. "Thanks." He pauses as if gathering his strength, pressing his lips together. "How are you and Malfoy?" he says at last as if he's reluctant to even ask. She frowns, picking up a quill and fiddling with it.

"We're fine, Harry." Hermione doesn't tell him that she's been worrying about Draco more and more recently. He's been having more nightmares, and sometimes he cries when he wakes. She catches him staring into space blankly too often, although when he notices her looking, he schools his face to an eerie normalcy. He's careful of her to a fault and it should be amazing, but it's beginning to feel brittle and false. As though he's hiding everything behind a mask. But she's very aware he wouldn't want Harry knowing about his vulnerabilities.

"There's nothing you –" Harry begins to ask, shifting uncomfortably. He's bright red and looks incredibly awkward, and Hermione cocks a brow. "I wanted to check – I mean, you were saying the other day..." She looks at him expectantly, but he backs up a step, clearly having lost his nerve. "Actually, never mind. I should get this to Remus."

"Oh." She watches, bemused, as he backpedals toward the door. "Okay?"

"Bye, 'Mione!" He waves a hand and then vanishes. She wonders what he was going to ask as she returns to an owl communicate they intercepted yesterday that mentions one of the American wizards by name. Jonas Wilson. Hermione doesn't know which one he was. She doesn't know what he did to her. She tries – desperately – not to think about it at the same time as the other half of her brain tries desperately to place him in the nightmarish memories that haunt her. Lupin had told her she didn't have to work on the message – that perhaps she shouldn't – but she wants to, for reasons she can't fully articulate. Not without wanting to cry. But she hasn't told Draco. Not with the way he is at the moment.

Reminding him of the dinner again might be too much for him to bear right now. Hermione can almost see the strain weighing down on him, crushing him beneath guilt and shame over what he'd done as the Order's agent, and a constant worry for her. She wishes he wouldn't worry about her so much. She's getting better, not worse. Slowly and inconsistently, yes, but she's not sliding downhill the way he seems to be, drowning in guilt that shouldn't even belong to him. Fuck, it's all such a mess. She leans over the table braced on her hands, her head starting to ache, a persistent thud beginning behind her eyes, her temples tightening. She feels useless. Utterly useless. Tears sting her eyes.

She sighs and sits with a thump, staring unfocused at the blank parchment in front of her, wishing she knew what to do. But even though she's doing better, she can still barely keep herself functional half the time – she has no idea how to help Draco deal with his own burdens. Especially when he won't talk to her about it. At all. Every time she's tried over the past several days, he changes the subject firmly enough that she doesn't want to try to push him. His eyes go cold and his mouth becomes a thin line, and he suddenly looks like a Death Eater again, and it frightens her. And even if it didn't, she knows he won't talk no matter how much she pushes. He's immovable. It's infuriating and stressful, and makes her lie awake at night worrying, after he's slipped back into sleep.

Hermione smears away her tears with an impatient gesture. The closest she gets to helping Draco is holding him in the dark night while he tries to stifle his silent weeping, his shoulders shaking and

his breathing ragged, his face turned away from her, or pressed against her chest. And that isn't really *helping*. She grabs her copy of the message she's trying to decrypt and glares at it, trying to spot patterns as her mind spins on Draco. Her headache worsens, thudding in time to her pulse, her orbital bones filled with sharp pain, her chest aching as though her heart is trying to beat through her ribs.

She doesn't know what to do.

Chapter End Notes

- Housekeeping!

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

Nineteen

"Malfoy! This isn't helping me," Hermione protests without any strength behind it, turning her head to flash Draco a smile as he kisses the ball of her shoulder, his hands finding her hips as they stand facing Lupin's map of England. She hums happily, leaning back into him, the scrap of parchment she's supposed to be sticking to the map forgotten in her hand. He came down from their room after spending over an hour pushing himself through calisthenics until his back burned and his muscles felt wrecked. A shower had filled in ten minutes, but then, bored and restless, he'd offered to help her with her work – noting where every Order member was currently stationed after a reshuffle of people's placements. It's not difficult but it's tedious, and he admittedly isn't being a lot of help.

"I'm being very helpful," he says, smirking, shoving his still damp hair back from his forehead and nibbling at her neck. They'd both slept shockingly well, and it's surprising what a difference that makes. Draco feels more normal than he has in far too long, and Hermione is exuding contentment as he distracts her from her work, a fragile playfulness in the air. She shivers and makes a funny little sound, wriggling as he nibbles and licks at her neck, just below her ear.

"That tickles!" She turns and looks up at him, leaning back against the map, batting at his chest with the parchment in reproof. He loves the way she looks at him when she's happy. The light in her eyes. The adoration. Draco doesn't deserve any of it, but he feasts on it regardless. It makes him feel nearly worthy. It makes *him* happy. They don't have these kinds of carefree, beautifully ordinary moments a lot, but he makes the most of it when they do, and so does she. He braces his hand by her head and plucks the parchment out of her fingers, flicking it toward the desk. Whether it makes it or not, he doesn't know. His eyes are on Hermione as she mock-frowns at him.

"You're even less helpful than Ron," she says, mirth in her voice, and he pretends mortal offence, playing along.

"That's cruel, Granger. Comparing me to Weasley? You've gone too far." But he smiles as she slides her hands under his shirt, palming over his abdomen, her eyes sparkling. She pokes and he makes an undignified *meep*. "What was that for?"

"You've been working out," she says as though that explains it, and slaps his stomach lightly.

"You're supposed to tense up," she says, poking him again and he does, too late, and throws her an unimpressed look. "I want to feel your muscles," she explains, cheeks reddening, and he smirks and tenses again, and this time her poke – just by his belly button – hits what's slowly becoming very toned muscle. She grins, and he feels stupidly flattered. "You make me feel so unfit," she complains, and he reaches to tuck a lock of hair back behind her ear, making a noise of disagreement.

"You don't need to be fit, Hermione," he says, answering honestly as she pulls her hands out from under his shirt and smoothes them down his front, from shoulders down. She seems to be enjoying

her exploration, and her cheeks are still pink, her pupils blown wide and her lower lip caught between her teeth. Draco wonders, hopefully and slightly desperately, if maybe he might get the chance to make her come later, if the day keeps going this well. He feels like she might be interested; it's a possibility that suddenly consumes his brain. "You need to put on more weight. Whereas I need something to occupy my time and my brain. Exercise works." He leans in, kissing her cheek, dotting little presses along toward her ear.

"*Mmph...*" Hermione's fingers curl in his shirt. "That's good," she says aimlessly, breathless and distracted, lifting her chin. He knows what she wants and kisses his way down to her jaw and mouths at her throat, wet and soft, placing gentle, sucking kisses, still braced against the wall with one hand as his other hand fits to her neck, cradling it. She leans against his hand and bares her throat further, trusting and pliable. He licks a stripe up over her jugular, and she whimpers. His mouth seeks hers, and their lips just barely touch when the sound of a throat clearing rings through the room.

Hermione immediately pushes against Draco, and he steps back, fist clenching as frustration sears through him. "Shit," he mutters as he gives Hermione a rueful glance. But she's busy smoothing her hair, flustered and blushing.

"Lunch is ready," Potter says awkwardly, and Draco sighs. Of course it's Potter who ruins a moment like that. For Salazar's sake, he could wring the golden boy's neck. He glares at Potter.

"Thanks," he says shortly.

Potter lingers. "Mione?" he asks diffidently; she's retrieved the scrap of parchment and is sticking it on the map.

"Yeah, I'll be there in a minute, Harry," she says, waving him off without meeting his eyes. When Potter reluctantly leaves the room, she buries her face in her hands. "That's so embarrassing."

"It wasn't so bad," Draco tries to reassure her, tension winding his muscles tight; he never knows what might set her off. If this ruins her day, he'll throttle Potter. Hermione shoots him a look.

"You were licking my throat!" she says, exasperated and mortified, but she's smiling a little, and he relaxes.

"I bet he does much worse with Ginevra," he says darkly, and she makes a face. "Come on. We may as well go to lunch then," he goes on. "Feed you up."

It's a beautiful, chill spring day; not that Hermione's gotten to see much of it – she's been shut away working in Lupin's windowless office all morning. Well, working until Draco turned up to distract her. But now she's bathed in the sunny streaming in the dining room windows as everyone sits around the table, finishing off lunch. Hermione's just chewing the last mouthful of her cold sliced sausage sandwich when Harry signals to her that he wants to talk. He gives her a raise of his brow, a meaningful jerk of his head, thumb jabbing in the direction of the back porch.

Hermione frowns, puzzled. But she squeezes Draco's fingers, letting him know where she's going in a whisper as around them, people collect up dishes or traipse out of the room. He nods, his thumb rubbing over hers, seeming genuinely peaceful this morning after a rare night with only one nightmare. It makes her happy to see it. Usually, Draco's so desperately sad beneath the veneer of calm support she knows he puts on for her, and she can sense the guilt twisted up inside him no

matter how he tries to gloss over it. But this morning, they've actually had *fun*, and it was lovely. Like a window into the future.

"Do you want me to make a cup of tea?" he asks, his grey eyes warm on her, their fingers still curled together.

"Yes, please," Hermione says, even though she doesn't really. She has learnt over the past few weeks that Draco seems to feel better when he's doing things for her. Like he's assuaging his guilt. Paying penance by tending to her. It's a funny circle of things; he makes her feel better with his mere presence, and she makes him feel better by letting him do things for her. She thinks she's getting the better end of the deal these days. Now that they're safe.

"Chamomile?"

"Surprise me," she says, thinking of Justin's ever-growing collection of teas. "I don't think I'll be long." Hermione can't imagine what Harry wants to talk to her about, but she doesn't think it's an in-depth heart-to-heart he's looking for. She stands and kisses Draco's temple, a quick press, and he watches her with a weird longing as she slips from the room after Harry. For someone who cut himself off from her for so long, now that he's given in to what they both want, he seems nervy every time she's out of his sight. Not that he ever says anything; he treats her like blown glass. Sometimes she wishes he wouldn't. She doesn't like being 'handled'.

It's warmer outside this afternoon; bracing rather than cold, the promise of spring hanging in the air, and the porch creaks faintly as Hermione stands beside Harry at the railing by the steps, him smiling at her briefly. This has become one of her favourite spots, here on the porch. She waits for Harry to talk, playing with the end of her half-undone braid as she leans on the railing, watching the breeze ripple through the garden, bending grass stalks and ruffling shrubbery, the naked tree branches shivering. There are green buds on the branches now, and birds flit through them, chirping brightly.

"This is awkward," he says at last, deeply uncomfortable, "but the other day when you were talking about doing things you didn't really want to, and roller coasters—" Hermione frowns at Harry, thinking, *that was over a week ago*—"—were you talking about Malfoy, um—" He breaks off. His cheeks are blotchy red and he stares down at his hands, forearms leaning over the rail, picking at his right thumbnail nervously as his mouth moves soundlessly, searching for the right words. Hermione feels tension bolt through her, accompanied by a sick mortification as she understands what Harry's driving at.

"Oh god, *no*. No, Harry. It's not like that! That's not what I meant at all," she rushes, embarrassed beyond belief. She wants to say *we've hardly even done anything since then*, but then that's not really true, and anyway, it's none of Harry's business.

"Because I didn't think about it at the time, but then I thought about it later. And the way you said it made it sound like perhaps you were doing things you didn't really want to, to please him," Harry forges on determinedly, and Hermione wants to sink into the ground. "And then I saw you two in Lupin's office before lunch, and — it just looked..." He trails off awkwardly.

Hermione hadn't thought she was still capable of experiencing such embarrassment after the indignities she'd been put through; heating her skin and making her pulse race and her palms sweaty. Her cheeks flame. She pictures the two of them in Lupin's office, seen from the doorway through Harry's eyes. She'd been backed up against the wall in a submissive position, with Draco

crowding up against her – looming over her, physically dominant, with his hand at her neck and his mouth at her throat as she bared it. *Shit*.

"No, Harry," she says forcefully, hugging herself tight. "Malfoy's never pressured me to do anything. Ever." *More the opposite*, she thinks wryly but doesn't say.

"Are you sure?" His green eyes are worried as he flicks his gaze to her, nervous and awkward. "Because if you're doing things because you feel obligated, or like maybe you *should* want to, or you –"

"No, Harry," Hermione interrupts. "I appreciate the concern, but that's not how things are. I mean, maybe sometimes I feel like I should want to, yes. But not because of Malfoy." She swallows hard, her pulse thudding in her ears, and says in a rush: "Because of *me*. Because *I* want to, but then when we try to do anything too fast, or anything more than... *well*, I end up stuck in a trauma flashback and – and –" She cuts herself off, breath coming too fast, as Harry's hand hovers over hers, not touching but close enough that she can feel the warmth, his eyes filled with an empathetic misery. Tears burn hot in her eyes, and she blinks them away and grabs Harry's hand, holding tight.

"I want things to be normal." She sniffs, nose running a little. "I want to be able to do things with the man I love, without – without..." She trails off, leaving the rest unvoiced. Harry's face is a strange mix of terribly sad and bitter, with just a drop of anger. It twists when she says the word *love*.

"Without remembering what he did to you?" he asks, and the gentleness in his voice only makes it hurt more, like a blade through the gut. Hermione yanks her hand away from him. "Because I don't see how that's possible, Hermione."

She stares at him, feeling oddly betrayed. She'd opened up to him – voiced a raw, painful hurt, and he'd only twisted the knife. The worst thing is the way Harry might be right. But *no*, Hermione refuses to accept that. There have been *good* things. When Draco came in the bathroom all over her hand, and when she came in his arms even if she did cry afterwards, and all the kisses and touches, and other things they've been doing since then, like his mouth on her breasts – it feels so good, so *amazing*. The things they do usually only occasionally remind her of awful memories, and *yes*, when the awful memories flood in, that does taint things, but it's mostly fleeting. It makes Hermione hopeful. In fact, she'd been trying to work up her nerve to do something more than just snogging again.

But now, standing here in the face of Harry's cynicism, she feels deflated. The wind feels more cutting as she stands there, apology slowly dawning on Harry's face, like he hadn't realised the impact of what he was saying.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he begins, "but –"

"No." She shakes her head emphatically, taking a step back from him. His black hair ruffled and his glasses crooked, a thick dark green parka on. He looks just like Harry, her best friend, and yet he doesn't understand, not at all. Not even a little bit. He doesn't know her anymore. She doesn't know him. Their lives have diverged, torn apart just like she was torn apart, and she doesn't know if they'll knit back together again. And even if they do, there will be scars. So much numb, dead scar tissue. She looks at him now, looking at her as if she's incapable, and thinks, *this is scar tissue*. This is the gulf slashed between them.

It feels as though they're speaking different languages.

"You have to understand how this looks to the rest of us –" he tries, clearly distraught.

"I know, okay. I *know* how it looks. I'm not *crazy*, Harry." She wipes at her cheeks, hating her tears. They make her look so *weak*. "I'm – I'm damaged, I know, but I'm not *crazy*."

"I know you're not, 'Mione," Harry says, placating her, one hand reaching out as though she's a spooked horse. She bristles like one; angry and overflowing with frustration. Fizzing with it. She steps back further to stand by the door, hugging herself as Harry goes on. "But you're my friend, and you're talking about doing sexual things that frighten you, with the man who held you prisoner. Who –" he swallows, looking pale "– who raped you," he gets out, and Hermione wants to slap him, or hex him into silence.

"Shut up, Harry. *Shut up*," she snaps, not half as vehemently as she'd like, her fists balling up at her sides and her chest heaving with her breaths. Rage is suffusing her. She feels nearly dizzy. "You're not helping. I know you think you are, but you're *not*."

"How are we supposed to help? You won't let any of us close enough to help! You keep us all at arm's length!" His voice is rising, frustration shivering through it.

"I had breakfast today with you, Ron, Ginny, and Justin, and then spent my morning working in Remus's office, where anyone can come help!" she protests. "And then I came to lunch! How is that keeping you at arm's length?"

"You come and sit with us sometimes and talk a little," Harry says rather disparagingly. "It's great, Hermione, and don't get me wrong, I'm so unbelievably happy you're back, and safe, and I accept that things are –" he searches for words "– that you're still healing, but let's be real. You hardly ever mention anything even vaguely personal."

"Maybe I just don't want to talk about personal things!" she snaps, impatient, rubbing a hand over her forehead. She feels exhausted. Exhausted and furious. She was having a good morning, a good day, and now Harry has gone and ruined it. Hermione knows how much of a delicate balance she teeters at every moment – she's not stupid – and she tries so hard to maintain that balance, with Draco's help. Because when it goes askew, it's hard to get back on track. When she starts to slide into depression, misery, and negativity, often only the reset of sleep will let her escape the pit she's fallen into. If she's lucky. She hates Harry for pushing her down this path. "You don't exactly bare your soul over chess. Or last card, or go fish. It's just *games* and small talk. Passing the time. Jesus, Harry, we're hardly having group therapy, are we?"

"It's just...different," he says helplessly, and he's right. It is. Harry and whoever else she plays and chats with may not talk about personal things, but they have an openness about them that Hermione noticeably lacks. She keeps a wall up without even meaning to, inadvertently shutting them out. They don't understand the wall is as much to keep her together as anything else. She won't admit to any of that though, not right now.

"You don't understand a single thing about him, or me."

"I understand more than you might think," he says tightly – meaningfully – and then he snaps his mouth shut and looks away like he wants to bite the words back. Hermione pins him with a dark look.

"And what the fuck is that supposed to mean, Harry?"

"Never mind." His eyes slide away from her, and he takes a shuffling step back, pressing against the railing.

"No, *you* never mind. For god's sake, Harry, I know you're keeping something from me. Spit it out."

"We interrogated him under veritaserum," he starts reluctantly, looking away from her. Hermione's chest feels too tight, and it's hard to catch her breath. She hugs herself, feeling small and frightened, and angry.

"I *know* that. I know you did," Hermione snaps out. The air is cool, but she feels hot in her coat, her anger warming her from the inside out. She's sweating suddenly with the heat of it, and nerves, and it feels gross – breaking out across the back of her neck, her armpits, her chest. *Thank you, Harry*, she thinks testily, trying to focus on breathing slowly and steadily. Her tone turns snarky. "So what? What does you and Ron ambushing Malfoy have to do with anything? What did it make you understand? Are you upset he did terrible things? Because –"

Harry interrupts, overriding her, his expression shaped by his frustration, brows scrunched down and mouth taut. "Yes, actually. Do you have any idea how terrible th–?" he begins. She doesn't want to hear it.

"He did those under your orders! At the say-so of the Order! He didn't *want* to, but *you* told him to stay."

"*You*? You keep saying that Hermione, like you're not a part of the Order anymore, like –"

She ignores him. She honestly doesn't *care* what he's saying. "You convinced him to *destroy* himself for the sake of the war. To do things that – that I don't even want to *imagine*, that I never want to know." She's sharing personal feelings now, Hermione thinks bitterly as she barrels on, both of them cutting over top of each other, breathless and getting louder. Harry should be pleased that she's talking, but instead, he looks devastated. Furious and devastated. "And –"

He scoffs and she slams her lips closed as he speaks. "Don't you think that's a problem? That you're – you're *with* someone who has done things so awful, you can't even bear to hear about them?"

"No! No, I don't. Because he did it all for the greater fucking good. *For the Order*," she says scathingly, trembling from the torrent of emotions flooding through her. "*Fuck*. You're just as responsible, Harry. *Everyone* involved in handling him when he was a double agent is just as fucking guilty as he is. Maybe more so because if he'd had the choice, he would've defected and fought on our side."

"He was more useful where he was," Harry says, dull but determined, and Hermione stares at him blankly, feeling like she doesn't know him at all. She thought she was the one who'd changed and turned into someone else, but maybe Harry hasn't been himself for a long time. Because it's hard to believe that Harry, her best friend, determined and plucky and compassionate, would just use another human being like that. But he has been – for over *two years*, and Hermione never knew. What else hasn't he told her? What other ruthless things has he done in the name of the war? It's as though she's seeing Harry clearly for the first time, and she doesn't recognise him. It shakes her to her core.

And then he says: "If he hadn't been there, you would've died when you were captured, Hermione. You would've –" he doesn't describe what they both know would've happened to her, but he doesn't have to. She knows they're both imagining it. What actually happened throughout her capture was

bad enough. She swallows hard, refusing to recall the dinner that her mind tries its best to blank out. They aren't talking about that, she tells herself, pushing down the looming shadows of memory, her throat feeling thick, her heart a staccato drumbeat.

"Fine. *Fine!* So he's done what you asked of him, *and* he's saved my life. And you're still holding what he had to do against him? That's *disgusting*, Harry. I can't fucking believe you. He didn't want to do it. He didn't *enjoy* it. He –"

"He did," Harry mumbles sullenly, and Hermione's stomach lurches.

"*What?*" She stares at him, a trickle of cold horror running through her. He and Ron interrogated Draco under veritaserum. They'd know things she doesn't. Things she doesn't *want* to know, but also things that maybe she has to know. Like that Draco enjoyed it. "Enjoyed *what*, Harry?" she asks, thinking of dozens of things it could be. All of it? He enjoyed all of it? Killing people? Hurting them? Hurting Hermione? She knows that's not true. Surely. It can't be true. Harry looks away from her, hands stuffed into his pockets and jaw clenched. "*Tell me*," Hermione demands.

"What he did to you," he grates out, ashen where his cheeks aren't blotched red. And there's horror in his eyes. Horror, and contempt, and she can see that he regrets speaking the words even as they come out of his mouth. As though he hates himself for saying them, and yet he has. "He enjoyed r-
raping you. He said so. He said it felt so good. He said –"

Trembles are running through Hermione's body like she's holding onto a live wire. She feels sick. She feels like vomiting. Intellectually, she knows it can't be as simple as Harry has made it sound. It *can't* be. *He had to*. Draco *had* to come, using her, in order to claim her. How else could he convince his master that he wanted her? And how do you reach orgasm without some level of physical enjoyment? It was a mechanical thing. Physiological. He couldn't help enjoying it. It wasn't his fault. It says *nothing* about him, nothing at all. He couldn't help it.

She hates Harry. She *hates* him. He understands *nothing*.

At some point, she realises she's screaming her thoughts aloud in a sobbing, broken cascade. Harry is against the railings and she's shoving him, hitting out at him, before hands grab her by her upper arms and reel her back. While Hermione's vaguely aware it's Draco, she still thrashes like an eel against him, too locked into panic and fury to react rationally. Kicking and writhing and struggling like a wildcat, trying belatedly to grab her wand. But he's holding her tight and pulling her back, and she's vaguely aware that he's talking to her, urgent and soothing at once, but she can't hear it over the ringing in her ears and the sound of her own yelling.

"You *bastard!* How could you do this to me? Why would you *say that*? How could you – why do you want to *ruin* it – I just want to be *normal*," she chokes and the tears are hot on her cheeks, streaming down, dripping off her chin as she fights Draco's grip. "I just want to be able to fuck my boyfriend without *remembering how he raped me!*" Draco makes a choked, devastated sound at that, and his grip slackens for a second. Hermione nearly gets free – to do what exactly, she doesn't know. Hit Harry? But then Draco's hands clamp down on her upper arms again, like iron vices hauling her back to him.

She stamps on his foot and tries to kick him in the shins, still working on a furious, panicked instinct, still *so angry*. Angry at everyone, at the whole damned world, at herself for being such a fucking *mess*. Draco's silent now, except for his ragged breaths – no more attempts to soothe her. Her last words seem to have shocked them all into silence, and all Hermione can hear now are her

gasping sobs and Draco's breath in her ear as he picks her up, arms around her middle, and pins her between his body and the wall. He cages her in as she twists to face him in her struggle to get free, trapping her legs so she can't kick and then pressing in close against her so she can't hit him, except for extremely ineffective thumps of her fists against his sides.

It feels like she's watching from very far away, through a darkened glass. Like she's outside of her body.

"*Shit*. I didn't mean –" Harry says brokenly, and Draco makes a snarling sound that cuts him off.

"Unless you can help, Potter, which you *can't*, then *fuck off*," Draco snaps out as Hermione's struggles weaken, and there's a long silence and then footsteps, and a moment later the bang of the door sounds. They're alone. Hermione smacks the heel of her open hand against Draco's back again, although in truth, most of the fight has gone out of her, leaving her feeling hollow and numb. He's as immovable as the wall he has her pinned against, and he's started mumbling apologies in a wretched voice. Oh god. She stops hitting him. *Oh god*. This is *awful*. Why did she say that? In front of him?

Because it is true, she supposes miserably. She desperately wants to be able to do sexual things with him. But whenever she does, even if she can move past the mostly repressed memories of the dinner and the American wizards without triggering anything, she keeps remembering the first revel. When he – Hermione cuts her thoughts off. It's one thing to try not to think about what *others* did to her, while she's with him – that seems to be possible. Achievable, if difficult. But moving past what *he* did to her, while he does very similar things – that is hard. That is nearly impossible, it feels.

How can she not think about the first revel, and about the way he *hurt* her, when his fingers and his mouth are touching her in the same places?

"I'm sorry. *I'm so sorry*," he's saying like a litany, guilt drenching his words, and Hermione wishes he'd stop. She wishes she could take back what she'd said. True or not, it wasn't fair. And *was* it even true? It was accurate, but was it *true*? Those two things aren't the same at all; Hermione knows that very well. Tears are still streaking her cheeks as Draco repeats his pointless apologies, drowning in guilt. Hermione wraps her arms around him tightly, fingers hooking together behind his back and her cheek pressing against his chest.

"*I'm sorry*," she chokes out through her tears. "I shouldn't have said that. I – you didn't do anything wrong, Draco. You *never* did anything wrong."

"But I *did* do that," he says, like it's killing him – a hand around his heart, squeezing. "I *did* rape you." He sounds almost like a child as he says the terrible words, wondering and horrified, his grip on her slackening. He draws back a little and looks down at her with desolate eyes, wet and dark, and his lips are trembling as his hands cup her shoulders very gently, and her heart breaks in two. A stillness falls over her.

"*No*," Hermione says, suddenly so sure as she stares up at him, the wind snatching at her hair, the sun pale, shining on his hair and bleaching it white. It's like an epiphany. She already knew it intellectually, but suddenly she *feels* it in her chest – a physical pain that she embraces. She finds the words. "No. You didn't. *He* did. The – the Dark Lord did. You *saved* me, Draco. You saved my life. You didn't want to do it either. You were forced just as much as I was."

"But I –" he starts, stumbling over the words as if dazed.

"No. I'm not saying that anymore," she says, small but firm. "Or thinking it. And I won't accept anyone else saying it either. Even you. We were *both* forced. Neither of us – neither of us is responsible for what happened. So you didn't rape me. That's not...accurate."

"But I chose to do it," he says, panicky, and for the first time since he came back to her, he seems like his control is utterly shattered, his veneer of calm fallen away. He's just a raw, broken twenty-year-old who sees himself as a monster even though he saved her, and Hermione feels guilt eating at her. "I chose to –"

She sighs. It's all about choices. It's always been about choices, in the end. The choices they'd both lacked. The choices he'd given her. The pain and punishment he'd chosen to take in order to protect her. And the way she's been choosing to see what he had to do to save her life, at that first revel, isn't helping anyone. It's unfair on Draco, and it's making things so much harder, for both of them.

"And so did I. I chose too, Draco." She cups his face in her hands, tenderness overwhelming her as she looks up at him, their eyes locked. "I chose to live, whatever it took. And you saved me. And it was ugly, and brutal, and now we both have that awfulness hanging over us like a curse, but it's not something you *did* to me. It's something we went through together." And that feels right. *That* feels like the truth, and a crushing weight lifts off Hermione's chest as she says the words.

She takes a deep breath, and it feels like she's breathing freely for the first time in months. A small, first step forward. One trauma has been faced. One nightmare confronted, and diminished by virtue of the light shining upon it. It is revealed; no longer a looming terror, but rather just a terrible, grief-filled sadness. She's crying harder, she realises, tears a silent flood down her cheeks. Crying for both of them; for the way they were both ruined by Voldemort, for the way he first broke them using each other.

She thinks Draco might be crying too; his face is pressed against her hair now, his breath on her ear, and she can feel wet heat seeping onto her scalp. He's still apologising, a faint mumble, and she doesn't think he's even really aware of what he's saying. She finds herself in the rare position of trying to comfort him. They stand there against the side of the house, clinging together as if they are each other's lifeline, and it's a while before Hermione feels capable of speech again.

"I do want you, though. I *do*. I get so –" she feels her cheeks heat "– um, aroused. But then the thought of *doing* anything more than what we've done makes me feel so scared. Because I don't want to remember *then*. The – the first revel, in particular. It's like it's just right *there*, under the surface."

"I know. I can't stop thinking about it either," he says weakly. "It's in my head, all the time. Whenever we do anything more than just kiss, it's *there*, lurking behind everything else, and I don't know what to do, or what to say. I'm afraid I'm going to trigger you, or hurt you, or –" He breaks off helplessly, his face buried against her hair. His voice is ragged and wet when he says simply: "I keep *remembering* it."

Hermione takes a deep breath and lets it out again very slowly, something cementing inside her; another epiphany. A certain peace that comes with surety. With acceptance. They have both been deeply hurt. Broken, to the point that she isn't sure either of them will ever be the way they were, *before*. But maybe that's okay.

"Then we should go and make a new memory," she says simply, her fingers combing through Draco's hair and tugging his head up, and his grey eyes are red-rimmed, a little wetness beneath them. He's a ruin. Ashen and devastated. He meets her eyes as if it hurts him, a dawning confusion

in the storm of his eyes as he processes what she's just said. "Now," she adds, in case he didn't realise.

"What? *Now?*" It's hoarse and bewildered as he stares at her wide-eyed, trying to figure out if she really means what it seems like she's implying; if she's actually serious. Hermione is very serious. That peaceful feeling swells through her as she straightens and takes his hand, lacing her fingers through his. His hand is large, and his fingers are cold from the chill.

"Yes." She swallows nervously, a thought occurring to her – what if Draco doesn't want to, after what just happened? He might not be in the mood for that, after *this*. "I mean, if you wa–"

"*Yes*," he says, breathless, comically fast – before she can even get the words out – his pupils dilating and his expression transforming as desire seethes up in him hard, written all over his face. "Yes. *Please*."

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

► Housekeeping!

Twenty

Hermione shuts the bedroom door behind her with a click and then uses a few quick charms to make sure it's locked, and they won't be heard, before she sets her wand and her arm holster aside on the dresser. Her heart is beating so hard and fast she can feel it thundering, reverberating through her ribs, and she feels like her lungs are airless and her blood is fizzing, her fingertips tingling. She thinks it's adrenaline washing through her, a tsunami of it, and she gulps as she turns to face Draco standing at the end of the bed. He looks somehow simultaneously terrified and predatory, and his eyes are glittering and fixed on her, chest expanding with his breaths.

A flick of her wand draws the heavy velvet curtains across, throwing the room into a dim gloom that seems somehow less confronting. *There, that helps*, Hermione thinks, and then doesn't know what to do next. She stands rooted to the floor for long seconds, her mind racing as fast as her pulse before she takes a deep breath. She wants this. And she wants him. The rest is just noise; extraneous. Irrelevant. A distraction. Draco is all that matters. Hermione lets out her breath. She's doing this; it's decided. Fear has no place in this.

Three steps and she's in front of him, face upturned to his, arms looping around his neck, on tiptoes. "Kiss me," she tells him, and his hands go to her waist and her back, and he's kissing her as if both their lives depend on it. He's shaking. Trembling right through as though she's pressing a taser to his throat, but his mouth is so hungry, and his grip on her is a little hard, a little desperate. Hermione's okay with that right now. She just holds him tighter in return, grabbing his shoulder, his jaw, his hair. Her hands roam, her fingers digging in, her touch possessive as her lips part to his. She wants him.

Warmth. Heat. Wet. Their teeth clash a little, and her lower lip gets crushed like an overripe fruit as her hands fist in his hair, tugging demandingly, pressing her whole body against him. "*Oh – mmph,*" she whimpers inarticulately as Draco licks into her mouth, and it's like he's stroking sheer pleasure into her from the very first slip of his tongue. Desire slams into Hermione's belly, shivers clattering down her spine and she moans again, pushing into the kiss. Her tongue licks against his again and again, and he groans, his hands twitching against her, finding their way under her shirt, gripping her waist and sliding up her naked back.

Hermione's arousal is a spark in a tinder-dry forest; it goes from a smouldering ember to a raging wildfire in moments, as if her body knows what they're going to be doing and is overflowing with anticipation. They're only kissing, but her clit already feels sensitised, her vulva flush with blood, her insides twitching, her body in overdrive. Oh god.

It's as if making the decision to do this – no matter how difficult it might be – has blotted out her fear. Like a roller coaster, she thinks giddily. Once you get up the nerve to do it, it becomes more thrilling than frightening, and you're glad you found the courage to do it. So far, that's holding true. It'll be okay, she tells herself, trying to stay in the moment, in the here and now, with him, as she

feels his erection press against her abdomen. She's safe with him, in their room, as his mouth presses pleasure into hers. There is no one else here. Just them.

Finally though, she wants more than just heady, dizzying kisses, swaying pressed together at the end of the bed. She's ready to move forward, a goal in mind. Driven. Hermione plans to rewrite old memories with a new one; this sex has a purpose. And in part, she's just impatient to elevate the pleasure. Hermione knows what she wants, and she wants it *now*. Draco's soft, demanding mouth on her breasts, and then eventually on her clit, as she does what he suggested and sits on his face, letting him pay worship to her.

She pulls away slowly, their mouths parting with a wet suction that makes her whimper, lips slowly dragging. Just that – the slow separation of their mouths – is an erotic experience in itself. The plush drag of his lips, the glimpse of his tongue curling behind white teeth, the hoarse little breaths he takes, the way his hands shift on her back, sliding down to allow her to draw away, settling at her waistband.

Hermione is breathless, her cheeks are hot, and so far, fear has eluded her.

"Strip," she says as she takes another step back, and the word comes out husky and low, arousal doing things to her throat. He smiles at that, slow and wicked, and if she could flush any more, she's sure she would. She clears her throat. "To your boxers," she tells him.

She's in control, she reminds herself. Their shared mantra, the litany that allows her to be brave and stay grounded. She's in control. When they're alone, she's always in control. He'll do whatever she says, always. And he is – unbuttoning his shirt and letting it fall to the rug, joined a moment later by his trousers, and Hermione's breath catches. He's only been pushing himself to work out in their room for about a week, but she feels like she can already tell the subtle differences. Where he was nearly too thin and toned, now he's lean and gradually building definition, muscles already more delineated, and bones pressing less sharply beneath his skin. She loves it.

His eyes are dark and glazed, and his lips swollen from their kisses, a flush creeping from his face down his chest, his breath coming quick. Aside from scars, his chest is nearly smooth, just a faint smattering of pale blond hairs, and then a trail of blond beginning below his belly button, disappearing under his boxer shorts, which his erection is currently trying to escape. Pressing determinedly out against the fabric and distorting it quite impressively. *That's going to be inside me soon*, Hermione thinks and chews on her lip, awash with nervous anticipation.

He's beautiful, though. A sculpture standing with an unconscious kind of grace. Like a big cat; a leopard, perhaps, all elegance and danger. He distracts her from shedding her own clothes with those magnetic steel grey eyes, and that expressive mouth and sharp jaw, his pale hair falling forward over his forehead in disarray, long enough that some of the ends tangle in his eyelashes when he blinks, and he frowns and shoves it back impatiently.

"What now?" he asks her, obviously aiming for an unhurried mild curiosity, but she knows him well enough now to hear the nerves thrumming in his voice like a taut wire plucked. The uncertainty. The worry. She wonders why he's worried. Is he worried that she'll back out? Or that she'll break down during the act? That he'll trigger her? Or, a more prosaic reason – is he worried about how he'll perform? She pulls her top off over her head, a thin vest underneath, and then shoves down her leggings before she inhales deeply and – before she can lose her nerve – whips off her vest. She resists the urge to cover her naked breasts with her hands, her heart a frantic drumbeat, ducking her chin, her gaze lifting nervously to his face.

"Oh Merlin. *Hermione*." His pupils are swollen, eating his irises, and he looks as though he'd like to devour her. He's all tension and desire, the want radiating off him as his fingers flex at his sides and his breathing pattern goes all funny, his lips parted. "Fuck. You're so beautiful."

She covers her cheeks then, as if there's any point in hiding her blush, and her hands are all shaky. *She's* all shaky. He reaches out, understanding in his eyes, and tugs her in close. Her naked chest against his, short enough to his height that he can rest his chin easily on her head, or kiss the crown of it, his arms wrapped around her in an embrace. "We don't have to, you know." His erection pushes against her belly, as if disagreeing with his reassurances. Hermione traces her fingers over his left nipple, cheek turned against his chest.

"I *want* to," she says, nearly a whisper, and he makes a low *hmm* that she hears reverberating in his chest with the way her face is pressed against it. She pushes off him with her right hand flat against his left pec, and then, mouth dry and terror warring with want, she sits on the edge of the bed.

"Kneel," she tells him like a Queen to her subject, and his mouth tips into a lopsided, sweet smirk. Draco kneels, sinking down on cue, and *oh. Oh*. There's something very heady about the way he does everything she says with that unquestioning willingness. He waits patiently as she just stares at him for a second, kneeling back on his heels at her feet and shoving his hair back again. Hermione takes a breath and shifts, planting her hands behind her and resting on them so that her breasts are pushed out, on display.

It's hard to get a proper breath, and shivers are running through her even though she feels hot. Draco's staring blatantly, hands resting palm up on his thighs, and she can see the strain in his forearms – one pale and one marred by the Mark – and the flex of his fingers. He wants to reach out. His throat bobs as he swallows, and his eyes are black and quicksilver, his dark blond lashes fluttering. Hermione feels oddly powerful despite her nerves and the traces of memory that slide cold through the dark corners of her mind. She parts her legs and shoves the memories down, sliding her feet over the rug until her knees are splayed wider than shoulder-width apart.

"You can touch," she says, and it comes out tight and breathless.

He *touches*.

A soft groan is dragged from Draco's throat as he lifts his hands and lays them over her knees, sliding them up her thighs to her hips. Warm and shocking, his hands span her thighs from top to outside – so large, so careful – and a breath that is almost a moan escapes her. Her thighs twitch.

"You're in control," he says in a rush, his voice low and unsteady. His hands find her waist, conforming to the curve of it, pressing against her flesh as he dips his head to the inside middle of her thigh and kisses it reverently. His jaw prickles her tender flesh, his tongue flicks out during the sucking kiss, and he leaves a cool, wet patch. "You have the power here, Hermione." He murmurs it into her skin and then kisses her right by her belly button, hands sliding up her sides so that his thumbs brush the undersides of her breasts.

"I'll do whatever you want." And it's a promise, a prayer, a plea. "I'll do whatever you want," he repeats against the soft skin of her abdomen, and it's not a reassurance; it's him *begging* her. There's hunger in his every movement – in the tone of his words, in the press of his mouth, and it sends a panting, dizzying arousal cascading through Hermione's body in response that makes her doubt she has control. Not really; she's reacting to him, and he's reacting to her, and neither of them is really in *control*, she thinks with a brief flash of clarity. But she'll try.

She leans forward as he looks up at her, awaiting her permission, and her left breast makes contact with his face. Her nipple brushes the corner of his lips, and quick as a striking snake, his mouth closes over it – she moans, shockingly loud in the quiet – as his hand slides behind her back, yanking her closer. It's as though he does it without conscious thought. His tongue slicks over her nipple, his mouth hot, and she makes another strangled moan, uneven and shapeless, as her hand buries in his hair. *Oh*. Oh, it feels so much better without cloth in the way. He sucks and licks, and a liquid fire flares down to her core. She's getting *wet*, aware of a sudden slick between her legs, and a visceral ecstasy burns bright through every nerve as he swirls his tongue and sucks and nips so very gently. She doesn't know why she'd been so scared to let him do it, to give up that barrier of fabric.

"H'mione?" He says it around her nipple, half garbled, his tongue stroking the hard bud inadvertently, and she realises she's making a constant, glitching moan, her fingers all twisted in the hair at the back of his head, pushing her breast out against his mouth. She stops. "Are you alright?" he asks, mouth still pressed against her nipple.

"I – I'm fine," she wobbles, easing up her grip on him and letting him pull back a bit. "Are – are you...?"

"*Yes*," he says emphatically, "just checking *you* were," and then his hand cups her other, neglected breast and his mouth dips to it, suckling it in. It's shockingly intense, his tongue laving over her nipple, but his mouth enclosing so much more, sucking firmly. She chokes out another moan that is nearly a wail, the pleasure so strong it almost tips over into pain. This is nothing like then. She pulls him up by the hair, and his mouth is wet and he's panting, his eyes glazed, and when she kisses him, he moans and his hands come up to cradle her face.

"Lie down on the bed," she says, her heart picking up again, *lub-dub, lub-dub, LUB-DUB*. He does as ordered once more, pushing to his feet with a sinuous elegance and then crawling onto the bed as she stands, watching him. His scarred back is a livid quilt, and for a moment, Hermione's heart lurches and she just wants to shove him face down, straddle his hips, and rub scar liniment into the ruin of his back, sex pushed from her mind. No wonder it hurts him and restricts his movement – but then he's sprawling on his back, and his expression is dizzy with lust, his erection thrusting up, his abdomen caving with his breaths, and Hermione forgets about his back.

She bites her lip and slides her knickers down her legs as he watches, eyes hooded. They drop to her feet, just a scrap of cotton, and she steps out and makes herself climb up beside him on the bed, feeling awkward and exposed.

"Come here," Draco says as he leans up on an elbow and she takes his hand. He pulls and grabs, and then, with a dizzying speed and a shift of angles, they're suddenly a tangle of limbs on the bed, and he's all mouth and searching fingers, kissing her lips, her jaw, her throat, and down over her collarbone. "What do you need?" he asks in between soft, hungry kisses to her lips as they lie entwined together. There's tenderness in his voice, and a grinding, aching want that makes his words come out unsteady and her skin feel tight and flushed, her breath shallow. "What do you want to do, Hermione?"

The way he's trying so hard to make her feel safe makes her feel inexpressibly grateful.

"I – I want you to make me come," she whispers, voice shaking and tight, the words a struggle to get out. "I want – what you said." The next words come out tiny and in a breathless rush as if she's admitting a crime: "I want to sit on your face."

Draco's eyes flash silver; predatory. "Yes," he rasps and then he rolls and lifts Hermione up like she weighs nothing, and she squeaks and flails before he settles her down straddling his face, kneeling above him with her legs snugged awkwardly under his shoulders.

"Oh god," Hermione wobbles out, vertigo seizing her and making her head whirl as she squeezes her eyes shut and braces her hands against the wall, and Draco holds her hips firmly, hands stroking up and down her flanks as though she's a skittish mooncalf.

"You're in control," Draco's saying, she realises belatedly. "You're in control."

Hermione looks down at him, and he looks dizzy himself; lust-drunk and wanting, flushed face framed between her thighs as she kneels over him. God. It's hot and obscene at once. It's like nothing that happened *then*, she tells herself determinedly, trying to actively *not* think about it.

"Are you alright? Granger?" His fingers press into the flesh of her arse, gently squeezing, and she gulps and nods. His grip is too much right now. Too constricting.

"Hands on the bed," she says, trying for firm and not quite making it there, her voice shaking traitorously – not just from nerves, but arousal. Her whole body feels hot, her skin tingling, her lungs in a vice. He's staring at her ravenously; staring between her legs, at her wet cunt only inches from his mouth. A wolf with a rabbit almost in its jaws. "No – no touching me with your hands." She bats at his right one, where it closes over the swell of her hip. Draco looks a little wild-eyed as he shoots her a pleading, almost miserable look, his pupils huge and his breath coming ragged, but does as he's told with a little groan of displeasure. He licks his lips, his gaze fixed on her *there* again, and fuck, she feels so *exposed*.

"Are you going to make me beg, Granger?" he asks, nearly slurring, a dark, honeyed edge to his voice as his eyes dart to meet hers again, and a visceral shudder of anticipation rolls right through her. There's a power to this. She's in control. She wobbles a grin, thinking of him begging.

"Yes."

"Fuck," he groans and his tongue darts out over his lower lip again. Hermione's insides clench, and she feels so wet, so *slick* and swollen, the air cold on her tender flesh, and *oh*, she can imagine his hot mouth would feel so good. His hands lie on the bed by her knees, and she sees his fingers twitch.

"Salazar's sake, you're going to start *dripping* soon," he says, and while he's smirking, there's an awed, needy tone to his voice that almost supersedes her embarrassment. Almost.

"Shut up and beg," she says sharply, and his eyes widen before he grins wickedly, a brief flash that makes the scar cutting down his cheek deepen, his eyes glittering, his chest heaving under her.

"Please. *Please*, Hermione. Please let me eat your pretty, dripping cunt, *please* –" her cheeks flame as he draws out the words as though he's savouring them, enjoying the effect of his obedience on her – "– sit on my face and let me drown in your juices, please, I'm *begging*, I –" His flow of words cuts off as she *sits*.

Oh.

He makes an almost pained groan, mouth open and his tongue instantly swirling over her clit.

"*Mmph.*"

She moans like he's breaking her in the sweetest way.

He licks and mouths as if he really *is* drinking her up, and everything's *so sensitive*.

"*Nngh.*"

Her forehead thumps against the wall.

His hands come up to clutch at her hips and she hardly notices, too busy rocking on his mouth in tiny little shifts of her hips. He's so hot. So soft. Ecstasy lights Hermione up from within, bright and sparking as it blazes through her veins and nerves, making her insides clench and her clit pulse and burn with pleasure, obliterating all thought except *more. More*. There is no space to think of anything except Draco, feasting on her cunt as if she's oxygen to his flame. Sweat breaks out over her entire body as she flushes all over, one hand curling in his hair, the other shoved clammy against the wall beside her forehead as she pants like a dog, her eyes squeezed shut.

"*Oh god.*"

She wants to come so badly. Her legs tremble, her hands tremble – she's shaking with the pleasure buzzing through her. She's a lightning rod in a storm, humming and quivering, flashing up with exquisite sensation as he suckles on her clit, or curls his tongue a particular way, or just mouths at her pussy all soft and sloppy, and *fuck* it's an overload. She quakes atop him, fingers clawing at the wallpaper and tightening in his hair. The world narrows down to this, to his mouth and his hands, and her desperate, gasping pleas and moans, everything else falling away.

"Oh, don't stop."

He doesn't.

Draco's tongue sweeps down from her clit, slicking between folds and lighting a trail of pleasure to the entrance of her, which he teases lightly around. She makes a breathy, squeaking sound. A groan shudders from him as he dips his tongue *into* her, thrusting it inside, and she nearly wails, the muscles in her thighs tensing. It feels so incredible. So bizarre. Hermione doesn't know whether she wants to try to shove herself upwards or grind down harder, and she's making an unsteady, animal moan as he fucks her with his tongue, plunging it into her.

"*Hnnngh – Draco – I – oh –*"

Then his tongue slides back up and *oh yes*, that's where she wants it the most. A burgeoning, greedy ecstasy radiates out from her clit, tensing her inner muscles in rippling spasms. She hisses a *yes*, and Draco makes a humming sound, his tongue moving on her clit, swirling and lapping, and the sensation builds and builds gloriously, hot and seething, edging toward climax. He's thorough, and he might have been a virgin, but he doesn't seem new to *this* part of things because everything he does is a maelstrom of perfection.

Locks of hair are plastered to her face with sweat – she's so feverish, so hot – and it's hard to remember not to yank his hair in her mindlessness, her other hand clawed clumsy against the wall, her breath wrenching in loud, her legs nearly going numb from how they're slid under his shoulders. His hands are grasping her bum, and he's making humming, satisfied sounds nearly lost beneath her moans. When she opens her eyes enough to peek from beneath her lashes she sees he's

looking up at her. Mouth pressed to her – oh god – and eyes like fire-licked steel, one gleaming and one shadowed in the dim light, both filled with a fierce intensity.

Hermione would be self-conscious, except she's too far gone. All she can think about is the orgasm building inside her. She releases her grip on his hair enough to pet clumsily through it. "I'm so close," she gets out, voice strangled and pleading. "So close. So –"

Draco lifts her up with his hands on her bum, freeing his mouth just enough to speak. "Come then, Hermione. *Come*." His tongue sweeps out, licking a delicious fire into her. "Come for me. *Now*." And then he's licking again, his eyes still pinned to hers, that command lingering in them and she wants to, she feels it rising, feels it – it – one more curl of his tongue, and *ohhh*...

She comes with a thready, sobbing wail, eyes slamming shut as her face contorts at the moment. It feels like she's breaking in two, her muscles all clenching tightly with the spasms of it. It's a sudden, sharp crest that wrenches up out of a sea of pleasure – a wave that's seized her, sweeping her along with it, crashing over her, sending her churning in the rush and the foam. She's gasping like she's drowning, unable to get a breath for a split second, every muscle in her body shuddering, pleasure bursting through her flesh bright and vital.

His tongue has turned soft, the flat of it moving gently and tenderly, his lips soft, pressing and mouthing, like sloppy kisses easing her through the aftershocks, waves of pleasure still rippling blissfully through her from her vulva outward. She shuts her eyes, sagging against the wall, revelling in the pleasure. Slowly, the aftershocks fade to a low hum of blissful completion, though Hermione's extremities are still tingling, her thighs trembling. She feels weak. She feels replete.

"*Oh*. That was... *amazing*."

This is the best feeling in the world, but now she just wants to collapse. And she can't move. Her legs are jelly and have gone numb from how she kneels splayed out with her lower legs trapped under his shoulders, though she manages to lift up just enough that she doesn't drown Draco. She giggles weakly, slumped forward over him so that her cheek is smushed to the wall, and with a small shock, she feels his hands cup her breasts. "Merlin, you're so fucking magnificent when you come," he murmurs, full of emotion, his breath puffing warm on her clit, and Hermione shivers and smiles against the wallpaper, feeling like a ragdoll. *Magnificent*? She likes the sound of that, as his hands caress her breasts and slide down to her belly. "So beautiful, coming apart under my tongue. So *good*."

She inhales and lets it out slowly, her body limp, feeling saturated with a warm, liquid heaviness. A good feeling. Her vulva is still exquisitely sensitive, though, as she learns when he ghosts his thumb along it, and she squeaks and twitches, and opens her eyes enough to see the evidence of her arousal. Slick, clear fluid coating his thumb, viscous and stretching like egg white as he shifts his hand to her hip. Oh god. "Fuck, you're so *wet*," he says, words thick with a lust-drunk, almost vicious satisfaction as her wetness smears on her thigh under his grip.

"I'm *stuck*," she says weakly, snickering as she attempts to move and just *can't*, her limbs all wobbly like a baby mooncalf's. "Help?"

Draco grins, and then his hands are sliding over Hermione's body and grasping firmly as he makes a huff of effort. She shifts her legs, and then she's draped over his torso, cheek to cheek with him. His chin and all around his mouth are glistening wet with her juices, and he smears them roughly away with the back of a hand before kissing her. She tastes a tanginess on his tongue and thinks: *that's me*. It's bizarre. His tongue feels so soft and his lips so plush, and she moans and then – limp

and exhausted – buries her face down in the crook of his neck. His arms come up around her back, smoothing over it repeatedly, her knees splayed to either side of his waist now. "That better?"

"*Mmmh.*" She kisses the side of his neck, over the big vein thrumming there below his jaw. Nips at it. Hums a happy sigh, her mind filled with him, and what they've just done, and nothing else. "I love you," she says muffled into his skin. He makes a contented sound low in his chest, and she can feel it reverberating through her.

"Love you too, Hermione." His hand strokes through her hair. "And your sweet pussy. *Merlin*, I could eat it all day."

They lie there together for a moment, Hermione soaking up the afterglow, and then she pushes herself upright, astraddle him, already flushed cheeks blushing hotter as her wetness makes a squelching sound against his lower abdomen. She covers her face instinctively, but he just makes a small moan of appreciation, and a low fuck drags out of his throat, and when she peeks between her fingers, he's glassy-eyed and his lips are parted as he stares at where she presses against him, as though rapturous.

"That's *fantastic*," he murmurs blissfully, as though talking to himself, lost in the moment. And then Hermione wiggles back, kneeling over Draco and reaching behind her to try to tug his boxer shorts down. She still wants to have sex. She might feel sated, but he's not. And the whole impetus for this was to erase old memories, to wipe them out and rewrite them with good. And they aren't finished, not yet.

"Are you sure?" he asks, even as he lifts his hips and shoves his boxers down, and Hermione nods tightly. Her breath comes a little fast again as he readies himself, and then she's kneeling where his cock just bumps warm against her arse cheek, and she whoops in a shaky breath. Gulps.

"I'm sure," she says, and knows she doesn't sound it. He looks like he's trying very hard to be careful and considerate through a weighty haze of lust, dark-blond brows knitted as he searches her face.

"Hermione – we don't have to."

Hermione remembers the weight of him, the blood on her thighs, the *pain*, and a shudder runs through her. The sudden need to run rises in her fleetingly, but she eases down over him anyway, biting her lip bruisingly hard. Voldemort won't fucking ruin this. She won't let him.

"I want to," she tells the man lying under her. She wants him. She loves him. He has suffered for her more than any person should, and he saved her, and he makes her happy in ways she never thought she could be again, and Voldemort won't take what they should be able to have.

She gasps as she feels the head of Draco's cock press up against her; blunt and warm against her slippery vulva. *Oh god*. Objectively speaking, she's sure it's not overly big, but right now – pressed against her most intimate parts, still swollen and sensitive from orgasm – it feels huge. Too much. How is it going to fit? Won't it just tear her again? Like the first time? The pain, and the blood... Panic fizzles through her, and it's hard to breathe as the head of him slides over and between her slick folds with every small shift of their bodies.

"*Fuck*," he grates out, and she looks up at his face. His eyes are heavy-lidded, his lips parted, strain written in the lines of him as his breath jerks in and out, fast and hard. She's sopping wet and slick

from coming, but she's still not going to try to just shove him into her without any care. Hermione reaches down between her thighs and grasps his cock.

"*Nngh*," he groans ineloquently as her fingers curl tightly around the shaft, his skin feverishly hot, his girth feeling dauntingly thick. "H'mione. *Fuck*."

She guides it against her entrance, *into* her very, very slowly, and it pushes and stretches, and oh god, *oh god*. "Oh god," she gasps, and there's a small, burning pain as the head of his cock slides properly into her, and it feels so full, it feels so much. It –

He moves a fraction with a gasp, hips bumping up as if he can't help himself and the pain flares, and she makes a wounded sound, animal-like and small. "No. *Still*," she says, incoherently, pushing with one of her hands on his chest, and he understands enough to freeze.

"I – I'm sorry." The tendons in his neck are taut, his jaw tight as he breathes very deliberately, his hands ghosting lightly over her hips. "Fuck, you're just so *tight*. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, it's just – a lot. Just be still for a moment," she gets out breathlessly. It's only a little, tiny hurt, but she's scared it will bloom into full-blown flowers of pain and blood, or just that it will remind her too sharply of *then*. Of the revel, or – she shuts down the thoughts. Refuses to think them. She sits over him very still, hands braced on his chest and her breath heaving in and out, and he strokes his hands over her sides, and down her hips and thighs.

"It's okay. Just relax," he says, not sounding very relaxed himself. His eyes search hers. His chin is still glistening wet in places and his cheeks are red – the livid scar lost amongst the colour – his lips flushed and swollen, and his eyes glazed and wanting. "You – you have to relax, and then it'll be fine."

She looks down at him, feeling dizzy and drunk. "You promise?" she asks, finding that she needs his assurances. "It feels like it's going to –" Tear, she thinks. Hurt. Damage. Like it did at the revel, like it did at the –

"*Hey*. Hey, focus on me," he says and he lifts his right hand to her cheek, thumb running over her lower lip. and a little self-deprecating smirk flits over his face, tempered by his desire. "I promise. My dick's really not that big, Granger. Last time –" he tries to say it lightly, but she can see the pain in his eyes – it mostly hurt because you weren't anywhere near ready, physically. You were too, um, dry, and I couldn't get you ready. But you are now. You've come, and you're *so* wet, and so fucking slick, *and Merlin* –" he closes his eyes and swallows, collecting himself – you'll – you'll be fine. Promise. I promise."

"Okay," she whispers and tries consciously to relax. Her thighs, her bum – it's hard to relax her cunt. She's not sure *how* exactly, and besides, orgasm has given it a mind of its own, little spasms still rolling and clenching through it sporadically. She knows how to do pelvic floor exercises though, she thinks suddenly, and that involves relaxing. So kneeling atop him, the head of his cock inside her, Hermione tries that. Slowly squeezing – drawing in and up – and then relaxing is how it's supposed to go. She does her best.

"*Oh fucking Merlin*," Draco gasps out in a strangled rush after making a weird *hnngh* that sounds like he's dying, his hands clamping down too hard on her hips. "What're you *doing*, Granger?"

"*Relaxing*," she says indignantly, losing all control of the exercise, and he shuts his eyes and huffs a ragged laugh, hands loosening on her thighs.

"That didn't feel like *relaxing*. That felt like the *opposite*. Not that I'm complaining, just...*Salazar's sake*, you're going to kill me."

She laughs. "The relaxing comes *after*." He opens one eye, staring at her owlishly, looking ridiculous, and his mouth is twitching.

"You can't just... *relax*, Hermione?"

She giggles, little bubbles and huffs of laughter spilling out of her as her shoulders shake, and then *oh* – "*Oh Draco*" – he's slid nearly completely into her slick cunt. Without realising it, she's sunk down onto him as she laughed, and it turns out she *could* just relax, and *oh*, he feels so big. She feels so *full*. Like she's being stretched, and filled beyond capacity. *Stuffed*. Overstuffed, except it doesn't hurt, only the smallest tenderness, the faintest burn. Mostly – overwhelmingly – it just feels amazing. Fucking amazing. Experimentally she lifts up and then slides back down slowly, taking even more of him, but not quite all.

"*Fuck*," Draco mutters from between gritted teeth, hands holding on too tight again as she repeats the process. Up until only the head of him is just barely still in her, and then back down, and this time she sits properly. She feels his cock *pushing* against her insides as though the length of him is just slightly too much for her to take, but it doesn't exactly hurt. "*Fuck-fuck-fuck*."

Amused, and slightly delirious with power and pleasure, she thinks, *that's what I'm doing*.

"I'm trying," she says aloud, and he shoots her a startled, wide-eyed look and then snickers, covering his eyes with a hand, his chest shaking as he laughs. This is good, Hermione thinks, dragged out of the moment for a second. Laughter and blissful, decadent pleasure are nothing like *that*. Like the revel.

"You feel amazing," he says thickly as she moves on him, and then he drags in a sharp breath and moans as she begins to find a rhythm. "*Amazing*. Merlin, I love you so much."

It feels so good. So *good*. This deep, primal, visceral pleasure that makes her press her fingers hard into his chest, gripping him so tightly it nearly hurts him. That makes her want to let out low, husky groans, her hips grinding and shifting. Her vulva is sensitive, her clit feels little starbursts of pleasure whenever she grinds against him, but mostly it's that feeling deep inside her that is blooming through her like a nova. So basic, so fundamental, *so fucking good*. She feels like an animal blindly grasping for bliss.

But she can't move fast enough for exactly what she wants. Can't get the right angle. She feels like Draco could be going even deeper, but she doesn't know how to make that happen. She inhales, shifting off him with a wet sound as their bodies detach, on her knees above him, eyes locked. "On my back," she says – nervous, because that was how – that was how they'd done it. But perhaps that's why they need to do it now. His expression reflects hers, echoing back her uncertainty.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." She strokes her fingers along his jaw, and lips, and he kisses the tips of them.

"Lie back then," he says softly, and there's an aching tenderness beneath the urgency and the desire to come that she can see stark on his face. "I'll be careful."

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

Thank you, Pidanka, for having brilliant ideas, as always!

Twenty-One

She's all roses and cream, amber and brown. Limbs splayed wide as he settles over her, nipples dusky rose and the rest of her flushed pinker than usual with arousal, sweat a sheen over her skin, damp on her forehead and temples where it's stuck little locks and wisps of hair down flat. Hermione's eyes are starry and glowing, pupils blown wide, her pink tongue sweeping over her lips, her breath hard and unsteady. Trust radiates off her as she slides her hands over his shoulders and then cups his face as he braces himself over her, fitting between her spread thighs. She's beautiful.

Glorious.

Draco feels a sweet, aching pain in his chest as he dips his mouth to hers, and she parts her lips to him eagerly. Hungrily. Her eyes flutter shut, long lashes fan against her flushed cheeks, and her mouth is intoxicating. Her tongue sweeps over his as he fumbles between them, grasping his cock and fitting it against her entrance as her hips lift to make it easier. Oh *fuck*. He slides in so easily, her cunt gripping him tightly but so wet, so slick, so hot, and she moans into their kiss, muffled and wavering, her fingers pressing firmly into his face.

He pushes all the way in then, and a groan leaves him even as he locks his hips, pausing to let her adjust. It's so fucking *good*. His mouth slides from hers, and he buries his face against the masses of her hair, breathing hard. "Are – are you alright? Is that –"

"Yes. More," she murmurs, eager and needy, her hands sliding over his shoulders, clinging on tightly. She's trembling but pushing into him, greedy and wanting, and what did he do to deserve this? *Nothing*. "I'm okay. Give me *more*."

So he does as he's told, gladly. He fucks her deliciously slowly, and she feels so *good*. His universe becomes her body. She is light, and air, and food and drink, and nothing matters but her. Burying himself in her, again and again, his breath a panting rhythm, her moans and whimpers the sweetest sound he's ever heard as her fingers tangle in his hair, and her legs grip his hips tightly. She's soft and hot, arching up into him, sliding her hands over his back as if his scars don't bother her at all. She's vocal too; a stream of words spilling from her lips. "So good – *oh god* – *Draco* – *nngh* – more –"

This is so much more than Draco deserves. He doesn't deserve any of this. Her love, her trust, the way she's letting him inside her despite what he did to her. Despite what he let them do. He can never be worthy of her. He's drenched in blood. Dripping in it. Saturated in the suffering of others. Not just Hermione's but so many people's. So many. He's tainted. Stained. Dirtying her just by

touching her. But Merlin, he cannot bring himself to stop. He'd rather die than stop. It would kill him.

This is where he belongs.

In her.

"*Fuck*," he gasps in her ear as he fucks into her, and her cunt is so wet it makes slick, deliciously obscene sounds every time he thrusts. Perfection. Sweet, wet, blissful perfection. Merlin, the way she's moaning is like life itself. Sweat beads on his forehead, and he feels hot all over, and his dick is a beacon of sheer ecstasy, broadcasting through his nerve endings. This is even better than eating her delicious pussy. Incredible. He finds a faster, harder rhythm, and oh Merlin, he thinks he might just die of this. Her cunt is gripping him, twitching, and he thinks in a corner of his dazed mind that she's somehow doing that on purpose, and he's bewildered and loves it at once.

"You feel – *amazing*," he chokes out, his mouth finding her throat, suckling and kissing, and her thighs bracket his hips and squeeze, her hands in his hair as he thrusts; his hips are rolling hard and sharp, and she's wailing now, a breathy, groaning discordance, as though she's beyond caring what she sounds like. Her wails are broken and juddering as he rests on one elbow with his other hand clutching her hip, *fucking*, pounding into her now as she urges him on, and despite the brutal force, this is nothing like the revel.

This is nothing like the way she wept despairingly as he used her, and they all watched.

Because he *did*. He did that. And Hermione might want to rewrite the past, but she can't, and he'll always have done what he did. He'll never deserve this. But Merlin, he can no longer deny himself, whether he deserves it or not. And maybe Draco's a monster, but he'll be on her leash. He'll kill for her. He'll die for her if need be, and gladly, because his life is hers to spend, whether she likes it or not. And if one day she decides she doesn't want him anymore, he'll go, and she'll never need to know what happens to him after that. But until then, he'll pay penance.

That's not how it is yet, though. For now, she still wants him with a needy, wanting trust – right now she clings to him, and her body is warm and demanding, her hands tugging at his hair until he turns his head and she can capture his lips with hers. Their teeth clack together, and their tongues meet rough and curling as he keeps moving, and the careless desperation of the kiss makes heat pool in him. He's panting and she's making low groans every time he slams home into the heat of her, and it's a maelstrom of ecstasy. It's bliss. He can feel orgasm creeping up on him. He's trying to hold out but she feels too good, and it's been so long since he came, and –

"*I'm gonna come*," he rushes out, mouth pressed half against hers so the words come out even more garbled, and she makes a whimper that sears into his brain and locks her ankles behind the small of his back. Trapping him inside her.

"Come then," she tells him, voice shaking and tight. "Come. *Draco*. Come inside me, *please*."

So he does.

Immediately and hard.

He thrusts arrhythmically as it takes him; once, twice – a third time, and his pleasure is searing, clenching chaos as he comes inside her with his dick buried deep. "*Hnn-nngh*." It's a low, faltering sound as his brain breaks apart, his muscles taut, heat radiating off him. He becomes nothing but

the wave of pleasure for a moment, everything else whitening out. Just *her*, and the way she makes him feel. His mouth is pressed against her cheek, open and groaning, his hand digging bruises into her hip. She's whimpering, making high-pitched little moans as she clings to him. There's a primal satisfaction purring in him; he's filled her with his cum, and some very basic, animal part of him is utterly sated by that. Intoxicated by the thought.

The intensity of it leaves him trembling and satiated as he lies slumped over her, his dick still inside her as he places clumsy kisses over her cheek. Her fingers are stroking through his hair, and her legs are still loosely gripping his hips, and she's warm and vital. He pulls back, his dick sliding out of her with a slick sound, and she makes a surprised noise, mouth curving into a smile. She's all flushed, her eyes heavy-lidded and dreamy, radiating bliss.

Draco rolls onto his side, off her, and draws her in close, tucking her pliable body up against his and then reaching down, managing to snag the edge of a blanket and yanking it up over them, tucking it around her gently. She lies with her head pillowed on his right arm, her right arm sliding over his waist as she makes a happy, humming sound. "I love you," she says quietly, voice all husky, and kisses his chest.

"I love you too," he answers, feeling it like a pulse through his entire body; love and satisfaction suffusing him. If he died right now, he'd die perfectly, utterly happy. "That was amazing. You were amazing." She kisses his chest again, her fingers trailing lightly over the edge of his back, sensation drifting in and out as she moves over scar tissue. "Was it all right for you?" he asks uncertainly. He's fairly sure it had to have been good for her from the way she'd responded, but it doesn't hurt to check. Hermione nods, very emphatically.

"Yes." She cuddles closer, her right leg hooking up awkwardly over his hip. "Better than just alright. God, it was *incredible*, Draco." She sounds drowsy and blissed out as she makes another happy little hum, and he kisses the crown of her head, an ache in his chest. There's a long, comfortable silence as they lie there cocooned together, his hand stroking down her back while his mind begins spinning over the significance of what they'd just done and the way things might play out from here.

"New memories," he says aloud, almost to himself. This hasn't undone what happened, or erased the scars, but it has given them something new. A fresh point of reference. Now when they think of sex, they can think of this instead of the bloodied horror of the revel. He smiles to himself as he runs his hand up and down Hermione's naked back in a lazy caress; she is smart.

"New memories," she echoes, slightly muffled against his skin. She rolls back and looks up at him, her face soft and relaxed, her lips plump and smiling, cheeks pink, and eyes hazy; amber sea glass framed by dark lashes. Merlin, she's beautiful. Like a painting. Maybe not classically beautiful, but so appealing to him, all her features are perfect in his eyes. The column of her throat as her head tips back over his arm leads down to the prominence of collarbones, sharp shoulders, and then the gentle curves of her breasts; each tipped dusky pink. He wants to bury himself in her all over again. She grins up at him, soft, smooth abdomen leading down to the faint jut of pelvic bones at her sides – still too thin – and the swell of her hips, and creamy thighs, the vee of short dark hair at the crux of her thighs obscuring most of her pretty pussy. "You're hard again," Hermione observes with a lazy, delighted smile and reaches down and – absurdly – playfully pokes his erection with one finger. He snorts, surprised, deep thoughts forgotten.

"I am, aren't I?"

"You know...I know it might not always be this easy," she says seriously, fingers closing over the head of his dick, walking down the shaft and cupping his balls. It tickles. "I'm not stupid enough to think that this will fix everything and that every time will go this well and that we won't have nightmares or...issues, anymore." She grips the shaft of his dick firmly, and he lets out a tiny moan despite himself. "But right now, I rather think I want to do it again."

Merlin. For a second, he stares at her wide-eyed, unable to process what she's saying, it's so unexpected. So unlikely. "Again?" he repeats dumbly, all the blood rushing from his brain to his dick. She nods. "Again," he says then, a confirmation, and when he kisses her, he's smiling. They both are.

Hermione feels like she's glowing. Radiant. She's feeling a sheer contentedness she didn't think was possible. Sure, she's sore. A little tender. But not like she was *then*; no, not even close. It's worlds apart. Incomparable. This is the pleasant, swollen tenderness of two rounds of fantastic sex that had felt utterly amazing. She'd come three times in the end, to his twice, and now she lies flopped on the bed bonelessly, leaving a puddle of cum and her own juices on the sheet. The mattress dips as Draco slides back into bed, in his boxers now, and she rolls her head to look at him, murmuring a thank you as he passes over her new wand. She cleans the bed with a wave of her wand and then stretches out beside him on her side as he lays back against the pillows.

She feels both light and heavy at once. Liquid. Contented. There's a fragility to the feeling – every good feeling she has is fragile, after all, always teetering on a knife's edge of memory and emotional trauma – but she feels good. Draco's opened the curtains, and the mid-afternoon sun is streaming in over the bed and her naked upper body. The blanket is tucked around her waist, but she doesn't feel self-conscious or cold. His eyes are dreamy as he looks down at her, leaning back lazily on the pillows with his forearm behind his head, and for once, she sees no guilt in his eyes. No self-loathing.

"Now, when I think of sex," she says, twirling her wand in her fingers. "I'll think of this." She smiles at Draco giddily, beaming until her cheeks hurt. "Like I said before, I know it doesn't fix everything, but I'm so glad we did this. I feel like I should thank Harry for making me decide to take the leap." Draco's face darkens, and it's like reality is bleeding back in, reminding him of all the bad. Hermione wishes she hadn't mentioned Harry. *Shit*.

"I won't be thanking him," Draco says, rubbing at his jaw. "Even if it did work out amazingly." A flicker of a smile lightens his features for a moment before he frowns again. "What happened before I got out there?"

"Nothing... Not really. He was just going on about – well –" She can't say it. She *won't*. It's not going to help anything, and it doesn't matter. Things had worked out in the end, weirdly. What Harry said isn't relevant. She'd rather just forget about it – and she definitely doesn't want to tell Draco.

"Hermione..." The mood shifts, and Hermione bemoans the loss of easy serenity as Draco eyes her, his tone hard. Why does he have to know?

"Fuck, why does it matter?" She rolls onto her back, rubbing her hands over her face in frustration before looking up at him, half upside-down. It's not *fair*. "What difference does it make? It worked out, didn't it? Can't we just leave it?" She sits up, pulling the sheet up under her armpits, knees to her chest. "Let sleeping dogs lie?"

"No. Because you looked like you were going to rip him apart with your bare hands. That's why. You were *hysterical*," he says patiently as though she's a child, although there's an edge of irritation in his voice. "You were kicking and screaming, and –"

"God, okay! That's *enough*!" That silences him for a moment. But he's looking at her still, waiting, his features cool and blank. There's no wriggling out of this. He looks at her with that expression; somehow demanding, implacable, his grey eyes steel and stone, flint sharp, and she knows she's going to cave. She hates Harry, suddenly. Hermione doesn't want to say. She doesn't want to tell him – Harry had been cruel and horrible, and she doesn't want to inflict that on Draco. And yet here she is. She wraps her arms around her knees, misery crawling up in her belly. She wants to go back to bathing in the afterglow. But there's no going back.

"Fuck," she mutters. He waits. "He told me that you enjoyed it." It comes out in a small, tight voice. She looks down at her knees, a weird, uncomfortable shame churning hot in her stomach, her lungs squeezing tightly. She can feel the heat creeping over her cheeks. She wants to be sick. It's a fucking awful thing to have to say. Silence fills the air. Silence *crushes* the air. She feels breathless, frozen. Draco doesn't make a sound. Not a single sound. The silence stretches out. She stares at her knees.

"I went a bit spare after that. I think I was screaming at him. I think I told him that...that of course you did –" he makes a sound now; a choked, harsh noise, but Hermione surges on "– because if you didn't, well, finish, then it wouldn't be very believable, and that it was mechanical. It was physiological. It wasn't because you liked...hurting me. I know that, Draco." Her breathing is shallow and too fast, her fingers digging into her wrists as she clutches her arms around her knees. "I know it wasn't – I mean, I was *there*. The biggest complaint I had at the time was that you took so fucking long to get it up," she says, trying for flippancy and going horribly wrong. He makes another miserable, horrible sound.

"I – Don't –" he tries and then falls silent with a quiet curse. Hermione remembers it all with a bleak kind of clarity. It's chaotic in her mind because, at the time, she'd been dazed and shocky, her head spinning – but it's *vivid* chaos in her memory. It hasn't softened with time. She remembers the pain, and the violation. The way he'd hit her. Her face swollen, her breasts bruised. Other people's blood slicking her skin. The way he'd shaken from the Cruciatus. That grunt of pleasure as he'd come. God. She can't stand it. It still makes her just as sick and horrified as it did two hours ago.

Her breath is coming short and heaving. She forces herself to look up at him, her fists clenching. He's staring at her, a hopeless kind of despair written on his face. His shoulders are slumped, his expression wretched – all pale skin and scars, and beautifully toned muscle sliding under his skin as he shoves his fringe back off his forehead. His brow is furrowed; he seems to still be searching for words and coming up empty, and self-hatred is settling bleakly on his features. *Fuck*. She's not having Harry and *stupid* memories ruin something amazing.

Without letting herself think any further about it, Hermione scrambles out of the blankets and crawls awkwardly onto Draco's lap. He moves automatically to accommodate her, his arms coming up around her and pulling her close. And then she's naked and straddling him on her knees, and his face is buried in the crook of her neck, his arms wrapped tightly around her middle. She reaches out for the sheet, pulling it roughly around her hips.

"I enjoyed it," he says, numbly. He takes a shaky breath. "I hated it, but you felt so good. It was the worst thing I've ever experienced, but it felt good. And – and –" He falls silent like a clockwork toy that's wound down. One of Hermione's hands cradles his head, and the other is pressed to his back.

His scar tissue is rough and uneven to the touch as she tries to comfort him. Is this messed up? She isn't sure. She doesn't care. It's still strange to be the one comforting *him* instead of vice versa. It makes her feel stronger. One of them needs to be the strong one. They can't both fall apart at once.

And when they were at the mansion, he was always strong. Always so strong. He's entitled to fall apart a little now. She had her turn down on the porch just earlier; now it can be his.

"Harry's an idiot. He doesn't know what he's talking about," she says, trying very hard to keep her voice even and matter-of-fact. His hair is silky soft to the touch, and she can feel his heart thudding against her chest through his, as though it's trying to beat right out of him. A bird beating itself senseless against the cage of his ribs. "He wasn't there. He has no fucking clue." Her voice turns sharp. Her fingers curl in his hair. No one else had been there. It had been them two floating alone together in an ocean of pain and fear, and no one else has the right to judge.

Hermione is sick of judgement and the way it gets under her skin. The way it crawls into her brain and nests there, growing doubts and uncertainties. Siobhan, with her cool, detached pity and distaste. Harry and Ron with their bewildered, loving horror. Tonks's silent concern. Oddly, Ginny and Lupin are the only two people who Hermione's very close to that don't seem to actively judge. They don't understand, but they don't cast judgement.

"You're really not going to listen to *Harry*, are you?" she asks Draco, a teary laugh catching in her throat.

"Potter *is* an idiot," he says, face still buried against her hair, and he sounds like he's smiling. Just a little.

"Exactly." She combs her fingers through his hair, trying to be pragmatic. It's oddly easy in the wake of their sex, as though the intimacy and endorphins have calmed her. Oxytocin has drugged her into an unnatural calm. Hermione will take it. "We both know what happened, Draco. We both know you didn't want to. Not really. We had no choice." She sighs. It's bizarre that what had happened that night at the revel was the same basic act as what they'd just spent nearly the past two hours doing. They couldn't be more dissimilar – the only alignment in both that he had penetrated her, and climaxed. But everything else – *everything* – had been diametrically opposed. The two acts couldn't have been more different.

"Potter still shouldn't have said that," he says, dragging her out of her wandering thoughts, sounding heavy with a dull anger.

"No. He shouldn't." Hermione turns her head and kisses his temple. "He was an utter git." Draco lifts his head and meets her eyes, his hands splayed wide on her sides, fingers warm. Their eyes are inches apart, and his are so pretty, even red-rimmed and a little bloodshot; silver sickles blotted with inky pupils and shaded by those thick, dark blonde lashes. They shine wetly, the complicated emotions in them too tangled to make sense of. "But in a way, I'm glad. Without him opening his big mouth, we might not have done this."

She can see the play of emotions over his face; the way that, over the space of a few heartbeats, he shoves them down, forcing himself to assume a semblance of normality. "When you put it that way," he says then, a faint, lopsided smile shaping his lips. That dull anguish is hidden, the self-loathing nearly gone – Hermione is sure it still all lurks beneath, but she doesn't know how to address that. She can't demand that Draco show her his pain. And what would she do if he did, anyway? Hermione can't fix it. So she kisses him instead, slanting her mouth soft and searching over his; a lingering, tender thing as her fingertips scritch over his scalp.

The only thing she *can* do is show him that she loves him, without loathing, shame, or regret.

A while later Hermione slides on one of Draco's t-shirts and wriggles into some leggings, and then sits on the edge of the bed, holding her wand and trying to recall the contraceptive charm she'd learned well over a year ago from Ginny, and then never had cause to use. "I hope I remember how to do this properly," she says, slightly nervous, wondering if she should just ask Ginny.

"So do I," Draco says emphatically, looking nervous too now as he sits on the bed beside her, fully clothed again. He's tried casting the charm himself, but her wand refuses to cooperate for him; the first attempt fizzled into nothing, and the second had put off sparks that had spattered tiny pink marks over Hermione's stomach. He'd refused to try a third time. He's shown her the wand movements, but for some reason, she can't seem to get it to work. Maybe she's too nervous.

"What if I think I've done it right, and it just doesn't work? Maybe I should just ask Ginny." Hermione wishes she'd thought of this before the sex, but she'd hardly been in any fit state. She swallows hard, weighing up the options. *Shit*. How mortifying. But pregnancy isn't something to be flippant about. Neither she nor Draco are capable of parenting right now. Certainly not in the middle of the war. Maybe not ever. She hasn't really thought about it until now. She wrings her hands together.

"Shit. Fuck. Maybe." Draco shoots her a worried look, charmingly out of his depth, and Hermione wants to smile despite the seriousness of the situation. "Would she do it for you?"

"Yes, of course." She fiddles with her wand, an anticipatory embarrassment already welling up in her stomach. She feels sick. She can't imagine Ginny will keep that secret from Harry. "I'll need to figure it out eventually, though. Unless you get your wand back. Because I can't run to Ginny every time we...you know. *Merlin*." She grimaces at the thought.

"You're perfectly capable of doing it, Granger," he says dryly. "You've just worked it up into a big deal in your head. You've psyched yourself out. I'm sure next time it'll be fine if you do it beforehand –" it works for several hours either side of sex, Hermione knows – "just not *this* time. When we've already..."

"Yeah. No. It's too risky," she agrees, shoulders slumping. "Merlin damnit, I'll go ask Ginny."

Hermione tames her hair a little and pulls on a baggy jersey, Draco kissing her temple and shooting her an apologetic glance as she leaves their room. She checks Ginny's room, hoping against hope that she's there – but she's not. Of course not; that would be too easy. With a sigh, Hermione slips down the stairs to peek into the sitting room. The radio's on, and Ron's there playing chess with Justin, Molly knitting industriously, while Ginny and Harry occupy the couch. Ginny's stretched out on the end facing the door, thankfully, her feet up on Harry's lap as she flicks through a National Geographic.

The redhead looks up as Hermione gestures toward her, trying to communicate her urgency silently. She raises her brows and Hermione mouths 'come here' and Ginny gets up, a quizzical expression on her face as she pats Harry's knee and murmurs something in his ear. He twists his head and looks up at Hermione over his shoulder, and guilt and curiosity are written all over his face as their eyes meet. Hermione looks away, feeling as though what she's done upstairs is printed all over her face. The two witches retreat to the nook by the stairs where they have a modicum of privacy, no one around, and Hermione's cheeks flame hotter as she faces Ginny. She feels sick with nerves and embarrassment.

"I hate to ask you, but – could you cast a contraceptive charm for me?"

"*Oh.*" Ginny looks at her in blatant surprise, flipping her hair back over her shoulder and eyeing Hermione assessingly, looking her up and down as if she could somehow see the evidence of sex on Hermione. *God.* She feels exposed. "Well, I *could*," Ginny says. She bites her lip, dark eyes worried. "First, are you okay though? I mean... Because earlier, we all heard you and Harry on the porch, and –"

Hermione nods emphatically. "Yes. Yes, actually. I'm fine. Honestly, Ginny." A smile creeps over her lips unbidden as she remembers everything they'd done earlier. How wonderful it had been, despite the imperfections and the lingering trauma. Ginny's own expression relaxes as she takes in Hermione's; the smile, her blush. Hermione feels like she must be practically exuding nerves, mortification, and happiness. "I'm better than fine," Hermione insists, meaning it. "I'd do the charm myself, but I've never actually needed to do it, and I'm all...well, I can't seem to get my head together, and I don't want to mess it up."

Ginny snickers, her expression understanding and amused at once. "I had to ask Angelina, the first time. I think first-time charm jitters are fairly common," she confesses. "No one wants to mess it up. The best is if you get into the habit of doing it –"

"Before the sex?" Hermione guesses, cheeks still hot, and Ginny grins and nods.

"Exactly." She nods at Hermione's wand, clutched in her hand. "How about you have a go, and then I'll do it too, to make sure."

"Thanks, Ginny." Hermione chews on the inside of her cheek before asking: "Can you not tell Harry?"

The redhead winces. "I mean, I won't *tell* him. But I have a feeling he might guess, and I don't want to outright lie to him, Hermione." She looks apologetic. "It's none of his business what you asked me though, and I'll tell him that." That's really not good enough, but Hermione reluctantly understands. She wouldn't want to lie to Draco either. Except this all but guarantees that Harry's going to find out, and then he'll tell Ron, and Merlin only knows how they'll react. It's a bit too late now, though – Ginny already knows, and Harry is bound to be suspicious and ask what they were talking about. *Fuck.* Hermione sighs and nods.

"Thanks, Ginny," she says again, forcing a smile to her lips.

"Malfoy," Potter says, yanking Draco out of warm, idle recollection. He looks up from the two mugs of tea he's just poured; one of Justin's weird Muggle ones. Tropical Blast it's called, and it appears to be mostly pineapple and coconut. It smells nice, at least. But for now, the tea is forgotten. Draco sets the kettle down and leans back against the bench, folding his arms over his chest, trying for casual arrogance and probably failing. The Boy-Who-Lived and Weasley are standing in the kitchen doorway through to the dining room, and neither of them looks overly happy. It's clear Ginevra's blabbed. Well, fuck.

Chapter 22

Twenty-Two

Draco sighs. Hermione had said Potter was probably going to put two and two together because Ginevra couldn't bring herself to make a little white lie. Wonderful. Being cornered in the kitchen alone isn't exactly ideal. Not with the way the two of them are looking at him. And not with the way he wants to haul off and clock Potter for telling Hermione what he'd forced out of Draco with veritaserum. What the hell did the fucking prat think he was trying to achieve with that? It had been cruel. Stupid and cruel.

"Potter. Weasley." He decides the best course of action is to ignore them for now, although it's very tempting not to. But Hermione would hardly appreciate him kicking things off with Potter. He's making tea while Hermione's in the shower, the contraceptive charm cast thanks to Ginevra. Draco could kick himself for not thinking about a charm. He's supposed to be better than that – to think about these things before they happen, to think ahead. He's slipping, now that he doesn't have to play the role of spy. He's getting sloppy. Jaw clenched to stop himself from speaking, he shoves off the bench and turns to grab a packet of biscuits. *Don't say anything*, he tells himself. *Don't say anything; it won't help. It'll just upset Hermione.*

"Where's Hermione?" Weasley asks shortly. Draco spares him a glance. Weasley's moved, standing in the doorway into the hallway – they've boxed him in. Well, that doesn't bode well. The redhead is sullen-looking, arms crossed over his chest, expression half obscured by his ridiculous beard as he blocks the doorway.

"None of your business." Draco feels anger fizzing in his chest as he slams the biscuits down on the bench. Merlin, he wishes he had his wand. He'd hex the pair of them, Potter in particular.

"Is she okay?" Potter demands, as though it wasn't his own words that had set Hermione off. It was *he* who had sent her spiralling from happy and coping to a hysterical mess. But he looks as if he's concerned *Draco* has done something to Hermione. And Salazar's sake, that burns. He hates that the two men know what he did to Hermione at the mansion. He hates that they forced him to tell them, ripping the words out of his head thanks to the veritaserum. Taking *their* turn at violating someone, not that they'd see it that way.

"Didn't Ginevra tell you, Potter?" Draco snaps as he looks over at the other man, who stands there glowering and self-righteous, completely oblivious to his own cruelty. Judging Draco as if he has any right to. He *doesn't* – whatever Draco did in Voldemort's service, he did for the Order. He did it to keep his cover intact so he could pass along information for Potter and his precious Order to act on. Including what he'd done to Hermione. He'd done what he had to do to save her life and to keep his cover, and Potter is fucking complicit. Not that the golden boy will ever admit to that. He won't take responsibility. He's happy to keep his hands clean and let Shackbolt do all the dirty work via his web of informants – even now, the man is off at another safe house, using someone else the way he used Draco, who's useless to him now.

And now Potter and Weasley are forcing a confrontation, by boxing Draco in. Blocking his exits. Fuck. And they think they're the good guys. They're hypocrites. Draco's control breaks. He whirls on Potter and stalks toward him, stopping close enough that Potter has to look up to meet his gaze, and he notices the other man discreetly drawing his wand. He doesn't care. Potter's not going to kill

him, and Draco isn't afraid of anything less than death. Shit, he's not even afraid of death. Pain? Pain is nothing. He *welcomes* pain at the moment, with anger searing through him, mixing sickly with guilt and that constant self-loathing. "You're the one who fucking dug the knife into her today, Potter, you fucking twat. Bringing up *that* shit? Did you think it was going to help her? Make her feel good?"

"It was the truth," the other man says uncertainly in the face of Draco's vehement rage, though his expression is still set in a determined self-righteousness, his green eyes narrowed and angry behind his spectacles.

"No shit, Potter," Draco snarls, his rage beating through him like a pulse, rushing in his veins. It feels like he's not getting a proper breath, the small kitchen feeling hot and suffocating. "Of course it was the truth. And she already *knew* it. She didn't need you rubbing it in."

"I –"

"We were both there. We know what happened. We're the *only* ones who know exactly what happened," he says, repeating Hermione's words to Potter. "So you didn't tell her anything new. Anything of value. You just brought up horrible fucking memories and shoved them in her face. You *hurt* her when she was happy. And why? To make yourself feel better? To get at me? Because you *disapprove*? You blithering fucking idiot." He's scathing in his fury, voice low and cold, tea and biscuits forgotten. "Get the fuck out of my way."

"No. *No*. You tell us what you did to Hermione today, first," Weasley demands, and Draco growls under his breath. They have it in their heads that he's gone and taken advantage of her, or worse, and he's not about to stand here and listen to that. Rage blooms bright and red in his mind, and his mouth runs away with him.

"Do you really want the details, Weasley?" He smirks at the redhead, watching as his fists clench and he takes a half step forward as though he'd like to hit Draco.

"Ron – don't," Potter says sharply, and Weasley halts. "You're not making yourself look good, Malfoy." He says, and Draco scoffs. He feels the sudden urge to play the Death Eater with the pair of them – to *crucio* them until they're screaming, and they have some idea of what it's like. They have no idea. They can hear him say it, and they can read it, but they have no idea who he is and what he's capable of. Not really. He wishes he could show them – up close and personal.

"I'm not *trying*. Now get out of my way, Potter." He shoves the shorter man back, and he rocks on his heels and takes a stumbling step back, but otherwise keeps blocking the narrow doorway.

"Last I saw Hermione, you were pinning her against the wall while she tried to get away, absolutely hysterical and screaming. A *wreck* –"

"Because of you." Draco shoves him again and Potter swears and whips his wand up, pointing it at Draco. He sets his jaw and eyes Potter with dull, impotent anger. "What are you hoping to do? Hex me? You think that'll make Granger happy?"

"Shut up, Malfoy. All I know is that she was a mess, and you had her trapped –"

"Which you were fine with," he points out. Potter dismisses that with a harsh sound.

"Yeah, but I didn't expect you to take her upstairs, and then, when she comes back down, she needs a contraceptive charm. D'you know what that sounds like? Ron? What does that sound like?"

"Sounds like coercion, Harry. Like the bastard raped her. Again," Weasley says, right on cue, as though the two idiots have rehearsed it. "Taking advantage of her when she isn't capable of consent."

"Oh, fuck you." It comes out in a snarl, rage washing through Draco in a torrent. How *dare* he. How fucking dare they both. Ignorant, selfish little fucks. It's not even so much the accusation against himself that pisses Draco off, it's what that accusation will do to Hermione when they share it with her, which he knows they inevitably will. Draco turns toward Weasley, fists balling up as he takes a step closer, adrenaline flooding him and making everything seem warped and slow, a sense of preternatural calm falling over him. Wand or no wand, he will beat the shit out of the prick for that. But Potter grabs him by the neck of his shirt and yanks him back.

"*Petrific* –" Potter begins. Without thinking, Draco pivots and sucker-punches Potter in one fluid motion; right fist meeting Potter's cheekbone and *fuck*, that *hurts*. His knuckles flare in pain even as Potter's head whips to the side and he stumbles back, colliding with the dining chairs, left hand clutching his cheek. His wand has gone skittering to one side across the wood floors, and they both stare at it. Potter lunges for it and Draco grabs him this time, pulling him up short, shirt twisting up in his left hand as he drives his right fist into Potter's side.

Potter lets out a *whoof* and his face turns red even as he grabs at the chair back to steady himself with one hand, and smashes the heel of his other hand wildly up into Draco's face, catching him square in the nose. Whether by accident or design, Draco doesn't know, but either way, it does just as much damage. There's a crunch and pain explodes through his sinuses; hot, awful pain spider webbing from his nose right through to his ears and behind his eyes. Almost immediately, he can feel blood running hot and metallic down the back of his throat, pouring from his nose and dripping off his chin.

He bares his teeth in a snarl and punches Potter again, two hard blows, and the abdomen is much more pleasant to strike than the other man's hard head. Potter grunts with the blows, gasping for air as Draco lands a right hook in his diaphragm. The hits shove the shorter man back against the dining chair, and he's flailing, and an animal sense of triumph burns up bright in Draco before suddenly pain erupts in the small of his back, in his right kidney, and *oh fuck*, that hurts. He staggers. "You want to do it the Muggle way, *fine*," Weasley pants over Draco's shoulder as he hits him again, a flurry of blows as Potter clutches at him and holds him trapped. Agony radiates through the small of his back and his abdomen by the time he manages to collect himself enough to elbow Weasley in the gut and stamp the heel of his foot down on the arch of Weasley's as hard as possible.

He's not wearing boots but Weasley still lets out a choked yelp, gurgling thanks to the elbow to the gut, and Draco thinks he feels something give way in the other man's foot. And then it's just straight up two against one, and *shit*, it's suddenly not easy. He's choking and gagging on his own blood as he dodges one of Potter's punches, just to catch one of Weasley's to the face; a hard smack to his jaw that – from the slew of furious curse words Weasley follows up with – hopefully broke the other man's knuckles. He gets Weasley in the eye with a wild right cross, before Potter gets *him* in the gut, hard enough that he's gagging for air too.

It's chaos; glorious fucking chaos. His adrenaline is churning, and the pain feels vibrant. Magnificent. Deserved. He doesn't care how much they hurt him, so long as he gets them back. All

three of them are choking and panting, gasping and wrecked – Draco less than the other two he thinks, as they break apart for a moment, and he straightens and rolls his shoulders. He grins at them and then spits blood on the floor before they wade in again.

He grabs Potter's shoulder, kneeing him in the balls and then spinning the man around so his back is pressed to Draco's front, holding Potter close with an arm around his chest, trying to use him as a shield even as he hits him with his free, left hand. Little rabbit jabs to the side, and Potter writhes and smashes his head back, clipping Draco's chin and dazing him even as he drives his elbows back too. It's enough that Draco's grip slips, and then Weasley catches Draco full in the left eye, and he staggers into the table, shoving off it with a growl and ducking Weasley's following punch, getting him in the belly twice. But then Potter catches Draco in the back of the knee – a kick? – and his leg goes out from under him, and he staggers sideways against the wall, nearly falling, one arm slamming out, hand slapping against the wall and shoving himself back up.

His eye is already swelling shut and every move sends pain stabbing through his abdomen, but he's on his feet. Facing Potter, who has his fists up, bruises already darkening on his face. Where's Weasley? *Oh shit*, Draco thinks and starts to back up to the wall, but it's too late. There's a blow to the small of his already bruising back that makes him grunt, another brutal kick to his knee that feels like something snaps, and then Potter punches him in the gut hard enough to wind him. He folds. The world spins, and then his back hits the edge of the table, and then he's fighting wildly, kicking and flailing, trying to twist free from Weasley's grip on one arm as Potter drives his fists into his stomach. He wrenches his arm free finally after several hard blows and catches Potter in the face, but falls to his knees in the process, his leg refusing to hold him when he tries to stand.

A hand grabs Draco's hair and tightens as he sways on his knees, and then Potter staggers forward and hits him in the face. Once, twice... And then suddenly a force pushes Draco forward face down, smacking to the floor – Weasley's grip on his hair breaks even as Potter goes sliding back to hit the opposite wall firmly. He can only assume the same happened to Weasley.

"Stop!" roars through the air, a booming shout that reverberates through Draco's bones. And then the force lifts, and Potter staggers forward a step as Draco claws his way to his feet using the chair near him for leverage. "What in Godric's name is wrong with you three?" a voice demands, loud and furious, and Draco blinks and focuses to see Lupin, standing in the doorway to the hall. Behind him, with his one good eye, Draco can see a handful of shocked Order members, and – *oh fuck* – Hermione. Standing on the stairs, white-faced and horrified.

"How dare you behave like this! Acting like animals! Fighting like –" Lupin looks around at his wife, Ginevra, Molly, and the others who stand there. "I'll handle this." It's a clear dismissal, and they all disperse, save for Hermione. Lupin doesn't tell her to leave. He turns and glares at the three young men, and Draco lifts his chin, glaring back, unrepentant. "Line up, you three." Draco refuses to move, but from the corner of his left eye he sees Weasley sidle up near him. They form a ragged line, Draco surreptitiously grabbing the chair back to stay upright and not fall clean over. Everything hurts, and his nose is still steadily trickling blood. He swallows it and grimaces, shakily tipping his head back and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"What on earth is all this about?" Lupin demands. They all try to answer at once, and Lupin growls and silences them with a short sound. "Harry," he says, and of course it's Potter he wants to hear from first. Draco tries to make a sound of disgust in the back of his throat and ends up choking on blood. Everyone looks at him. There's a small, distressed sound and he looks up through the doorway at the stairs. Hermione clutches the bannister railing as she stares at him, face ashen, hair hanging wet and straggling from her shower, a towel still in her hand. He stares up at her, still

pinching his nose, and finds he regrets fighting. Deeply. The hurt and worry on her face are killing him.

"We...had a misunderstanding," Potter says and Draco arches a brow, surprised. Ouch. He thinks he may have split his brow, and just reopened a clotting cut. Blood trickles down into his good eye and he knuckles at it. *Shit*. It doesn't hurt but it does blur what vision he has left.

"A misunderstanding?" Lupin queries disbelievingly. Draco feels disbelieving himself. Why is Potter not just saying it? Is it to protect himself and Weasley, or Hermione? Because it can't be to do Draco a favour. "What kind of misunderstanding results in *this*?"

"I don't want to say," Potter says shortly.

"It's because Draco and I had sex, isn't it?" Hermione asks, voice ringing out clearly from the stairs, and everyone winces in unison. She's forgotten to call him *Malfoy* in public, like she usually does. Or she's chosen not to.

"You can't blame us for being worried," Harry calls out, but Hermione is unmoved.

"So instead of asking me, you decide to get in a fistfight with Draco?" she asks scathingly.

"He started it!" Weasley protests, and Draco suppresses a smile; yeah, okay. He guesses he did. Kind of.

Lupin sighs wearily and shakes his head, as though deeply disappointed. "It doesn't matter who started it."

"Well, he did," Weasley interjects, while Potter wisely stays silent. Draco finds himself speaking up, although he knows better.

"Only after you bailed me up in the kitchen and wouldn't let me leave, Weasley."

"Because you were being a prick, after you'd taken Hermione upstairs and —"

"Shut up, Ron!" Hermione snaps sharply and she sounds like she's crying, although to Draco's blurry sight she just looks furious.

"You should all know better. I'm disappointed in all three of you," Lupin says heavily. "Fighting each other? Harry, Ron, you're supposed to be setting a good example. Merlin's sake! And not just fighting an unarmed wizard, but ganging up on him, two against one? You should be ashamed of yourselves. Honestly," Lupin says sternly, disgust in his voice, and Draco sees Weasley drop his head and scuff his feet on the floor like a scolded child. Both of them murmur apologies, and promise not to do it again, as though they're back at Hogwarts having been caught fighting by a teacher. Admittedly, it's how Lupin is acting too. Lupin turns his gaze on Draco, who risks dropping his hand from pinching his nose. The bleeding doesn't start again.

"And I know you're not used to this, Draco, but we're all on the same side, here. If you want to fit in and be part of the Order, you need to *act* like it. You managed to keep your mask intact while undercover for years without a single slip, and yet you can't stay in control of yourself when these two idiots goad you? I can't help but think you wanted to fight."

"Maybe I did," Draco snaps, honesty spilling out of him unbidden, pain making him careless.
"Maybe I *do* want to fight."

"For Merlin's – you shouldn't be fighting your own allies," Lupin says, exasperated.

"So then send me out there! Let me fight the other side, then. Just give me something to fight, for fuck's sake, so I'm not sitting here all day hating myself. I'm *useless*. I could be useful. I could do something to help! Let me fucking *fight*, Lupin!" His nose starts bleeding again and he swears and pinches the bridge, nasal as he goes on, on a roll. "When do I get a chance to atone for what you made me do? When do I get to fight on the right side? You used me, and now that I'm ruined, you've just thrown me aside instead of letting me try to do something good." It's raw, too raw, and Draco wishes he hadn't said it as he snaps his mouth shut and looks up at Hermione. Her hand is pressed over her mouth, and she's ashen and silent, eyes wounded. He knows she hates the idea of him fighting, and he's just gone and begged to do it. Damn it. She turns and stomps up the stairs without a word. *Shit*. Well, there's no point stopping now.

His expression is pleading as he stares down the lycanthrope. "I'm a *good* fighter. And I know many of the people you're fighting. I know how they duel. How they operate. I could be valuable on missions."

"Well, I can see that you're a good fighter," Lupin says dryly. He sighs, running a hand through his hair, shoulders slumping. "Look. If this happens again, you'll all be stuck doing the most unpleasant job I can think of. Yes? Understood?" They all nod mutely. "Go clean yourself up, Draco. We'll talk about you joining missions when I *don't* want to shout at you." Draco nods, limping achingly out of the dining room. "As for you two," he hears Lupin say as he stops in front of the stairs, "clean this mess up, and then yourselves. For Merlin's sake, you two are bloody *impossible*."

Draco contemplates the stairs as his right knee throbs like a knotted, tearing ball of pain, matching his nose. His back and abdomen ache and hurt, feeling horribly hot and swollen, and he suspects he might be pissing blood tonight. He feels as though a herd of mooncalves has just trampled him. Three flights stretch up above him – two if he just makes for the uppermost bathroom, which might be wise with his knee feeling the way it is. And then when he gets to the top he'll either be stuck ineffectively doctoring himself in the bathroom, or get the dubious pleasure of having an angry, upset Hermione tend to him. He sighs, clutching the railing with one hand and the bridge of his nose with another.

Well, *fuck*. This is going to be fun.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Twenty-Three

Draco's staring at himself in the mirror, leaning heavily on the sink with one hand as he gingerly touches his nose with the other. He hasn't seen her there in the doorway yet, his left eye puffy and swollen half-shut. He looks like a mess, the idiot. Like he stepped in front of a bus. Like he fell off his broomstick during a Quidditch match. And he wants to go and fight? And risk this happening again, or *dying*? Or capture? Screw him. He's such a selfish *bastard*. So stupid. Trying to be noble. She watches as he carefully splashes his face with water, hissing at the pain, still not alerted to her presence as he dabs his face dry with the hand towel.

He's supposed to be a Slytherin, not some headstrong Gryffindor, so why does he insist on wanting to run out there and sacrifice himself? He's done enough for the Order – he's suffered enough for them. More than enough. While Lupin has been kind and understanding, Kingsley – and the Order as an organisation – have treated him like a disposable tool, to be used hard until it breaks and then thrown away. It's cruel. Wrong. Draco owes them nothing, after everything he's done. If anything, he owes *her*, she thinks childishly. It should be *her* who holds his life in her hands, who gets to decide whether he risks himself.

She can't manage without him.

He peers at himself in the mirror, so lean and wiry, the sleeves of his long-sleeved t-shirt pushed up to his elbows, as he pinches his nose carefully and then – "Oh my god!" she squeaks in horror as he forces his slightly crooked nose back into alignment with a faint crunch. He flinches, startled, and looks up at her in the mirror, his one good eye clear grey and beautiful – and watering with pain. *Idiot*. He blinks the tears away. Her hands are raised, fluttering at her sides as if she can somehow stop him from setting his nose like that, despite it being too late.

"Granger." He says just her name and nothing else, and his expression is serious but otherwise unreadable for a second. He has a litany of injuries just on his face alone. Split lip and left eyebrow, the left side of his face and jaw bruising up impressively – badly enough to obscure the thin scar cutting down it – his eye blacked, and his nose swollen and bloodied and perhaps still not entirely straight. Hermione clutches her hands together, anger and distress mixing in her belly. She feels sick. And that *can't* have fixed his nose properly. *Idiot*.

"You need to guard your left more," she says dumbly, looking at how that side had caught most of the damage and remembering the last minute or so of the fight that she'd seen – transfixed horrified on the stairs, her wand forgotten on the bed. He looks at himself in the mirror and then barks out a hoarse laugh.

"Yeah," he says simply, still sounding slightly nasal. "I do." He looks at her in the mirror again, and she can't decipher his expression through the injuries of the fight. Regret, she thinks, and a mute apology. But really, who knows? She had seen how he'd come so wholly alive in that brief fight, and she hates it. Alive, filled with an intent, vital passion that was the same as when he kissed her, as when they'd had sex less than a few hours ago. It seems both fighting and fucking bring him to life, she thinks crudely; they both crack through the mask he tries to keep up to cover the raw self

beneath, which is filled with so much emotion it hurts to see. She isn't sure what that says. What it means. She swallows hard.

She had seen the depth of the self-loathing on his face when he'd said, *let me atone*.

"Sit down then," Hermione snaps, pulling her wand, which she'd retrieved while he was slowly limping his way up the stairs. "On the toilet," she directs him and then mumbles, "idiot," under her breath as he limps to the toilet and flips the lid closed, sitting down carefully. He's moving like an old man. He leans back, looking up at her, and she thinks he heard her mumbled insult from the rueful smile he gives her.

"Ouch," he says as his lip cracks and starts bleeding again, licking away the blood with one sweep of his tongue, and Hermione winces and hurries to fetch the jar of bruise cream, the essence of dittany and cotton wool balls from the cabinet.

"Idiot," she mumbles again, furious as she tucks a damp lock of hair behind her ear. She sets the dittany and cotton wool on the counter beside the sink and then takes Draco's chin in her hand, turning his face toward her. She can't believe Harry and Ron have done this. It's lucky Draco hasn't been hurt worse – as it was, he'd ended up holding his own surprisingly well. "Two against one," she mutters angrily, following a ragged trail of thoughts in her head. "The gits." The corner of Draco's mouth twitches into a bloodied smile, and Hermione frowns.

"*Episkey*," she says sharply, and his smirk vanishes as he whimpers and his hand comes up to his nose, which is now undeniably fixed. It looks like it hurt him. Good, she thinks viciously. Meanly.

"Fuck!" he says quietly but emphatically, grimacing.

"Don't be a baby," she says, angry. Too angry to be reasonable. Her chest feels tight and hot. Harry and Ron are meddling arseholes, and Draco is stubbornly determined to hate himself, and she thinks of him going out there on missions, fighting, and she wants to scream. Hermione knows that she's not capable of fighting anymore. She's aware her capture put paid to her being able to go on missions without being a liability, for the foreseeable future at least. Put her in front of a Death Eater and she'll crumble. So Draco would be out there without her, while she sits here waiting to know if he's even coming home – and that might just kill her.

She damps a ball of cotton wool in the essence of dittany and – pinching the cut together – dabs his eyebrow, less gently than she might have if she weren't so angry. His eyes study her – she can see his steady gaze in her peripheral vision. The wound begins to seal slowly as he grits his teeth, jaw tight and shoulders hunched. Dittany stings and normally Hermione would feel sympathetic, but right now she *doesn't*. "Close your eyes," she tells him, all hard, brittle edges, tears threatening to spill over. She stares into his eyes – one swollen and one beautiful – and feels like screaming and stamping her foot like a child as she reads the tired, remorseful certainty in his gaze and the set of his bloodied mouth. It makes her feel like slapping him.

He wants to fight. Well, he can't. He can't. "Close your eyes," she says again very tightly. Very angrily. Draco stares at her for a second as though weighing up the degree of her anger, and she glares. He sighs and shuts his eyes obediently, tongue playing with the split in his upper lip.

"Hermione," he says very softly and calmly, and she doesn't want to hear whatever he's going to say, because she knows it won't be *'I'm sorry, I don't want to go on missions'*.

"Shut up." She runs the cotton ball over his eyelid, gentler than she wants to be. He still winces, pulling back, and she tightens her grip on his chin.

"I didn't go down there *intending* to pick a fight," he says, tired. Weary. His hand lands on her hip, warm and firm, and she looks down. His hands are large and bony, his knuckles abraded and a little swollen. She wants to sink into his touch. She wants to climb on his lap. She wants to cry. She wants to fuck him again. A tear wells over her lower lid, and she lets go of his chin to swipe it away with the back of her hand, sniffing wetly.

"*Fuck*," he mumbles, and when she looks up at him, there's a sharp misery on his face, remorse clear despite the mess Harry and Ron have made of his features. He lifts the hand that's not resting on her hip to her cheek, tracing gently along her cheekbone. "Please don't cry, Hermione," he says very softly, and it *is* a plea. "I didn't want this." She doesn't entirely believe that. She saw how much he enjoyed that damn fight. She bats his hand lightly down and throws the dirty, blood-pinked cotton ball in the small bathroom bin, wetting a fresh one.

"They had me bailed up in the kitchen, Hermione. Potter was blocking one door and Weasley the other," Draco explains. His thumb rubs over the waistband of her joggers as if trying to soothe her. It's not working. "They were looking for a fight."

"Well, I'm sure you could've avoided it somehow!" Hermione takes his chin in her hand again, finishing with his eye, the swelling already reduced by half and any abrasions gone. She'll need to put bruise cream on it though. Just like on the rest of his stupid face – he'll be blossoming in healing green and yellow bruises for a few days. His eyes are shut again, but somehow she can still tell he's feeling guilty and a little smug at once. They both know he could've found a way to defuse the tension if he wanted instead of fighting. Not that he should have had to. Merlin, Harry and Ron are such prats. She can decide for herself who she wants to have sex with. How *dare* they. She's so sick of being constantly controlled. Constantly handled. Anger seethes under her skin, spilling out of her messily.

"I should be bathing in the fucking afterglow right now," she says, her frustration hot and her distress a flailing, panicking creature. She feels like she can't breathe. "And instead, I'm looking after you because you just had to go and *fight*, like a –"

"I didn't *want* to fight, Hermione," he says, tone sliding toward frustration, wincing and flinching back as she wets a fresh cotton ball with dittany and swipes it over his mended but still swollen nose, a cut on the bridge.

"Oh? I thought you *did*. In fact, I distinctly heard you say to Remus that you *did*," she says tartly, deliberately being obtuse.

"Not like *that*. Not Potter and Weasley. You know that. Salazar's sake, I'm sorry, but –"

"No, you're not. You're *not* sorry! If you're really sorry, then you won't go and ask Remus to fight, but I bet you *will*," she tells him viciously as she smears dittany roughly over his puffy, split top lip, and he makes a small sound of pain in the back of his throat and grabs her wrist.

"Granger..." He says her name wearily as he holds her wrist, and that grip makes her feel trapped. Panic fizzes. "That actually hurts, you know," he says, and the genuine annoyance in his voice makes her stomach twist sickly.

"Then do it your bloody self!" she gets out shakily, furious as she wrenches her wrist away from his grip – he lets go, good eye widening as if he realises what he's done – and throws the cotton ball into his lap. She backs up against the bathroom wall, arms wrapped around her middle, trying not to cry. "I'm supposed to feel happy right now! I *did* feel happy!" She hitches in a shaky breath, tears stinging her eyes, short nails digging into her forearms. "*Fuck*, I can't believe I thought I could have something good. So fucking *stupid*. I should've known –"

Draco's lips press together before he speaks, tossing the cotton ball in the bin and standing with a wince and a stagger as his knee nearly goes out from under him. "Shit. I didn't want that, Hermione." He rubs his wrist tiredly over his forehead, looking wretched as he stands in front of the sink, staring in the mirror. His gaze catches hers. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to –"

"Don't! Just...shut up. I know it was Harry and Ron's fault! And I'm furious with them. But it's *you* who wants to go out on missions!" she snaps, watching as he begins to dab bruise cream onto his face, his expression grim.

"Weasley fights," he says, as if that means anything, and Hermione makes a harsh, angry sound.

"Ron isn't you! I don't –" Draco strips his shirt off and shoves it on the counter, and Hermione loses her train of thought. He's so bruised. All across the small of his scarred back, and over his abdomen are dark violet blooms, vivid against his pale skin. *God*. It looks awful on his back; the way the bruising and swelling interact with the ropery scars is ugly and painful looking. They're puffy and more discoloured than usual. A ragged, rough quilt that makes Hermione's anger dissolve in a moment. He took that for her. Some of it comes from her own whiplashes. She did that to him. Guilt writhes in her as he starts smoothing cream down the lean planes of his abdomen, scars etched into his skin there as well. Older and silvered-purple, they're from well before her capture. There is nearly nowhere untouched on him.

How can Hermione be angry at him over wanting to do what he sees as the right thing? And yet she *is* angry because she's terrified.

"You don't what?" he asks. She swallows hard, walking forward and dipping her fingers in the bruise cream.

"I don't need *him*," she says softly, swiping cream over the rough scarring, gentle now. She feels a little tension run out of him, his shoulders relaxing slightly as he keeps applying the cream to his abdomen. "I love Ron, and care about him, but not the way I love *you*." Hermione sighs, cream-covered fingers sliding to his side, pressing her lips to the patchwork of his back. She wishes again that he'd let her put scar liniment on it. The scars could be reduced to nearly nothing in less than a year with regular applications, but he's so damn stubborn. Draco leans back slightly as if pressing into her touch, hungry for it.

She kisses his back, right over his spine, and then starts smoothing the cream back into his bruised skin. She tries to be calm. Reasonable. "I just can't stand the idea of you going out there, Draco. You've done enough. They don't have the fucking right to ask any more of you after the things that you've done for them. What you've done to *yourself* for them. And they're *not* asking you to. So why are you offering? Do you just have a fucking death wish?" There's a silence that stretches out horribly.

"No," he says at last, too late. The pause was too long. Hermione feels cold. Chills run heavy through her, making her leaden and numb. She steps back from him, fingers greasy with cream curling into a fist as she looks at him in the mirror.

"You *bastard*." How dare he. How *dare* he think that of himself. It's as though he thinks he has no value, and he's so, so wrong. He's broken himself for the Order, for years. He's done more than anyone could be expected to do, and the terrible thing is that he's probably never going to get the recognition he deserves for it. It was a job done in the shadows, involving terrible things, and it has damned him. Hermione is well aware that even if – when – they win the war, Draco will never be praised by the public. He will never be hailed as a hero. The information he gave the Order was invaluable – Remus had told Hermione so – but what he had to do to stay undercover, to get the information, and pass it along...

"I *don't*," he says quickly. "Not a death wish. I'm not suicidal, for Merlin's sake. I just – you don't know what I've *done*, Hermione." She can imagine, and it makes worms squirm in her stomach. "You don't know what I fucking live with. I can't stand it. I need to do something good."

"You're *wrong*. You've done so much good. You have. You risked your life for the Order. You put yourself through hell doing a thankless, terrible job. You saved me! And you did what you could to try to help the people you could help. I know that you did. I *saw* you try to look after those women in the dungeons. You didn't have to do that. It put you at risk of discovery. But you still *did* it."

"It's not enough," he says blankly, his eyes very far away, hand pressed against his abdomen, which is black and violet and shiny with bruise cream. "It's not enough. I want to actually be fighting on the right fucking side for once. To do something actually, openly *good*. Something that isn't fucking awful, and disgusting, and *destroying*." His expression is bleak as he remembers.

"And what about me?" she asks, selfish and unfair perhaps, but she doesn't care. He can deny it, but he clearly thinks he deserves to die – or doesn't deserve to live, if there's a difference – and if he goes on missions with that attitude, he *will* die, eventually. She's seen it happen. The people who have lost hope, the people whose survival instinct has become blunted by loss and despair – they always end up dying. And then she'll lose him. It's not fucking *fair*. He's only one man – what difference will he make, really? He's contributed *enough* to the war. Her fists squeeze tight. "What about *me*?"

"I'm sorry," he says helplessly. "But –"

Hermione shakes her head wildly, rubbing at her tears as she stares at his bruised face in the mirror. "No, you aren't. You aren't."

"Hermione, *please*." His eyes beg her to understand, but she doesn't. "I *need* to do this, if the Order will let me. *When* they let me."

"Fuck you."

"I'm sorry." Draco's gaze is steady on hers in the mirror. She wants to cry. Her chest hurts, a pang straight through it.

"Stop saying that! You're *not*!"

"I'm sorry I ruined what should have been special," he says, and his bruised face is indeed filled with regret as his shoulders hunch a little, his chin dropping as he goes on awkwardly. "Today, with the – the sex..." His cheeks flush slightly, where they aren't bruised. He looks boyish and young, and filled with uncertainty, but Hermione is hurt and angry. She keeps thinking about him dead. Or captured. She thinks about his back and the way it restricts his movements. She thinks about how

he called himself expendable. She thinks about how he would've stayed behind at the mansion and died. She doesn't trust him to stay alive.

He's looking at her, hand still splayed over his stomach, hair falling over his eyes and face still half-battered but beautiful. "I'm sorry, Hermione."

Tears cloud her eyes. Panic bubbles in her chest. She wants to lock them both in a room and never come out again. She hates this fucking war.

"I'm *sick* of you apologising to me after you've put your dick in me," she says bitterly, and regrets it immediately as his expression crumples. He's wide-eyed, wounded and wretched, as if he can't believe she'd say that – and honestly, she can't believe it either. She feels as though she just shot him point-blank, and she wants so badly to take it back. She feels as though she just punched *herself* in the stomach. "I –" she begins and he shakes his head fast.

"No," he says, low and rough, and anger vibrates in the one word. His features are somehow stony cold and utterly raw all at once. Furious. "*No*. Don't. *Get out*. Get out before I say something I regret."

She flees.

Draco can hear her shouting at Potter and Weasley from the bathroom as he leans forward over the sink, gripping the edge of the counter tightly enough that his knuckles creak, his head hanging down as he breathes hard. He feels sick to his stomach. It sounds like she's yelling through her tears, full of utter fury, her words coming in uneven, broken-up strings. He can only hear occasional snatches of them.

Fuck.

The rage that had boiled up only minutes before had frightened him – the intensity of his anger, the urge to slam her up against the wall with his hand over her mouth to shut her up and...and then what? But what she'd said, after everything that had happened today? Draco hadn't been able to handle it. He's at breaking point. He's *past* it, and just clinging on desperately. He would never actually hurt her, but he might've said things that did damage he couldn't take back. Cruel, awful words. Her own words echo in his mind even as he hears snippets of what she's shouting now, interspersed with quiet as – presumably – Potter or Weasley respond to her.

"– ruin everything – fucking bastards – to hell – you've done – hate – it's my choice – at him when I should've – at you!" And then a moment later: "*Because I love him!*"

He closes his eyes for a second, a small pain sliding through his chest at that. Relief, he thinks, mingled with a persistent anger. It feels foreign, being angry at her. It's not pleasant at all. He knows full well why she's lashing out, but that doesn't alleviate the hurt of hearing her say what she'd said. And it doesn't make it any less frustrating to have her try to wrap him in cotton wool – he flicks a ball into the sink – and prevent him from fighting. She doesn't understand – she *can't* understand, and thank Merlin for that because he doesn't want her to feel how he feels. But stuck in this safe house, watching Weasley and the others go out on missions, he feels like he's caught in the jaws of a trap that's slowly crushing him.

The need to join the right side of the fight eats at him. He wants to go on a raid and kill the fucking *Death Eaters*, instead of innocent people. Just for once. For once that might be nice.

There's the slam of a door and then the creaking of footsteps running up the stairs, and then faintly, the slam of another door. Hermione's shut herself in their room, Draco guesses. He inhales deeply and lets the breath out slowly, and then straightens and pulls his shirt back on with a grimace. Even with the bruise cream, it's sore. And she didn't finish his back properly. He shucks his trousers down around his ankles and rubs his knee with the cream in the hopes it helps, although it seems less bruised and more strained. Either way, it'll heal, he thinks grimly. Potter and Weasley got in a few good shots, although really, their showing was pathetic, considering it was two against one. He's had far worse.

Draco pulls his joggers back up and runs his hands through his hair, shoving it back and examining his face in the mirror. He looks like he was in a fight three days ago instead of less than an hour, but it still isn't pretty. He straightens. As much as he wants to just sit on the toilet and contemplate the ways in which his day went horribly wrong, and then so fucking right, and then horrifically wrong again, he can't hide away in here all day. Although he can't imagine Hermione is going to want him in their room. Shit. He sets his jaw and lifts his chin, and leaves the bathroom at a slow, limping pace.

No one is around on this floor; all the doors shut. If they're in their rooms, no doubt they're trying to avoid the drama. He can hear the wireless downstairs and the faint whistle of the kettle, but nothing else. It's as though everyone else has melted away. The house is occupied by ghosts. Draco abandons the idea of making tea. He doesn't think his knee can take the trip down the stairs and back up again, and he doesn't think Hermione would welcome it now anyway. For a moment he pauses in the doorway, not knowing where to go, and then he remembers the spare room in the loft next to their room. He feels sick as he limps down the corridor. He's angry with Hermione, and she's angry with him, and he can't see a way to fix it. He's not going to decide he's happy sitting out the war without fighting, and she's not about to decide she's okay with him going out there.

Their bedroom door is shut as he walks past, knee crying with pain. The loft room is quiet and musty from disuse, two easy chairs sitting near the doorway, and a homemade quilt on the bed. He wonders who this house belonged to as he lies down on the bed and takes the weight off his knee. Whether they're still alive. He stares at the ceiling. It's weird to think that just a few hours ago, he'd been having sex with Hermione, and everything had been blissfully, wonderfully good. And now...

Now she's furious, and Draco's angry too, as much as he wishes he wasn't, and it's fucking horrible. He doesn't know how to deal with this. When he and Pansy argued, it had been over minor, stupid things that they could both grumpily compromise on. Not to mention, they'd been kids, and it had all been a lot less serious. This is something entirely different. And the way Hermione had said what she had about sex – *sick of you apologising* – fuck, he feels hot and ill, and angry enough that it takes him a while to realise he's shaking. He shuts his eyes and flings a forearm over them, and tears start flowing silently.

He'd tried so fucking hard to make it perfect for her in that moment. Perfect for them both – he'd had his own demons to exorcise. And then, thanks to the catalyst of Potter and Weasley, it had all gone so horribly fucking awry.

Chapter End Notes

► Housekeeping!

Chapter 24

Twenty-Four

Hermione sleeps alone that night. It's awful. Draco's just through the wall in the spare room, but he might as well be in Australia. She'd heard him limping past the door earlier as she sat on the edge of the bed waiting for him while she was still trying to calm down from the nearly hysterical, very shrill scolding she'd given Harry and Ron. She'd really let loose on them – perhaps even more than they deserved – channelling all her anger at them, and all her fear for Draco, into one furious meltdown. And then she'd stormed upstairs and slammed the door, fury bubbling under her skin, feeling hot, and teary, and miserable.

She hadn't expected Draco to just walk past their bedroom when he came up, finally. She'd expected that awkward limp to lead to a knock on the door, at least. An opportunity for her to apologise. For him to say he wouldn't insist on fighting. Her stomach had plummeted sickly, her hands curling into tight, clammy fists as she'd heard the spare room door shut with a quiet click.

She feels torn asunder by the distance stretching out between them, like half of her heart has been scooped from her chest, bleeding and ruined. Hermione both hates the feeling itself – horrible and sick-making – and hates that she feels that way. She doesn't know if it's normal to feel so wounded by this separation rather than just the argument, but she almost certainly thinks not. It's like a simmering anxiety and distress beneath her skin, and there's a tight feeling in her chest, a hot fear eating through her. Being so dependent on him makes her angry – not at him, because it's not his fault, but at *life* – and that anger drives her to a stubborn refusal to cave and go try to talk, or apologise.

If not for that dependent need, Hermione thinks she probably would've gone through to the spare room and tried to reconcile with Draco because she feels awful for what she said. She wishes she could take the words back. Stuff them back down her throat and choke on them. It had been cruel and unfair. He *hadn't* picked the fight with Harry and Ron – and Merlin, she was furious with them – and he wasn't a bad person for wanting to fight in the war. If anything, the latter illustrates his *goodness*, despite his insistence he's a monster. But in an ironic twist, Hermione's desperate, animal desire to go to Draco is the very thing that pushes her to stay away.

She refuses to give in to it. To do so would feel like being controlled by her trauma.

So instead, Hermione spends her evening curled up in bed, miserable and caught between desire and anger, her infuriating need itching at her as she runs over what had happened in a nightmarish loop. The sex – and oh god, that *had* been amazing. Draco standing there between Harry and Ron, blood smearing his face, unrepentant. The feel of his back under her fingers. The way she'd said what she'd said to him. That horrible attack. That cruel verbal stab. *I'm sick of you apologising to me after you've put your dick in me*. The memory of his face at the moment she'd spoken makes her feel hot and cold all over. She regrets it with an intensity that hurts. She cries a little, but less than she thought she would, as a sense of numbness begins to slowly blanket her. The whole day has exhausted her, and *that* just makes her want Draco more.

He is her comfort, and now he's *angry* at her. Wounded by her. It's a wretched, fucking terrible feeling.

What if he hates her now? What if she hurt him too badly? What if he thinks she hates him? Hermione's head is an incoherent jumble of fears.

She ends up slipping quietly from her room and asking Tonks for a vial of Dreamless Sleep before it gets too late – unable to stand another minute of lying awake, knowing that Draco is *right there*, and not going to him. Unwilling to feed her dependency; she feels like a drug addict. She lies down, head on her pillows and blankets tucked neatly around her as she stares up at the ceiling, vial in hand. A part of her hopes with a frantic desperation that he'll come into the bedroom and take the choice away from her. End her suffering without her having to give in to her maddening itch. But he doesn't.

So she uncorks the vial and drinks the potion, and shortly thereafter, slides into merciful nothingness.

"Oh, Hermione," Lupin says with mild surprise as he appears at the office doorway, and Hermione rubs her eyes, glancing at the clock. It's nearly midnight. That means she's spent almost three hours on nine lines of encrypted text that she still hasn't managed to make heads or tails of. She's thought she solved it more than once, but the encryption never works out. No wonder her head is aching. The fact that she worked through most of the day probably hasn't helped. Really, she should have put her work aside hours ago, but it distracts her from obsessing over Draco, at least.

She hasn't spoken to him all day, and she's only seen him once. Hermione feels all tangled up remembering it – she'd gone to leave their bedroom mid-morning, and she'd seen him coming up the stairs. Their eyes had met for a split second before Hermione had backed swiftly back into the bedroom and shut the door. He'd seen her, she knew it. He'd seen her run from him. She'd heard his footsteps, slowing outside the door. Stopping. She'd leaned against it, her breath coming fast and heavy, and she wasn't sure if she'd wanted him to knock or not. But after a few seconds, the footsteps had started again, and then a moment later, she'd heard the spare room door shut.

Hermione still wasn't sure why she'd avoided him – embarrassment? Fear that he'd be angry with her? But in the moment she'd felt so awful, remembering what she'd said to him and how coldly furious it had made him. His anger had made him look like a stranger. A dangerous, wounded animal. Except if she hadn't avoided him, if she hadn't been such a coward, perhaps they could have sorted it all out. Instead, she'd hidden, and their rift had dragged on all day. Hermione feels all hot and stupid just remembering the way she'd fled from him. The little glimpse of angry hurt on his face as he'd crested the stairs, his fringe falling in pale sheaves over his eyes.

After that near run-in, Hermione had shut herself in Lupin's office. She'd risked making a cup of coffee and met a shame-faced, bruised Ron in the kitchen, guiltily bringing her lunch and dinner, so she'd only had to leave the office to use the bathroom. Stupidly, part of Hermione had hoped Draco might've come to see her, but why would he after she'd shut him out like that? She felt like such a horrible coward. When Ron had brought her dinner, he'd said Draco had appeared briefly to make some sandwiches and tea and then disappeared upstairs again. Hermione doesn't know if Draco's still too angry to see her, or if he thinks *she's* too angry, or if he just doesn't know *how* to break the ice between them, much like her.

She's been fretting and sick over it all day whenever she has let herself surface from the mind-numbing boredom of her work, and she doesn't think she can face another night without him. Every molecule in her body is screaming for him. But she's too cowardly to make the first move.

"What are you still doing down here?" Lupin drags her from her thoughts.

"Work," Hermione says through a yawn. "This intercepted owl is driving me insane." She frowns. "Like everything else in my life," she mumbles, misery curdling in her stomach. Louder, she says, "Oh, that reminds me, Remus – I decrypted a note for Kingsley earlier. It came from Apple, at Hogwarts. Not urgent, obviously." She pushes the piece of parchment forward across the desk. She doesn't know whom the code name represents, and doesn't ask. Lupin enters the room, tucking the note in his pocket and sitting down opposite her. She wonders if Draco has talked to him about fighting again, or if he's been avoiding everyone.

"Thanks. I'll make sure he gets it." He pulls over a quill and a spare piece of parchment. "I have to send an owl off to my contact at MACUSA."

"Oh." Hermione rests her forehead in her hands, staring at the indecipherable text, mind swirling. There's silence for a moment. Then: "Please don't let Draco fight." She lifts her head and stares at Lupin pleadingly. He looks at her with a sad kind of compassion, mouth pressing into a sympathetic almost-smile as he puts his quill back in the inkwell and leans back in his seat. Listening. "He's done enough," she goes on quickly as he remains silent, her voice vibrating with intensity. "Let him rest, for Merlin's sake. He's sacrificed himself literally body and fucking *soul* for the Order, and now you want to get him killed?"

Lupin sighs. "It's not *me* who wants to send him out there," he tells her gently, and she hates the words as they fall from his lips. "He *wants* it. He seems to – to need it, Hermione. And I can't say I don't understand. If I were him..." He stares off into the distance, mind far away, before he blinks back to the moment. "I imagine that to Draco, the idea of killing Death Eaters seems like the only way to atone. He's spent so long killing innocents. From the debriefings... I won't go into detail –"

"Please don't." Hermione would rather keep her ignorance. It's not bliss, but it's better than knowing what he did. She doesn't want to look at him and think of any more horrors than she already does.

"Well, let's just say I understand his desire to wreak vengeance. To kill the right people for once. To try to balance the scales. To atone," he repeats, and his expression is filled with a terrible compassion that makes Hermione shudder.

"But it's not going to undo what he did," she tells Lupin intently. "We all know that. And I doubt it'll make him feel so much better that it's worth risking him. His back – he doesn't have the mobility he needs –"

"Hm," Lupin interrupts, scratching at his stubble and smiling faintly. "He seemed fine with Harry and Ron."

"Well, he's *not*. The scar tissue restricts his movements, and causes him pain, and –"

"Scar liniment will treat that," Lupin says placidly, and Hermione could slap him.

"Remus!" Tears cloud her eyes. He's missing the damn point, and she's pretty sure he's doing that on purpose. "If he goes out there... He's got no care for his own life. He doesn't value it. I'm convinced he thinks he should be dead. I don't trust him out there. I –"

"You think he'll get himself killed on purpose?" Lupin raises his brows, questioning. Concerned.

"Not consciously, " Hermione prevaricates. She rubs a hand over her eyes. It comes away dampened with tears. "But maybe subconsciously. Remus, just... Please. Don't give his wand back. You can't let him out there. He's – he's a liability," she tries, desperate, and Lupin gives her a kindly, pitying look.

"Is he? Really, Hermione?"

"Maybe! I don't know." She leans back in her chair, arms crossed over her chest, tense. She chews on her lower lip, staring at the table as Lupin stares at her, his gaze even and calm. She sighs, breaking first. "I just don't want him out there," she says in a small voice. It's wet with tears that she hasn't shed, her voice a little scratchy and thick.

"You can't decide for him," Lupin says, and Hermione blinks hard. Her eyes sting. It isn't fair. "I'm not going to give Draco his wand back yet –" oh god, relief barrels through her for a moment, "– because I feel I should get a consensus from the senior Order members. His debriefing may be finished, but the others may still feel uncomfortable with having him work in the field."

"And when will you do that?" Not for weeks, Hermione hopes desperately, crossing her fingers discreetly. Not for weeks.

"Well, we usually have weekly meetings, so I could –"

"Could you hold off on that just a little longer? *Please*, Remus." She widens her eyes, begging. "For me." He frowns.

"No. No, Hermione, I can't."

"Shit," she mutters and hitches a little breath in, a tear spilling over. "God, I'm just so *scared*," she says in a tiny, broken voice, and Lupin winces and looks apologetic.

He folds his arms and thinks a moment, face unhappily contemplative. "Fine," he says at last. "*Fine*, Hermione. I won't do anything – *yet*. But if he asks me again, then –"

"I know, I know," Hermione babbles, interrupting him. "Thank you so much, Remus. Thank you." Relief is rushing through her in a torrent, the floodgates opening. A stay of execution is all she could have realistically hoped for, and she's gotten it. Thank Merlin. Lupin eyes her.

"You should talk to him, Hermione." She looks away. "Talk to him about how scared you are. Like the adult you say you are. Or, accept that he's going to do what he's going to do, and let it slide. Learn to live with it. Either way, you two need to sort this out, somehow. You can't keep on this way. You've both obviously been miserable. He's been shut in the spare room all damned day, and you've been locked in here...it's very productive on your end, I suppose, but it's untenable. Ridiculous." He tips a sympathetic smile toward her. "And I would know. Just...talk to him."

"I –"

"Either that, or go to bloody bed. It's too late for you to be working." He raises his brows when she doesn't immediately move. "Go on. I'm not kidding. You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here," he says lightly, as if quoting something, and Hermione surrenders with a weak smile.

"Fine. I'm going."

She thinks of talking to Draco as she tidies her files away and feels sick with nerves, although she knows Lupin is right, and she needs to do *something*. She knows this situation is her fault, really. She shouldn't have said what she did. To use the sex they'd just had against him like that was beyond the pale. It was more cruel than Hermione had thought she was capable of. The hurt that had flashed across his face as the words struck home had stabbed right through her. She says goodnight to Lupin and heads for the stairs, chewing on her lip as she tries to sort through her thoughts so she can do what the older wizard advises, and talk to Draco.

First she'd said that horribly cruel thing, and then she'd actively avoided him – he probably thinks she's furious with him. When really, it's he who has every right to be angry and hurt, if he is. Because he's done nothing but take care of her, as best as he could, for months. He's sacrificed for her – so much. She's been thinking about it today, despite her best attempts to bury herself in her work, and it's slowly become obvious that he has done nothing but give to her, and she isn't sure how much she's given back. She worries she may only have taken from him. That upsets her more and more the more she dwells on it.

And then yesterday, Draco had heard Hermione screaming at Harry about how he'd raped her, before she'd pushed for sex, telling him that she refused to see what had happened as him hurting her anymore – only to fling it straight back in his face later, without even thinking. She'd lashed out because she was scared for him, but that didn't make what she'd said any less hurtful. Shit. It is becoming clear to Hermione just how badly she's messed up. And the longer she leaves it, she thinks as she trudges up the stairs, the worse it will get. She should wake him. See if he'll let her crawl into bed with him, even if they don't sort anything out until morning.

Hermione still stalls though, nervous. She showers, part of her mind thinking *just in case*. And as she does, she finds herself thinking about what they did yesterday before it all went wrong. As she runs the flannel over her shoulders, her breasts, her thighs, she finds her mind drifting to what Draco had done to them. The softness of his mouth, the swipe of his tongue, and the press of his fingers. Like magic, the thought of him doing those things makes her feel shivery and heated, arousal pooling low in her belly.

Regardless of how things turned out yesterday, Hermione is so glad they had sex. So glad. Because now, when she thinks of his touch, of him pushing inside her, she thinks about that, instead of...before. And it had been so good. So much better than she'd thought. Draco had *worshipped* her body. Reverent and obscene all at once, and oh god, it had been like being reborn. Something hot and needy grows in her as she stands in the bathroom in a clean vest and a pair of his boxer shorts, drying her hair with magic. She stares at herself in the mirror for a long moment, and then – focusing carefully – casts a contraceptive charm. She feels arousal competing with her fear that Draco will turn her away. But she can't bear to spend another night away from him; Hermione knows that now with a steady certainty. If she has to beg him to sleep in the same bed, she will, and she will take it as her due.

Draco jerks awake as his hand shoots out, locking around a wrist, eyes snapping open as there's a feminine gasp, and his gaze lands on Hermione. Shadowy and silvered in the moonlight, her hand stretching out toward him, and her eyes wide, a pretty ghost in his grasp. For a moment, he doesn't think she's real. An apparition. A desire. Then the fog of sleep drops away as though she's slapped it out of him, and he lets her go fast as she tugs back. He'd just been dreaming of her – a good dream, the best kind of dream – and he's pretty sure he's hard. Fuck. Draco just hopes it's not visible. He doesn't want to scare her off. Because she's here.

She's actually here.

His dream is vivid in his mind; pleasure and slickness, and the echo of her moans. He eyes her carefully. She's avoided him all last night and today, and now she just turns up in the spare room at – well, it's late, he knows that much. He hadn't fallen asleep until after 10 pm. It sets him on edge. He thought she was angry at him.

Hell, Draco had thought *he* was still angry at her too, until he'd opened his eyes to her face. To her silhouette in the dark, her body right there in reach, and his dream is crowding his thoughts out. No, he's not angry. Concerned, yes. Worry creeps up fast as his brain kicks into gear and starts doing its job. What's Hermione doing in here, in the middle of the night? After what happened? She looks fine physically, but –

"Are you alright?" he rasps, thinking of nightmares and panic attacks, but she nods, quick and nervous. The tip of her tongue sweeps out over her lips, one hand twisting in the hem of her vest and pulling it taut and thin as she shifts on her feet. She's limned in moonlight, and the soft glow makes her look even more ethereal. Dark hair in a cloud around her face, nipples a shadow under her top, the black boxers of his that she wears sitting precariously low on her hips, as though she hasn't magically resized them. *Fuck*.

With Draco's worries set aside for now, he's left with just wanting her; straightforward and uncomplicated. He wants her in his arms, in the bed, under the blankets and tangled with him, clothed or unclothed; it makes no difference. He wants her warm and close, *his*, in his grasp, where he can press his mouth to her flesh. His anger is a distant, forgotten memory. Nothing compares to having her in front of him right now, like a succubus.

Nothing else matters much.

The vicious rage and hurt he'd felt at her last words had passed by the time he'd woken from last night's restless, nightmare-plagued sleep, leaving only a bruised tenderness. The anger and frustration that she doesn't want to let him pay recompense by fighting with the Order has lingered, but it is swept away like a phantom in the face of her presence. He can deal with those feelings – with that problem – tomorrow. Later. Whenever. Who cares. She's here.

All this passes through his head in a second.

"What –" he begins aloud, voice rough with sleep, but Hermione interrupts him, her eyes big and hands wringing. *Fuck*, she looks so good. So touchable. So luscious. It makes his fingers itch for the feel of her – the brush of skin on skin, the wet heat of her mouth. It makes him want to re-enact his filthy dream. Her head tipped back and throat bared, her legs falling open, her hips bumping up, that pretty, sweet pussy all flushed and slick and begging to be touched. His breath hisses in at the thought, the darkened room spinning dizzily. He blinks.

"I didn't want to sleep without you again," she says, voice shaking slightly as if she's afraid Draco will turn her away. Salazar's sake, he would *never*. Never.

"Come to bed," he says and it comes out like an order, his voice still low and husky as he shifts over, lifting the blanket. She slides in, and her body is cold as he tucks her close, a fierce, protective feeling searing to life in his chest. She turns in the circle of his arms to face him, her head tipping back so their eyes meet in the dark, and hers are inky and unreadable, her lower lip a plump curve of dusky desaturated rose and shadow as her mouth opens to speak.

"You avoided me," he cuts in first, wanting to know where he stands – on solid ground or quicksand. "Why?" Her gaze drops. She pauses, and her breath is short and shallow. Shit, he recognises her fear. He rubs a hand soothingly up and down her back. "I'm not angry at you, Hermione. Not even a little. You can tell me." It's a reassurance and a prompt.

She takes a breath. "I was afraid," she says in a little out-rush, gaze still downturned. "I was embarrassed, and I was worried you'd be angry because, really, *you* didn't do anything wrong. It was Harry and Ron who started the fight. And then what I said – it was all my fault, and – Draco, I'm sor—" He ducks his head and kisses the words from her lips without thinking. He knows what she's going to say, and she doesn't have to. They don't have to think about it at all. Not now that he knows she's not angry. He's careful as always – makes it easy for her to pull away. But she doesn't. Instead, Hermione breathes a startled moan into his mouth, and a shudder shakes her chest as she unexpectedly fists her hand in his hair and kisses him back brutally hard. She's controlling the kiss and he gives in. There's a tension racking her body, and their teeth clack briefly as they work out the angles, her tongue hot and seeking. Penetrative, like she's fucking his mouth.

Oh fuck. Pleasure judders down his body at the thought and the sensation, and his dick twitches. He tugs her closer instinctively, her insistent, greedy demand making him less careful. What does she want, doing this? He knows what *he* wants – *all of her*; her pussy clutching around his dick, coming on him, her mouth screaming, her breasts under his mouth, *fuck*, she's so perfect, so *good* – but then her grip yanks at his fringe and their mouths break apart with a wet sound as he goes with her pull. He stares at her, open-mouthed and panting, wanting, as she licks her lips.

"– Sorry," she finishes a little dazedly, her breath coming hard and her mouth all kiss-red, and then bites her lip and Draco *whimpers*. Her eyes widen at the sound. He wants her an obscene amount. After that kiss, he wants her more than he wants to breathe. He nuzzles against her throat, the two of them tangled together, his mouth open and sucking, tasting her skin. In his dream, he'd taken her apart completely – no care and no tenderness, just an overwhelming hunger, and she'd screamed, and screamed as she'd come on him, beneath him, impaled by him, choked by him. His dick twitches again. Her hands are on his chest now. His abdomen. Searching over his scarred skin, soft fingers drifting, exploring.

Merlin.

"I'm not," he says aloud. "I'm not sorry." Her fingers wriggle beneath his waistband, and he sucks in a breath. And then her grasp is firm around his achingly hard dick, her fingers cool and soft, "Fuck, Hermione, what –" Her lips press to his parted ones; an open press, soft and luxurious, and only brief. It's enough to shut him up.

"I want you," she says very softly and seriously as she looks into his eyes, and hearing that nearly kills him. Something knots up in his stomach, and he bites his lip on a groan. He cups her face in his hand, thumb running over her cheek, and he's trembling ever-so-slightly, his blood thrumming in his veins, his breath catching.

"Now?" he manages to ask, and she nods against his hand, a hint of fear lurking in the back of her eyes. " *Good*," he says vehemently, and then he's lying her back against the pillows and sliding down the bed, his knee twinging with pain. He ignores it. The boxers she wears – *his* boxers, baggy on her, Merlin he loves how she looks in his clothes – slide down so easily as she lifts her hips, her breathing still erratic, her eyes big, and she's not wearing anything underneath. Just soft, short curls and her already glistening wet, flushed pussy. Fuck. He's starting to think Hermione planned this.

"Yes?" he asks as he parts her thighs, and she gulps and nods and whispers a *yes*, her voice tight. Her hair is loose and haloed over the pillow, her lips dark in the low light, her nipples barely visible through her vest as hard nubs, her chest rising and falling quickly. Her thighs are so soft under his hands, so lush, so perfect as he settles on his bruised stomach between them and sinks his mouth to her flesh. The moan that drags from her throat at the contact is heady. She's delicious. A feast; her juices pleasant and faintly tangy, and there's something inexplicably, deeply arousing about the taste of her as he slides his tongue between her folds, licking up her from cunt to clit and relishing the way she squirms under his ministrations.

She whimpers and moans, and her hands find his head, burying in his hair, her fingers curling and tugging at the strands. "Oh god...oh god, Draco... *fuck*..."

Draco hums with filthy satisfaction as he slicks his tongue over her clit in soft, sloppy circles, and she writhes as the hum reverberates through her. He's on his elbows and his hands slide beneath her, gripping the curves of her arse and holding her, his tongue moving inexorably. He's thorough. Tongue laving between her folds and spearing into her cunt, making her clench and twitch, and Merlin, he wants to put his dick there so badly. But he has to make her come first. Her legs rise up, her thighs clamping on his head as he moves back to her clit, circling and lapping, and when he raises his eyes to see, she's arching her back now, thrusting her breasts up, a flush creeping down from her cheeks to the neckline of her vest, her hands clutching at the bedsheets.

Hermione's breath is coming in short, hard pants, her eyes screwed tight shut and a little frown line etched between her eyebrows as she holds her mouth open in an *o*, and Salazar's sake, if he could only push his dick between those sweet lips, he'd die happy. He feels the orgasm building in her. Her thighs tensing, her features drawing tight, her pants for air becoming vocal little moans, that frown of hers deepening in concentration as she focuses on what's happening within her. He holds her tight, tongue light and rhythmic, repetition his entire world. She whimpers, fingers scrabbling at the bed, and one hand locking back in his hair as the climax rises up, the peak she's about to hit and tip off, and then she makes a little cascade of gasps.

"*Oh – oh – oh –*"

And then a strangled, breathy moan tears from Hermione's throat as she tries desperately to be quiet and doesn't quite succeed, her hips lifting off the bed, her whole body a strung bow. Draco grins to himself as he keeps licking, slowly easing off, finishing by pressing soft, open-mouthed kisses against her pussy and feeling little twitches running through her soft, wet flesh – rippling aftershocks. Her body goes limp and lax as her fingers pet through his hair clumsily, and he climbs up her body, settling over her. She pulls him down to her eagerly, her legs bracketing his hips, all her fear gone in the wake of her orgasm, her eyes heavy-lidded and pupils huge.

"Have you cast a contraceptive charm?" he remembers to ask, expecting that she hasn't – suddenly worried she's going to say they can't have sex because of that, especially because she doesn't have her wand on her – but she blushes even pinker and nods. *Oh*. Oh, she *was* planning this before she even came in.

"Please," she whispers, and fuck, that's so dizzyingly hot. He kisses her mouth, light and lingering, before he presses cheek to cheek with her, one hand reaching down to fit them together. He remembers what she said involuntarily, and a needle of hurt pricks at him, mixing with his desire. So much desire – he feels drunk on her, intoxicated, half out of his head with want. "Draco – *please*."

"I'm not apologising for this one, Hermione," he tells her, low in her ear as he slowly presses his dick inside her, her slick flesh stretching to accommodate him as she clings to him and whimpers needily. "I don't care what you fucking say after this. I'm—" The head of his dick slips fully into her, and he gasps and moans, and so does she. His head drops, his forehead pressed to her cheek, the rest of his shaft slowly sliding home. "*Hnngh...*" The universe is gripping and wet, and he loves it. Loves her. "I'm not sorry." His voice is strangled and he breathes hard. "Not sorry. *Fuck.*" He's coming to pieces inside her, and she's holding him together.

Draco moves inside her, and she's moaning. He's moaning. Losing himself completely, his self-control slipping clean out of his grasp. She's hot and amazing, and the pressure builds fast. The lingering shreds of anger combine with his hurt and make a potent brew. He doesn't try to last, just fucks into her mindless and needy, kissing her cheek, her mouth, and her throat, gripping her hip, palming over her side, grunting with the effort of each thrust. He fucks her hard. "Is this —?" he asks incoherently at one point and feels her nod fast and sharp, her hands clutching his shoulders.

"Yes," she gasps, clumsy and slurred. "Don't — don't stop."

He doesn't, until he comes. Hard. Spilling into her with a shudder and a groan, and a series of erratic thrusts, and oh Merlin, it's like coming home. He clutches her close, pressing his mouth down against her sweat-damp cheek, panting against her as fading ripples of pleasure wash through him, satisfaction heavy in his bones. Her hands stroke over his head and down his neck, fingertips dragging firmly, palming over his shoulders and down his back. "I love you," Hermione murmurs, a blurry little exhortation, and he turns his head and kisses her before he pulls out of her carefully, and rolls to the side before he crushes her.

"I love you," Draco says drowsily, satiation and tiredness creeping up on him as he slides his arm around her, and she curls up against him with a little sigh. She seems blissfully happy, and he couldn't feel more satisfied than he does right now. Everything else can wait until morning.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

- ▶ Content Warning
- ▶ Housekeeping!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Twenty-Five

Draco wakes the next day with Hermione sprawled in his arms, contented and warm, and the idea of unearthing the nastiness and conflict of the day before yesterday seems an unnecessary evil. Especially considering his knee is still sore and strained, and he's limping badly when he gets up to use the loo. There will be no fighting for him until his knee has healed, and why bother bringing up conflict before then? So he just doesn't. He lets sleeping dogs lie. He figures Hermione must feel much the same because she doesn't bring it up either.

Instead, they have a normal day – or what passes for normal for them.

He smiles at her and kisses her in the morning before she slides out of the spare room bed, and he follows her limping back through to their room. She seems happy, and he does his best to foster that feeling after the miserable few days they've had. They eat breakfast with everyone like usual, and she glares at Potter and Weasley while he shoots them discreet smirks. Potter, in particular, is blossoming with visible greenish-yellow bruises, and that gives Draco a hint of childish pride. He didn't do too badly for it being two against one.

And then after that, they slide into their usual routine.

He works out – careful of his knee – showers, shaves, and eats lunch with Hermione in Lupin's office. He spends part of the afternoon in the office with her, assisting her while she faux-complains he's really a hindrance. And when shared glances and little touches become more heated as time goes on, Lupin eventually catches on and mutters something under his breath long-sufferingly and banishes them with a smile. Draco limps his way upstairs after Hermione, who rolls her eyes at his slowness. She's been an odd mix of annoyed and concerned about his injuries. Draco gets the feeling she wants to fuss over him, even as she's unimpressed with his choice to engage Potter and Weasley.

The sun throws gold over the bedroom as he pushes the door shut behind him with a click, and she's smiling, her hair loose and wild as she slides her arms around his neck. A waterfall of fluffy curls, loose and waving, haloing her heart-shaped face, her eyes glowing amber as they catch the late afternoon light. So fucking beautiful. Her cheeks are pink, and there's a nervous energy to her, buzzing around her. She pushes up on tiptoes and kisses him, and she's trembling a little, and Draco's not sure if it's fear or want. He very much wants to just repeat last night. To just fuck her. It's so tempting.

But instead, his mouth is soft on hers as his hands settle at her waist, letting her lead this time, and in response, she's greedy and pushing. Fantastically demanding. Her fingers curl in the shorter hairs at the nape of his neck as they stand locked together, her on her tiptoes and him with his head bent

to her. She shoves up against him, her lower abdomen pressed against his dick, and he can feel himself getting hard against her. There's a shivering frisson in the air and a glorious, frenetic energy bubbling off her, spilling everywhere. He's caught in it, struggling to keep his head.

She's panting and he's hard as iron when she breaks the kiss and tries to drag his shirt off over his head, clumsy and impatient. He finishes yanking it off when she struggles, dropping it on the floor and rolling his shoulders back, wondering what she thinks of him. He's more battered than usual right now. Draco wouldn't say he's self-conscious exactly because he hardly ever thinks of it, but when he does, he finds it hard to believe his scars are appealing – although his chest and abdomen are scattered with old, odd scars, rather than a thick lacework of whiplashes, it's still not pretty. He already has a lifetime of scars and he's only twenty, although the only one visible usually is the thin lash cutting from the hinge of his jaw up to just beneath his left eye.

"I can't believe they did this to you." Her hands ignore any scars, sweeping warm over his skin to very gently trace the large, healing bruises with a wince, her touch so light and careful he can hardly feel it. She's clearly still angry with Potter and Weasley, from the edge in her tone.

"They're hardly unscathed," he points out, with the hint of a smirk he can't quite suppress. Luckily, Hermione's not looking at his expression. Her eyes are on his body, and she seems to be admiring it, something which makes Draco feel oddly exposed and pleased as he stands obediently still under her hands. Her fingers glide up his sides and over his chest, brushing past his nipples before one hand drifts down to his belly button. Pokes it. "Urgh, don't *do* that," he protests. It feels *weird* and he reacts on instinct, batting her hand aside and she snickers, playful, that giddy energy still filling the room. He kisses the laugh out of her mouth, tongue curling against the inside of her teeth and she moans, a muffled, wanting sound that makes his cock twitch.

Draco's fingers go to her shirt as they kiss some more – she's wearing one that buttons down the front, and he unbuttons it nimbly as he pushes kisses into her, and her fingers clutch at his upper arms, her mouth slanting and eager against his. Under her shirt, Hermione wears only a thin vest, and her breasts are soft and warm when he palms them gently. He pulls her vest up out of her leggings and slides his hands beneath it, over her abdomen, and oh Merlin, her skin is like hot silk. He pokes her belly button teasingly, and she makes an indignant sound into his mouth and pulls away, huffing a laugh. "Hey!"

"You started it, Granger," he tells her with a half-smile, infected by her mood, and tugs her back to him, his hands light at her wrists – always careful. But she's grinning as he ducks his head and nuzzles her throat, stripping her shirt down her arms and letting it fall to the floor. A series of breathless, squeaking laughs huff out of her as he wraps his arms around her and places wet and nibbling kisses under her ear. Her hands pat at his head and grab fistfuls of his hair as she squirms, giggling. His arms loop around her and he kisses her ear, jaw, chin, the corner of her mouth, her nose, her eyebrow, all sloppy and teasing as he backs her toward the bed. She's laughing. It's fucking wonderful.

They tip onto the bed, and he catches himself on his hands above her. Her hair is *everywhere*, and he smooths it back from her face. One wild section flops right back over her eyes, and he sweeps it off her face and twirls the offending section of hair into one thick twist, tucking it behind her ear as he dips his lips down to hers. She makes a funny, shuddering little gasp as he twirls it, but then he's kissing that away. Her mouth is so soft, and so sweet. So pliable, and motionless, and she's shivering, and – "Hermione?" Draco pulls back and looks at her, dread creeping up cold and thick. Her eyes are open, but she's not there, staring blankly at the ceiling. Her breath is coming in little panting gasps through her mouth now that he's not kissing her.

Oh shit. He doesn't know what he's done to trigger it, but she's like she was after the dinner. That thought makes him remember it sharply, and rage and horror rise up sickly in him. They'd done things he can barely stand to remember while he'd just sat and watched, and *smiled*. As he scrambles up and off the bed, she just lies there, with her hands lax at her sides like a corpse, still utterly gone behind the eyes. Catatonic. Feeling sick to his stomach, Draco does much the same as what he did after the dinner, once they had finished with her and he'd been able to take her back to their room. He talks to her reassuringly as he gently sits her up, and she moves with him, unresisting and obedient, although she's frowning now. Her eyes squeeze shut. There are tears trickling out from beneath her lashes.

She's coming back, that awful moment of absence passing. A terrible relief washes through him.

"It's alright. It's okay. Come on. There we go. You're alright. You're safe. It's okay," he says, a litany of useless reassurances spilling from his lips as he gets her settled on the edge of the bed and crouches at her feet. "It's over, Hermione. It's just me. You aren't there anymore." Her hair is falling forward over her face as she drops her chin, and he reaches up to push it back, and she flinches away with a whimper. Her fear of him is like a knife to the gut. He drops his hand. "It's okay," he makes himself say, afraid to touch her now, not knowing what to do as she sits there trembling, hugging herself. He doesn't know how to help her. "You're safe, Hermione." At least when he says it now, it's true. She *is* safe.

Time passes – over half an hour by the clock – and eventually, Draco falls silent as she sits there with her head down and her hair hiding her face, breathing in ragged little sips. He settles cross-legged and still shirtless at her feet in the afternoon sun, thinking of the mansion and the way she'd sat in her armchair, and how he'd fallen asleep at her feet more than once as she huddled in that chair silently, lost in pain. He stares at his hands in his lap and feels so fucking *useless*. He looks up when he hears a strangled sob. She's crying. Her face buried in her hands, shoulders shaking, and Draco swears silently, hating this. Despising it. Hating himself for whatever he did to trigger it – and he's been trying to figure that out as he sat there at her feet, and all he can think is that it's the particular way he touched her hair.

Something so fucking simple. Touching her hair.

And there's nothing Draco can do. He just sits and listens to Hermione cry – watches her fall apart even as she holds herself stiff and frozen, as if moving will destroy her – and he's too scared to touch her, in case he makes it worse. He tells her he loves her. He tells her it's okay. He tells her he'll do whatever she wants, whatever she needs, she only needs to tell him and he'll do it. She's in control. She's in charge. It feels like forever before she abruptly slides off the edge of the bed, and all but flings herself into Draco's lap. An armful of shaking, tear-wet, clutching girl burying her face into the crook of his neck as she plasters herself against him.

The dam has broken, and she clings to him, weeping uncontrollably. "I – I wish I – could just – forget," she gasps wetly between heaving sobs, and Draco holds her close and careful, his heart cracking, trying not to cry himself. His hands smooth up and down her spine – avoiding her hair just in case, although he has a mouthful of it, and it's tickling his face. "The – the dinner," she gets out as if trying to explain, and Draco holds her tighter, rocking slowly side to side as if she's a child, shushing her gently.

"I know," he says softly, wanting to take apart every single wizard who'd been in that fucking room. Who'd hurt her. To break them into bloody chunks. To make them scream as he rips them open. "I know, love. I know. I'm so sorry." He rocks her ceaselessly, and her face is wet against his skin, and

her fingers dig into his back. "I'm so fucking sorry." He wonders if there could've been a way to shield her from what they'd done. He couldn't have avoided taking her to the dinner, but he wonders if he should have *obliterated* her afterwards. If he should've given her a potion to make it blurry and dark in her mind. Has he failed her? Should he have done more?

"I'm so sorry."

"Stop saying sorry," she gasps during a break in her sobs, thumping her fist against his shoulder. "It's not your *fault*!" But it feels like his fault. Draco remembers sitting there making pleasant conversation as they used her, and she wept, and sobbed, and screamed, and begged with raw desperation for him to save her, and it *feels* like his fault. He'd smiled, and laughed, and made small talk about using her, and about how much prettier she looked weeping, and listened to them talk about how she felt. How *good* she felt. How slick she was, once she began bleeding. How well she choked for them. How she looked better with her face covered in their cum.

He gags.

His head falls forward against hers, face blindly burying in her hair – no thought of avoiding triggering her now – and he breathes in the scent of her. Clean and sweet. Fresh. That night, she'd smelled of blood, sweat, and other things he doesn't want to think about. That he can't stand to think about. "I'm so sorry," he gasps, and *he's* nearly crying now, his eyes stinging as his stomach roils, and he clings to her tighter. She makes a startled, hiccupping sound and stiffens for a second, and then her hand pets over his hair, and *she* makes a shaky, hitching shush of reassurance through her own tears.

"I'm sorry," he says again, rocking her in his arms as he tries to wrestle himself back under control, and the day feels dark. A cloud has fallen over the sun.

It takes a long while before Hermione's calm enough to disentangle from him, a hollow sort of exhaustion etched into her face as she climbs off his lap and slumps beside him on the floor. He scoops her up like a child, settling her into their bed like he used to at the mansion. Tucking the blankets around her, and – very carefully – brushing the hair off her face. "I'm sorry," she says in a very small voice, her eyes huge in her face, and he shakes his head.

"Don't," he says. "Don't ever be sorry."

It's a stark reminder that things haven't been fixed, not by a long shot, and it's a stark reminder that while they're moving forward, it won't be simple or without setbacks. Just because they've made new memories, it doesn't mean the old ones are erased. They still linger, waiting to be triggered.

He brings Hermione dinner in their room that evening and has to coax her to eat.

But then later that night, while they spoon together in bed, she turns to him and kisses him gently, and it somehow slides into hours of slow, luxurious intimacy. She sets the pace and the tone, and it's careful and easy at once. Kissing and touching, shedding clothes like autumn leaves, searching over each other's bodies before his mouth finally finds her cunt, and he licks her until she comes on his tongue. And then, when he sits back on his knees between her legs, wiping her juices from his lips with no thought of doing anything else on his mind – not after what happened earlier – she pulls him down to her. She takes his dick in her hand, lifting her hips and guiding it inside the soaking wet, tight heat of her, and Merlin, he loves her so much.

Days go past in some fragile, carefully constructed bubble. Happy but delicately balanced. Always edged with a dark underbelly. There's always the past, a spectre looming. And no one has any idea what the future will hold. But the present? The present is good, right now.

Every time Draco is in Lupin's office while the older wizard is there, Hermione feels jittery, wondering if he'll ask Lupin about fighting. His knee is healing fast, and if he wanted to join the active Order members on a mission, he'd probably be cleared for it. But he doesn't ask. Not yet. And Lupin keeps his word and doesn't say anything. She has a respite, for now, and she embraces it. She doesn't know what she'll do if he does ask. The thought of Draco going out there still terrifies her because no matter what he's said, she doesn't believe he values his own life. He called himself expendable; she can't forget that. That had been the truth, in his voice. He couldn't take that back, no matter what he said. No – he would have to convince her he didn't feel that way any more.

Maybe sex will be enough to make him want to live, she thinks wryly sometimes in the wake of it, the times that it doesn't go awry in some embarrassing way. In the past five days, Hermione has learned that blowjobs are not something she's currently capable of without throwing up, and that twirling her hair – such a random, harmless thing – is a bad idea. But even those headlong spins into nightmare don't feel quite as leaden or crushing as they did. And Draco is there, of course, always. When she falls apart, he's there to hold her together. To bring her back.

And there's just something in the air that feels *good*.

It feels like spring. Not just the weather, which is indeed slowly warming, but something more ephemeral. A general feeling of growth, and freshness. Everything outside is beginning to come back to life, and like a cliché, Hermione feels like she might be too. Hope is burgeoning in her chest. She wakes up and feels *okay* more often than not; like she has today, feeling warm and content as she swam up to consciousness in the early dawn.

Things don't seem entirely hopeless anymore – Hermione's constant despair has lifted, after months. There is light glimmering at the end of the tunnel, and she can see it. She's reaching for it. She finds herself starting to believe that perhaps she might actually be able to be functional, one day, if they win the war. She's damaged but perhaps not entirely broken.

If Draco didn't want to fight for the Order, then life would be as close to perfect as Hermione could hope for right now as she lies snuggled on her side under the blankets, listening to the early morning birdsong as pale dawn seeps through the crack in their curtains, and watching Draco sleep, sprawled on his stomach with his face turned toward her. He looks so peaceful this morning.

His features are softened and his expression smoothed, all the tension gone. The little crease between his brows is absent, his mouth full and lax, lips just barely parted, and the dark blonde fans of his lashes flutter slightly as his eyes move beneath his lids with their faint tracery of veins. A hint of stubble glints pale gold along his jaw, and above his top lip, and she knows if she kisses him, he'll feel like sandpaper. Aside from the thin purple seam bisecting his left cheek – the slowly healing whiplash scar – his face looks unscathed by war.

He's wearing nothing but black boxers, and he's shoved the blankets half off in his sleep, and Hermione finds herself transfixed by the sight of him in the half-light. His shoulders are broad, and his back is a jagged topography of shadow and light catching over his scarring, rendering him starkly. Beneath the scars lies muscle; defined lines of it that he's slowly honing, and Hermione won't complain about that. He's going from thin and toned to lean, wiry muscle, and it suits him. He's beautiful. His left hand is tucked just under his chin, fingers twitching a little in his sleep.

She can't resist. She reaches out and ghosts her hand along his forearm, fingers trailing lightly alongside the Mark. Shock jolts in her chest as his hand snaps out and grabs hers, sliding up to encircle her wrist. Eyes still shut, he mumbles, "H'mione," and then flops his arm over her sleepily. "You alright?" It makes her heart feel constricted within her chest that his first thought is of her, and whether she's okay.

"Yes," she whispers, and he hums, drowsy and sleepy, eyes slitting open a crack, hazy grey eyeing her before his lids slid shut again, as though weighed down with leaden weights.

"Good. Love you," he says through a yawn, and *oh*, the way he *says* that, all slurred and sleepy. His arm is warm and heavy over her and Hermione wriggles closer, a familiar feeling stirring in the pit of her stomach as he hums again and his hand slides down her body. His fingers splay and grip firm over the curve of her bum, his thumb rubbing through her knickers in absent, little circles, and that familiar feeling grows. Warm and swirling. She kisses the sharp point of his chin, and he really does feel sandpapery rough. She smiles.

Arousal swims lazy in her veins as Draco dips his chin without opening his eyes and kisses her properly on the mouth. His lips are plush and the fleeting slide of his tongue sends delicious shivers through her. "You just don't want me to sleep, do you?" he says, a smile in his voice, and Hermione drops a chaste kiss on his lips again, and they curve beneath hers.

"No," she says decidedly, and nuzzles at the underside of his jaw. As far as she knows, he had no nightmares last night, and while she'd woken with a bad one around midnight, she'd slept dreamlessly and heavily besides that, and she feels happy this morning. Not for any reason, not because anything good happened – just a general feeling of well-being. It's a feeling she's still getting used to – it feels like a trap, sometimes. For a while, she had thought she might never feel it again. And now that she does, it's hard to trust the feeling. It feels like, at any minute, the rug is about to be ripped out from under her feet, as though everything is going to fall apart, to tumble down a dark hole.

Her stomach squirms, uncertainty and dread lurching up.

But then Draco's laughing quietly at her '*no*' and kissing her cheek as he bundles her closer, his hand squeezing her bum blatantly, kneading it. She lets out a little whimper and pushes into his hand. "What do you want then, Granger?" he asks her, all sleepy-husky and teasing, as he brushes his lips over hers, his eyes open now, his gaze somewhere between amused and aroused. She feels heat flush up beneath her skin as her fingers push his fringe back – his hair is so pretty in this dim morning light, nearly white. And so soft. It sticks up a little where she's shoved it back and looks silly, and she hides a smile.

"You," she murmurs in answer, and his eyes flash hungry and she forgets about his hair.

"Really?" he asks, careful and hopeful, and bites his lip when she nods. They'd tried yesterday morning, when she'd discovered she couldn't put his cock in her mouth without throwing up. She swallows hard as she salivates sickly at the memory, and his eyes narrow as if he caught the movement. "Are you sure?" She nods again.

"I want to," she tells him, kissing his lower lip and sucking it into her mouth, biting it herself before she lets go and smiles at him. "Please? Make me feel good, Draco?"

"*Mmph*," he says inarticulately, kissing her, and things dissolve into warmth and pleasure. His hand sliding over her skin, and his tongue teasing her and licking tingling arousal into her that shoots

straight through her insides like an arrow, making delicious things happen inside her; clenching muscles and hypersensitive flesh, and she squeezes her thighs together. She feels hot all over as he kisses her mouth, and her jaw, and wetly down her throat, nipping at her neck, and she squirms and makes a sound between a moan and a squeal as it sends zaps of pleasure down her spine like the sexual equivalent of static electricity.

And then his hands are on her and arranging them both with an efficiency she loves, laying her back and shoving up her vest like he's dying, like it's life and death, and then his mouth is on her left nipple, hot and wet. "Oh," she says faintly, and her hands grab the pillow on either side of her head. "Ohhh *nnngh*..."

Draco's sprawled long and lean beside her, his body pushed against hers, and she can feel his cock jabbing hard into her thigh as he mouths at her breasts one at a time, his hand behind her back so he can roll her forward to more easily reach her right one. She's helpful; pushing forward into his mouth, one of her hands sinking into his hair. He worships her breasts. Showers them with attention, and she can feel herself getting wetter and wetter, her body winding tighter, a delicious tension building. He's methodical and thorough. After his first, shockingly good assault, he takes it slow.

Stroking featherlight, and then pinching gently. Dotting wet, licking kisses all over Hermione's skin and making her moan with frustration as he just barely avoids her nipple. He *teases*. The bastard. Licking around her areola, and then pulling back before he hits the nub she wants him to just damn well *suck on*. She makes annoyed huffs and arches her back, trying to shove her nipple into his mouth and groans as he grins and dodges.

"*Please*," she begs and he relents, licking and sucking as his hand plays gently with her other breast, and then switches sides and repeats the process, and oh god, it's maddening and amazing. Before long, her breasts are tingling like crazy, and her nipples are so exquisitely hypersensitive that she actually can't take anymore.

"No, no – too much," Hermione gasps and shoves at Draco's head with the heels of her hands, and that's when he starts to move down. He kisses his way down each rib like a ladder, laying a kiss below her sternum, and then another just above her belly button, and then down, and down, and his fingers curl under the band of her knickers. They slide down her hips, and then all the way off as he kneels beside her and then he's sinking between her thighs with a sigh. Hands pressing them open, on his elbows and sliding his hands under her bum, lifting her up. Open mouth pressed to her vulva. Tongue sweeping flat and soft before swirling the tip of it around her clit.

Oh.

His tongue is a revelation, every time. Hermione didn't think the human tongue could be so many radically different things. Soft, hard. Pointed or flat. Forceful, or gentle. It can slowly, sweetly build a warm, liquid ecstasy that seeps through her easily and lullingly like a rising tide, or it can strike a sharp, raging pleasure immediately through her that lights her nerves on fire.

This time, it's soft and sweet.

Hermione reaches out blindly and grabs his pillow, shoving it behind her shoulders, and he pauses and looks up at her questioningly as she gets settled. She's propped up a little more, and now she can *see*. His hair falling over his eyes, which are silver and steel between the strands, and his mouth grinning before he lowers himself back to his work. She feels like a queen lounging back on her throne, as he worships her with his mouth. Pleasure wells up in her, radiating throughout her. His

skin is ivory, and purple scarring, his shoulders flexing and shifting, and *fuck*, he looks so hot like that, with his face hidden between her thighs.

She doesn't close her eyes until she comes.

Chapter End Notes

► Notes

Chapter 26

Twenty-Six

As he enters Lupin's office, his limp nearly absent, Hermione looks up from the table that's become her desk with a quill in her hand. There's a smudge of ink on her cheek, and a smile that spreads over her face. Guilt twists in Draco's gut. She's so pleased to see him. So happy. They'd had a blissful morning, and now here he is to ruin it all. He knows what this will probably do to her, but he's very much hoping that she may have silently changed her mind, since then. Maybe. That she'll understand. It's probably a vain hope. Draco doesn't know what he'll do if she falls to pieces. He sets his jaw.

"Come to help?" she asks, indicating the chaos on the tabletop. A clutter of scrolls and papers is spread everywhere. "It's time to reassign the strike teams, and Remus has me 'helping', which seems to mean doing most of the work," she teases, grinning at Lupin, who's currently frowning at a large map of Scotland. It's so covered in strings, pins, little scraps of parchment, and magical glowing dots and marks that Draco isn't sure how Lupin makes sense of it all. Nymphadora stands beside her husband and glances up at Hermione's words, shooting a smile at her cousin. He nods at her in response as he takes a step into the room.

"No, actually," he says in an almost apologetic tone, and that's enough to suck all the happiness out of the air and make the mood plummet. Hermione's breath sucks in and her fingers tighten on the quill she's holding, the colour draining from her cheeks as she looks down quickly.

"Oh," she says in a very small voice, and Draco winces. Lupin turns to face them, eyes darting between Draco and Hermione as if afraid of an explosion. Well, it won't be coming from Draco, should it happen. Tension hovers in the air as Nymphadora keeps doing whatever she was doing before, moving things around on the map, except Draco's pretty sure she's no longer paying proper attention to what she's doing.

"Draco," Lupin greets him with a tight smile. "What brings you down here today, then?"

"I want my wand back," he says bluntly. There's no point in sugar-coating it. They all know exactly why he's there if it's not to keep Hermione company and help out with menial tasks. "You said you'd talk to me about it, Lupin, and you haven't. I've waited patiently, but it's been nearly a week. I haven't brought it up until now because with my knee still healing, there hasn't been much point, but my limp has been almost gone for two days now. I can fight. So," he pins the older wizard with a hard look. "Will you let me?" Lupin's gaze slides back to Hermione, and the man grimaces, and there's an apology in his eyes aimed at her.

"Wait." Draco starts to put two and two together, and maybe he's jumping to conclusions, but it seems a reasonable assumption. "Did Hermione tell you not to say anything to me?"

Lupin doesn't answer, but he doesn't have to. The way he glances down at his feet as he shoves his hands in his pockets and refrains from responding at all is enough. A weary disappointment settles over Draco as he looks at Hermione, who's also looking down, misery printed all over her. Stupidly, it feels like a betrayal. It shouldn't – what else could he have expected from her? Just because they've been avoiding the topic altogether, it doesn't mean she's any happier about him fighting.

And clearly, she isn't. She's gone behind his back and told Lupin not to keep his word. Annoyance rises in him, and it takes an effort to try to let it go; a slow inhale and exhale. He's angry.

"Shit." He sighs, rubbing a hand over his jaw, the room silent except for him and tension hanging thick in the air. "So now what? Because Hermione says so, I'm not allowed to fight? Is that it?" He glares at Lupin, who shakes his head.

"No, Draco. You can have your wand back. Hermione merely asked me to wait for you to ask, rather than offer –"

"Remus!" she snaps, furious, hand smacking against the tabletop. As if Draco hadn't already figured it was something like that. In fact, that was slightly *better* than Draco had assumed.

"Hermione," Lupin says tiredly, and she fixes him with a tearful gaze but falls silent as he goes on, her expression mutinous. "And I agreed. Now that you're asking, you can have your wand. As to missions, yes. That can be arranged as well. In fact, it's good timing, with the teams being reassigned."

"Remus!" Hermione snaps again, and the betrayal on her face is horrible as she stares at the older wizard, face ashen and eyes wet. Draco hates it.

"He's well enough, Hermione," Lupin says wearily. "And we do desperately need fighters. We've lost too many in recent months."

"Which is exactly why I don't want him out there!"

"It's not up to you, Hermione. He gets to decide for himself. Just as you do." Lupin sighs, sympathy in his eyes as he gestures at the parchment in front of Hermione. "Put him on the list."

Draco winces as Hermione reacts in much the way he expected. "This is *shit*. I never get to decide anything. For half a Merlin-damned year, I haven't been able to make one single fucking decision for myself. Not anything that *mattered*, anyway. *I'm so sick of it*. I'm not fucking putting him on the list," Hermione snaps and shoves herself to her feet, chair skidding backwards. "You can do it, Remus, but I won't. I *won't*."

"That's fine, Hermione," Lupin immediately retracts, hands up, placating her. "You don't have to." The lycanthrope is sympathetic and gentle, and Draco can tell Hermione hates it. There's nothing worse than useless pity.

"And *you*." She levels a furious glare at Draco as she stands there leaning over the desk, her thick, messy braid falling forward over her shoulder, the smudge of ink still dark on her ashen cheek. Her hands are planted and she's breathing harshly, her chest heaving, panic seething in her eyes, and fuck, how can he do this to her? She's terrified for him, and he can stop it all just by not fighting. How can he justify this? "Don't you give a shit? Don't you care?" she begins, and her voice is thrumming with a tight, frightened anger. Draco slides his eyes over to the other two occupants of the room, both radiating an awkward discomfort. "Are you so *desperate* to die, that –"

"In the hall," Draco says shortly, cutting her off, a sick, guilty frustration welling up in him. "I think Lupin and Nymphadora would prefer it if we talk in the hall." Besides, he's not about to get into another argument in front of the older wizard; he still has some pride left to him. He doesn't want to have this kind of conversation in front of an audience. He has a feeling it could get messy. Emotional. Shit. He just wants to *fight*. It's not like he wants to do anything unreasonable.

"Fine," she agrees and then stalks past him, fury radiating off her, stiffening her spine and making her jaw tense. She'd be beautiful if it wasn't him that she was angry at – as it is, he can't entirely enjoy the fierce elegance of her as she strides out of the room. He's too busy feeling guilty for making her feel this way. He nods weakly to Lupin, who offers him a wry half-smile before turning to his wife, who's purple-haired as she fidgets with a piece of parchment at the map, obviously curious. He shuts the office door behind him as he leaves. And then there's Hermione standing there, arms crossed over her chest, angry.

"How could you, Draco?" she asks him with quiet anger, staring up at him with her back to the wall, her eyes wounded, as they stand in the little nook outside of Lupin's office. Annoyance bubbles up. They shouldn't even have to talk about this – Hermione knows the situation. And yet here he is, feeling like he's doing something wrong by wanting to fight. He keeps his voice down as he stands in front of her, hands in his pockets, trying desperately for calm.

"How can I *not*? You heard him. The Order needs people, and here I am." He shrugs helplessly. "I'm a good fighter. A good duellist. I'd be an asset to the Order, and instead, I'm sitting around here doing nothing. It's a fucking waste."

"You're going to go out there and die," Hermione says miserably, as if it's some foregone conclusion. Draco wants to shake some sense into her, pushing his hair impatiently off his face and holding in the frustration that wants to froth out of him. He tries for rationality.

"I've stayed alive this long, haven't I? I was working for the Dark Lord, fighting on his side, and I kept myself alive. Why are you so convinced I'm suicidal?" he snaps out in a low voice as he hears movement from the kitchen. She flinches at the last word. Draco doesn't get it. Her fixation on this is becoming infuriating.

Yes, he thinks he's a monster – but after what he's done in the service of the Order under Voldemort's command, it would be stranger if he *didn't* despise himself. The things he'd had to do were unspeakable. Unforgivable. Abhorrent. And for all that she's said that he shouldn't hate himself for it, *she* doesn't want to know the details of what he's done – and to be fair, he doesn't want her to know, either. Draco doesn't want Hermione to envision him doing the things that he did. She might never want to touch him again. That's a can of worms that never needs to be opened. Some things are just better left buried. But buried or not, he feels the guilt. The shame. The self-disgust that lies coiled in the back of his head, stirring lazily from time to time, and rearing up in nightmares.

"I don't think you're suicidal, exactly," Hermione admits, lacing her hands together in front of her, fidgeting with her fingers, nervous, her voice tight. "I just don't think you want to live badly enough." She lifts her chin, her eyes skittering away from his. "You were willing to die back at the mansion, for no reason. No reason at all, Draco. It wasn't going to help me get away, and it wasn't going to provide the Order with more information – you'd just decided to die." She falls silent, looking at him.

Shit. What's he supposed to say to that? She keeps pulling it out, like exhuming a body that should be left to rot in peace. And he has no good answer. Not any that he thinks she'll accept. He tries anyway. "Things have changed. I thought –" He trails off helplessly. What is he supposed to say? At the time, he was half out of his head with the pressure of it all, the strain, and the guilt, and he'd thought it would be best for her, and for him, and for the world at large if he died – except he no longer thinks that. Not entirely, at least. It's the truth, but he doubts it will reassure Hermione.

"Yes?" She all but snarls, and oh, she's in fine form. Eyes snapping, voice shaking with fury, and Draco finds himself suddenly very glad she can still do this. Her ordeal at the mansion hasn't crushed her spirit. *Draco* hasn't crushed her spirit. He may have broken her, but it seems she's mending, thank Merlin. "You thought *what*? What exactly has *changed*?" she demands.

"I thought that I couldn't go on. I thought that I couldn't live with the guilt. And I thought that I was bad for you. That it would be better if you left and forgot me. Moved on." From the way her eyes narrow as Draco says the last, he instantly regrets adding it. He shouldn't have mentioned her at all. Well, fuck. His pulse is too quick, and his breathing is coming raggedly now, tension a band around his skull, his eye sockets aching with the threat of a headache. He finds himself clenching and relaxing his fists rhythmically. He wishes he could hit Potter and Weasley again. Or hell, be hit by them. Either would provide him with some sort of release.

"Oh my god. That is so *unfair*, Draco." Her voice goes up, and the noises in the kitchen pause briefly before starting again. "You're trying to pin part of your decision to die on *me*? Make it my fault? Say that it would be what was best for me? For you to *die*?"

"For fuck's sake, Hermione, *no*! No. That was one very small part of it. But you asked me, and I answered. Don't get furious with me just because you don't like the answer!" It actually hurts that she has so entirely glossed over what he said about guilt, and how he couldn't face it going on. Instead, she's zeroed in on the least important part because it involves her. Well, more fool him for adding it, he supposes bitterly. "I thought I was irredeemable. I thought that there was no way I could ever atone. And I'm still not sure I can. But I want to try." He runs his hand through his hair again, and it's shaking. *Shit*. "I need to do something. I can't just sit here and do *nothing*. It's driving me insane."

Hermione just looks at him, misery in her eyes, hands clasped together very tightly. "Haven't you done enough?" she asks, and her small, pleading voice stabs right through him. *Fuck*.

"No," he says simply, and she looks away, jaw clenching.

"Fine. Fine. I can't stop you." There's a wobble in her voice as she drags her sleeve over her eyes. She dodges him when he tries to reach out for her, and he sees wetness smeared on her cheeks.

"Hermione," he says pleadingly – exhausted – but she ducks into Lupin's office and shuts the door firmly behind her. "Fuck," he snarls quietly and slumps back against the wall, head dropping back as he drags his hands down his face. He breathes for a long moment, wondering what the hell he's going to do. How can he justify doing this to her? The office door clicks open again and he rolls his head to look. Unsurprisingly, it's not Hermione. Pulling the door quietly closed behind him is Lupin, his expression rueful as he runs an assessing gaze over Draco.

There's a familiar pale wand in Lupin's hand; Draco's. His eyes fix on the polished yew, but he doesn't mention it.

"Are you alright?" the lycanthrope asks, and Draco shrugs, huffing a weak laugh.

"Not really." He's flippant, but there's a deep pit of dread in his stomach. There's no good solution to this problem. Either he loses, she loses, or one of them changes their mind – and considering how stubborn they both are, the last option is unlikely. Lupin steps within arm's reach and holds out Draco's wand, butt first. He takes it, and a feeling of rightness snaps through him as it settles in his hand, fitting perfectly. The connection to his magic, muted and dulled without a wand to focus it,

soars. Bright, and shining. Energy soaks through him, and a sense of security comes with it. Merlin, he's missed that.

"You may as well have your wand back, whatever you decide to do," Lupin says. "It's not doing much good locked away, and I'm sure you'd rather have it."

"Thank you. Although I have a feeling my decision has been made for me, if I don't want Hermione to never speak to me again." He grimaces, looking toward Lupin's office, fidgeting with his wand, as if reacquainting himself with an old friend.

"She'll calm down." Lupin shoves his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels, awkward and sympathetic. "You know, it's probably a good sign she feels safe enough to get angry with you, after everything. It's healthy. And it's normal to disagree." He rubs the back of his head, grimacing. "I should know. Just...give her some time to process it."

"I'm not sure time is going to help, honestly. Unless I wait until after the damned war is *over*."

Lupin chuckles. "Maybe Tonks will help her see things differently," he offers, and Draco makes a hollow laugh as he pushes off the wall.

"I don't see Nymphadora helping in that regard. She's hardly cheering me on, is she?" He's a little bitter.

"You might be surprised." Lupin smiles placidly. "We're not all against you, Draco. Especially not now we've been able to see your relationship with Hermione. The day-to-day. The ordinary. You're good for her." The wizard says the words easily, as if he's stating a simple truth. The sky is blue, water is wet, Draco is good for Hermione. He bites the inside of his cheek as Lupin finishes, pale eyes steady on Draco. His quiet trust is discomfiting. "Truly good."

Draco looks down at his feet. He doesn't know what to do with that compliment. "I appreciate the vote of confidence," he says stiffly. And he does.

"I can see about arranging your placement on a strike team if you like," Lupin offers after an awkward moment of silence passes. Draco shakes his head, raking his fingers through his hair again – it's getting far too long.

"No. No, don't." He makes a harsh, frustrated sound under his breath. He hates this. Every fibre of him wants to be out there. Doing something *good*. And yet here he is, saying these damn words. "I – I'll wait and talk to Hermione first. I *want* to fight, but I'd rather not do it if it's going to make her feel like – like that." He wiggles his wand toward the door of Lupin's office, irritation in the gesture. Lupin nods.

"I thought you might say that." He sighs and offers up some annoyingly useless sage advice. "Just remember that you won't be any good to her if you're eating yourself up inside with guilt, Draco."

"Yeah." He jerks a nod, tone short, a hint of sarcasm creeping in. "I'll remember that." For all the fucking good it'll do him.

Hermione sits down and glares at the lists in front of her as she picks up her quill, a sick misery churning in her gut. She wants to cry. This feeling of impotent, frustrated anger toward Draco is making her feel ill. It's so *wrong*. Feeling angry at him feels anathema – so damn wrong it hurts. He

understands her when no one else can, and he somehow soothes her when she's inconsolable, and he supports her when she's shaky. They aren't supposed to be at odds like this. It feels as though the world has shifted on its axis.

Because he wants to fight, and he expects her to support that.

There's the metallic sound of clasps sliding open, and Hermione looks up to see Lupin opening the box of spare wands. Fury leaps up in her. He's going to give it to Draco, and then he'll assign him to a strike team, and Hermione won't be able to do a damn thing about it. He looks a little shamefaced, avoiding Hermione's glare as he leaves the room with Draco's wand in his hand, and she grits her teeth in impotent anger. It's just her and Tonks now. She can hear the faint murmur of voices in the hallway. She stares down at her lists again, frowning, feeling like she should just focus on work, but it's hard to concentrate.

She feels eyes on her, and when she looks up, Tonks quickly slides her gaze away and focuses on the map of Scotland again. She's marking out locations they believe are Snatcher encampments. The Snatchers have stepped up their game lately; they're grabbing unwary Muggle women for Death Eater purposes. Hermione deciphered a note found at one encampment the other day about experiments using Muggle women for breeding purposes. They were feeding them what appeared to be a variation of Exstimulo Potion – which increased spell power in wizards and witches – throughout the pregnancy. They want to find out what that does to the developing baby. Voldemort appears to be taking notes from Mengele.

It's horrendous. Utterly sickening – Hermione can hardly bear to think of it because it makes her imagine herself in that position, and it so easily could've been her. Maybe that had been why Voldemort had decided he wanted her, at the end.

And yet, Hermione is currently trying not to cry over something as trite as Draco being angry at her. It isn't the horrific torture being inflicted on Muggle women, or the torture and death so many people were suffering, or even the torture she'd suffered. It's because she's having boy problems – fighting with her boyfriend. How pathetic, and petty. They're at war; surely, she should have bigger issues to worry about. And yet here she sits, fuming and tearful. She bites her lip hard enough to hurt and swipes at her cheeks, aware of Tonks's sneaky sideways glances. The older witch's hair is blue; the colour of a peacock feather and just as glossy.

"I know you're judging me."

"I'm not judging you, Hermione," Tonks says with faint amusement, pushing a pin into place over Montrose and then stepping back with a satisfied sigh, hands on her hips as she eyes the map.

"I sound like a hysterical idiot." Hermione's self-aware enough to know that. To know that she probably appears to be irrational. Certainly, to the outside eye. But they weren't there that night in the woods. When her stomach had plummeted like a stone and horror spread treacle-slow and cold through her veins as she realised he planned to die, even though there was absolutely no need. Because he wanted to die. He wanted it to end. He'd valued his own death over being with her. That stings.

"You don't," Tonks says. "Not at all. It's simply that Draco seems well enough to fight, he wants to, and we *do* need him." Hermione meets Tonks's eyes as the older witch sits down in Lupin's usual seat, elbows on the table and chin resting on her clasped hands as she gives Hermione her whole attention. "So tell me. Why don't you want him to? Because if it's just fear he'll be hurt, or killed..." Tonks sighs. "I understand it, but Hermione – that's war."

"Hasn't he done enough?" Anger simmers in her, and her tears are hot. She rubs them away roughly. "He's ruined himself for the Order, Tonks. You *know* that. He's going to live with what he had to do *forever*. And yet you think it's fine to send him straight back out there?"

Tonks's expression is open and pragmatic. "I *do*, considering he wants to. We'd never make anyone fight who didn't want to, or wasn't fit to. That just gets you dead people. Better that people who can't fight for whatever reason – like you – are used in non-combat roles, of which there are plenty. So if he wanted to brew potions, assist Healers, be a messenger, run a safe house, or any other duty like that, we'd be in favour of it," the witch says, hair turning bottle green as she ticks roles off on her fingers. "But he doesn't want to, Hermione."

"But he's not fit," Hermione argues, wanting to bury her face in her hands and scream. "He's not. He's walking dead, Tonks." The other woman sits back in her chair, arms folded, listening, and unlike Siobhan, Hermione feels like she's actually *listening* to what Hermione has to say. "You know what I mean? You've seen it. When people just give up. They go out there on missions again and again for months and months, and you can see the fight in them – the determination that they will make it through. And then one day, it's like a spark just goes out. And they still go out on missions, but they've lost that fight to survive. They're upright and moving, but they're just going through the motions –"

Tonks nods, mouth tight and eyes distant, and Hermione knows she's thinking of examples of that. Of people who had that light extinguished. Who had let go. Hermione goes on, speaking fast and passionately, jamming her finger against the table for emphasis, her heart beating quickly.

"And they make mistakes. And they're reckless. They're not careful, they're not by the book, they do things they know they shouldn't, take risks that are too high because they don't *care* anymore. They've already accepted that they're going to die eventually, and they're okay with that. They accept it. They're walking fucking dead. They're not desperately scrabbling to *live* anymore. And then, usually sooner rather than later, that kills them."

"And you think he feels that way?"

"Worse. Don't you dare mention this to anyone but Remus, but I think part of him actively wants to die, Tonks. I think he thinks it would be a relief. If it all just ended. If he could die in the service of something good. And then he wouldn't have to live with the guilt anymore." She sighs, heartsick and angry, and feeling so selfish as the words spill out of her, cadence quickening as her distress builds and flows, a torrent that carves a ravine straight through her chest. "Because me wanting him isn't enough. Me needing him isn't enough. He saved me. He took care of me and held me together when I was utterly broken, and yet he still wants to fucking leave me. God! You know, I *hate* him sometimes."

Tonks stares at her quietly for a moment, waiting for Hermione to get a handle on herself before she speaks. "You don't think that things are a little different now? I mean –"

"No! That's what *he* said. He said things have changed, but *what's changed*? Really? He's still done all the things he hates himself for. He's still just as fucking guilty. He's *lying*." Hermione swears under her breath, hands full of tension, heels of her palms patting aimlessly down against the table when really she wants to hit it as hard as she can. "He's lying. He does that. The bastard. Slytherin, right? Fucking *typical*." She's bitter, breathing hard, incoherence creeping in as her emotions get the better of her and tears start to streak her cheeks. But Tonks brings her back down to earth with a bump.

"Merlin's sake, Hermione," she says crisply, and she *does* smack her hand on the table, sharp and loud. Hermione jumps at the shocking sound and gulps down a sob. "Pull yourself together. Deep breath and calm down. Nothing's happening right *now*, yeah?" Hermione nods and heaves in a breath, holding it and trying to let it out slowly. "You know, ultimately, it's not your decision," Tonks says, a cruel kindness to her voice. Gentle, as she says such a horrible thing.

"I know," Hermione whispers, clasping her hands in her lap now, fingers interlocked and clenching so tightly that her bones grind together, and it *hurts*. "I wish it was. It should be. It's not fair."

"Yeah, well, life isn't fair, is it? You know that," Tonks says briskly. "I want to be living in a nice little house with my husband and child, and instead, I get to see Teddy a few times a week if I'm lucky because he's off with my parents for safety. I'm missing out on all his firsts because of this damned war. He started calling my mother 'mama' instead of me, for a while there. But there's no point crying about it." And then Tonks shoots Hermione a wry smile. "I *do*, though. Every time Teddy has to go back with my mum. I'm not sure Remus knows, but I take a long shower and bawl my eyes out," the witch confides, and there's a tightness to her voice, her eyes wet. "But then it's back to work. And I'm sure each time I go out on a mission, Remus is sick with worry for me. And probably thinking he should be out there assuming the risk instead of me, his wife, whom he feels he should protect. But he swallows it down and gets on with things."

Tonks's gaze is steady, filled with sympathy, but no compromise. "You're not the only one who's scared, Hermione."

Hermione swallows hard, a knot of emotion in her throat. "It's different though, Tonks. You desperately want to live. Remus knows you'll do anything to get home to him and Teddy," she says softly. Wretchedly. "I'm not sure Draco would do anything to get home to me."

"Don't be stupid. You're clearly his whole bloody *world*."

"I'm not being stupid, Tonks. Draco hides it well, most of the time – it's easy for even me to forget," Hermione says, although perhaps it would be more honest to say she engages in active denial. Sticking her head in the sand because she can't relieve his pain, so it's easier not to see it. She comforts him at night, and she distracts him from his thoughts – she does her very best to make it easier for him – but she doesn't like to think about *why* he needs her comfort, or what it is that's consuming his thoughts. She forces herself to meet Tonks's eyes. "But the truth is, I think he *hates* himself, more than he even cares about me. He's living with the memory of doing things I don't even want to imagine. I honestly think that he'd see death as – as penance. As a *relief*."

The words taste like ashes on her tongue.

"Well, not letting him fight is hardly going to help him ease his burden, is it?" Tonks says finally, after a long, thoughtful silence. The words are like a slap in the face, and Hermione physically recoils. "He's sitting here, safe and sound, with nothing to do but think about all the atrocities he had to commit, while others go out and fight and die for him. While the friends and family of people he tortured and killed, or just watched be exterminated, risk their lives instead of him."

"That's –"

"That's hardly going to help him, is it, Hermione?"

"I –"

"You need to think about this, Hermione." Tonks levels a hard stare on her, and Hermione drops her gaze. She feels sick. "Really think. Because if he feels as bad as you say, it's not going to get any easier for him. And whether it should be your choice or not – from what Remus has told me since you two got back, I have a feeling Draco would rather die than make you unhappy. That's not a good place to be in, Hermione. It doesn't work out well."

Hermione says nothing. Tonks's words echo in her head like a death knell.

"Just think about it, yeah?"

"Yeah. I will," she manages a hoarse whisper. Then: "Thanks. I guess."

Tonks laughs, short and somehow apologetic. "Oh, please don't thank me, Hermione. You look like I just stomped on your pygmy puff."

"I kind of *feel* like that too," Hermione admits, with a huff of teary laughter. "But – I will think about it." And she knows she will. She imagines she'll think of nothing else for some time. She's not sure Tonks is right about what decision Draco will make – maybe he's told Lupin he wants to fight, and damn what Hermione thinks. Right now, she almost hopes he has. Because then she can be angry, and worried, and she won't have to agonise over whether she's doing the right thing or not, preventing him from fighting. Whether she's saving his life only to doom him. *Fuck*.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

► Housekeeping!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Twenty-Seven

Hermione looks up from her perch on the porch stairs, automatically clutching her wand tighter as a noise comes from the apparition point in the garden shed. She'd slipped outside to sit with her thoughts after her depressing talk with Tonks, figuring Draco had probably gone up to their room, if he hadn't gone and taken refuge in the spare room again. She just wants ten minutes or so alone to sit and think, and pull herself together before she faces him. But it seems being alone isn't something Hermione will get today; it's Harry who appears from the door of the garden shed. He shuts the door behind him and lifts a hand in greeting.

Hermione's still annoyed with him for picking that fight with Draco, but only slightly now. She figures Draco was probably just as happy to fight as Harry and Ron because all three of them are stupid, testosterone-riddled idiots when it comes right down to it. She plasters on a smile, waving back. "Harry. Where've you been?"

"Hi 'Mione." He looks tired as he comes down the garden path, his hair sticking up every which way and his glasses askew, as they always seem to be. He's in a heavy coat, and there's a smudge of what Hermione thinks is soot on his forehead and nose. He holds up a folder. "I was just picking over a Death Eater house we took yesterday. Got all the papers that survived the fire. You'll be kept busy for days." She smiles faintly as he sits beside her, a weight to him that slumps his shoulders as he scrubs a hand through his hair, folder on his lap. "I'm only allowed in once the battle's over. Lucky me," he says bitterly, and Hermione makes a disgusted noise in the back of her throat.

"You're as bad as Draco," she mutters, shooting him a glare. "You two are so similar sometimes."

"You take that back, 'Mione," he protests, weariness making it less vehement than usual. "I'm nothing like Malfoy!"

"If you say so, Harry," Hermione says calmly, smiling to herself, a streak of pain in her expression because they *are*. Most notable in regards to the stupid, noble sense of self-sacrifice that Draco seems to have developed, and that Harry had always had. It is infuriating for the people who care about them. Trying to keep them alive, while they just want to fling themselves into the thick of it and damn their own safety. She supposes Ron is a little like that too, but there is something different about Ron's attitude, which she'd noticed when she'd been on missions with both him and Harry before her capture.

Ron fights because he has to, not because he wants to. Hermione has no doubt that under Voldemort's command, Draco had been the same. Tactical, ruthless, careful, and pragmatic – never risking too much or going too far. Controlled. Because he hadn't really wanted to be there – he hadn't *wanted* to kill. He'd just wanted to keep his head down and stay alive. But now, it's different. He wants to be there. He *wants* to kill the enemy. He wants to fucking *atone*. Hermione doesn't

know why he's so fixated on that. He's only one man. And he can't undo what he's done by killing Death Eaters. What difference will it make, really?

"I just want to be part of it," Harry says miserably.

"So does Draco," Hermione answers tartly and sighs, straightening and pulling her parka tighter around her. "I don't know why you two are so insistent on getting yourselves killed."

"Well, for one, I'm sick of Ron looking at me like I'm shirking. I keep expecting him to give me a white feather," Harry complains, and Hermione chews on her lip. She has noticed that, and it doesn't seem to be going away. Even though they're obviously still best friends, the lingering resentment grows heavier each day; an infected splinter lodged under the skin. It's driving them apart. Harry hunches over his folder of papers, elbows on his knees, frowning at nothing.

"He knows it's not your fault."

"Yeah, well, that doesn't seem to be making a difference, so..." Harry shoots back, clearly miserable. "Sorry, 'Mione. I shouldn't complain."

"It's fine," Hermione says and sways toward Harry, nudging him affectionately. "Feel free to complain. It's nice to think of someone else's problems for once." She smiles at him, close-lipped and sympathetic. "It can't be fun, though. I've noticed some...awkward moments. I feel like it's not my place to get in the middle, though. Have you tried talking to him about it?"

Harry stares at her for a second and then laughs humourlessly. "Me and Ron, talk about our problems? You're kidding, right?" He's clearly trying to joke, but it hits her all wrong.

"You two are so *stupid*." A pall falls over Hermione. She's exhausted, angry and utterly miserable, and here's Harry trying to make a joke out of falling out with Ron. It irks her, betting under her skin in a way she hadn't expected. "You know, he could *die* out there, and how would you feel then?" Her words cut the air, and they're far crueller than she means them to be, but suddenly, all her anger has been transferred into this – this rift between friends, and she's not *wrong*. Harry stares at her open-mouthed and shocked for a moment, green eyes wide and wounded.

"God, Hermione. That's a shitty thing to say."

"It's the fucking truth, Harry." Hermione shoves herself to her feet, snatching the folder off Harry's lap and glaring down at him. She's not sure if she's talking to herself or to him. "If you don't like it, that's just too damn bad. It doesn't make it any less true. So think about *that*."

Draco grunts as he pushes his body past the point where he should stop, his back stinging and pulling, his thighs burning, his arms straining, his abdomen tight. He's filled with a furious, overwhelming frustration, and he has no way to exorcise it save mindless, repetitive exercise. It's productive – it stops the scar tissue on his back from stiffening his movements up any further – and should he fight eventually, fitness can be essential in battle. Magic does the heavy lifting in a duel, but in a pitched battle, being able to move through the battlefield with ease gives one a definite advantage over standing still and needing to fling up shield after shield.

Besides, sometimes it becomes necessary to disable opponents with one's bare hands; Draco has done it several times over the past few years thanks to being disarmed in the heat of battle, and strength makes that situation much more survivable.

It's a shame he can't really work on cardio the way he wants to – at the mansion, before Hermione's capture, he'd run circuits around the outside of the hedge maze. A wizard who can't run fast dies quicker than one who can, in his experience. There's no space here to run, though, so he makes do with what he can do, and at times like this, it helps. He feels a sharp, hot pain as if something in his back is tearing; adhesions, probably. He ignores it.

Everything in Draco is focused on pushing his body through the next move, keeping count, jaw tight as he draws breath slowly and steadily. His anger, his frustration, and his infernal fucking guilt – it all fades away, nothing left but his body and the struggle to push himself further and further.

After she's taken the folder into Lupin's office and had a look at it – stalling for as long as possible – Hermione ascends the stairs to face Draco.

She opens the bedroom door to Draco halfway through a push-up, stretched out on the scant floorspace of their bedroom. He's in nothing but joggers slung low on his hips, and his pale skin is flushed with the exertion. His back makes Hermione want to cringe with sympathetic pain, with the way the scars are pulling and puckered, all livid ridges and valleys that streak from shoulder to waist. But the rest of him is glorious. She slips in and shuts the door behind her, still holding the door knob awkwardly behind her back as she stands there pressed against the door, staring. Her breath feels a little short. *Well*. This is not what she expected to walk in on. He's breathing hard, and his arms are trembling slightly.

"Sorry, I was just –" he begins, dropping to one knee, and a drop of sweat slides down his shoulder, cutting a rivulet over the dense muscle that's taut and defined with strain. Hermione swallows dryly. He looks so long and lean like this, his shoulders broad and his hips narrow, skin all reddened and shining with sweat, and hair falling forward to hide his face. But he's on his knees in front of her now, shoving his hair back with both hands, and it's damp and like cornsilk, raked back as he licks his lips, panting. His eyes are moon grey and his cheeks are ruddy, and she watches, transfixed. Jesus Christ, does he have any idea how hot he looks?

"It's, um – it's fine. I –" she stammers as Draco pushes to his feet, tall and shirtless, and Hermione finds herself staring at his chest. She wants to press herself against him. To plaster herself against the hot, sweat-damp of him and feel his arms come up around her. Holding her close, so that she knows everything will be okay. She bites her lip and makes an abortive move forward, just as he steps back. He doesn't seem to notice that she has to quickly pull her hand back to her side and stutter her foot to a halt – he's busy scooping up his t-shirt and sinking to the edge of the bed. His forearms are pale and stark, the Dark Mark standing out ugly and vivid as he pushes his hair back again and then sighs and looks up at her.

"I told Lupin no," he says, at the same time as she says:

"I'm sorry."

What he says is a lot more meaningful than what she does. She clasps her hands together in front of her and then fiddles nervously with the cuffs of her chambray shirt. So he won't. Hermione isn't sure if she's more relieved or more guilty. It's a close race; a photo finish. Draco meets her gaze, and his eyes are colourless and blank. She shivers.

"I'm guessing that 'I'm sorry' doesn't mean you've changed your feelings on the matter?" he asks very carefully, and she sees his fist clench, and a thread of tension pulls taut in his voice, thrumming beneath the surface. Hermione looks away, staring at the worn rug.

"No. No, I'm sorry, but I haven't." Her voice is *definitely* trembling, and her heart has kicked off into high gear, racing like a stampede of thestrals; unseen but thundering. "I can't be okay with it. If that's what you want to do, I can't stop you, but I wish you wouldn't. The thought of you out there while you're like this terrifies me, and –"

"Like what?" he interrupts sharply, and the anger that flares up in his face – his eyes cold and narrowed and his mouth tense – makes Hermione lose her train of thought entirely. He suddenly looks like a Death Eater. His stare is cold and hard, absent of any human feeling. She feels like prey beneath it, a shudder running through her.

"What?" she asks helplessly, fingers twining together again. Oh god, she hates this. It feels like an interrogation. Like a judgement, and he's the judge. She's standing there and answering him shakily, scrabbling, while he sits there cool and angry, his eyes steely now, and cutting.

"The thought of me out there while I'm like *what*?" he repeats with fraying patience, and Hermione bites the inside of her cheek before she answers.

"We've been over this, Draco. While you don't value your life. While you half think you should've just stayed at the mansion. While you have some *stupid* concept of atonement and penance in your head."

"*It's not fucking stupid.*" He snarls the words, leaning forward with his hands braced on the bed at his sides as though he's ready to shove himself upright, and Hermione's heart is suddenly rabbit quick and beating so hard that she feels like her chest is reverberating. She starts to sweat; palms, armpits, the nape of her neck. Beneath her breasts. Fear sweat is springing up all over her as adrenaline floods her system in the face of his anger. It makes her remember. She clenches her jaw and lifts her chin. She can be fucking angry too.

"You can't un-torture anyone, Draco! You can't bring people back to life! I don't know what you did exactly, but you can't undo it! You'll always have done it. Always and for-fucking-ever! It doesn't matter if you tear you-know-who apart yourself with your bare bloody hands!" She's shouting and she hasn't cast a *muffliato*. Everyone on this floor and the next one will hear – she doesn't care. She's too furious, gesticulating as she yells, tears blurring her eyes and her breath whooping in unevenly. "*You will always have done those things!* Killing yourself isn't going to change a fucking thing! It's not going to magically absolve you! Everyone you killed and hurt will still be... *that.*"

Silence falls briefly as she snaps her mouth shut, shaking like she's palsied, her heart a thundering avalanche, her palms clammy, and her stomach nauseated. She's breathing so hard she's nearly hyperventilating. "And you don't have to atone anyway," she gasps, smearing her tears away with her shirt sleeve, desperate for him to understand. "Everything you did, you did because the fucking Order told you to stay there! You didn't have a choice! You were a spy! It was your job!"

He's silent. His head is bowed, and Hermione feels so, so sick. She immediately regrets everything she said and wants to take it all back. Shit. She keeps *saying* these things and then wanting to sink into the floor, ashamed and mortified. The silence hangs in the air, thick and awful, stretching out until she fears it will snap, violently. His shoulders are tense, his fingers curled in the blanket. Hermione heaves in a juddering breath. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "I'm just so scared. The idea of you going out there when half of you thinks you *deserve* to die?" His head jerks up and his mouth opens, and Hermione holds up a finger. "Don't. Don't deny it." His lips press together, but he doesn't say anything. "That's just asking for something to go wrong – I mean, I can't be okay with

that. It's dangerous. Going out there unfocused and conflicted is the best way to get yourself killed. So no. I'm not giving my fucking blessing." She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly.

"But I can't stop you, either."

He shakes his head, small and miserable. "No. No. I can't do that to you." His jaw tightens, his face darkening with anger. "I wish I could, but I can't." He looks down, a ripple of tension rolling through him. Anger. "I won't fight, Hermione. Not without your permission."

She feels helpless. Because she doesn't want to stop him, but she can't tell him she's okay with it either when she *isn't*. So they're stuck in some horrible limbo where both of them are miserable now. "Oh," is all she says, small and sorry, and Draco sighs. She can almost feel the way he stitches his self-control back together and sets his anger toward her aside, letting it go on that long, sad exhale. He stands then.

"I'm going to have a shower," he says calmly, as if they'd never had this conversation, as if she hadn't just screamed at him until she was gasping. His hands settle on her shoulders as he kisses her lightly on the forehead. His lips are brand hot, and so are his hands as he gently turns her, moving her out of the way, before dragging on his shirt and pulling some fresh clothes out of the dresser, heading out of the room without another word. Hermione sinks down onto the edge of the bed and buries her head in her hands. She has the feeling she's made a terrible mistake, and she's not sure she can undo it.

That night, after the lights go out, Hermione turns to Draco, sheets rustling, her breathing unsteady in the near dark as her fingers trace over his jaw, her lips finding his. She kisses him with a tentative uncertainty, and a sudden sharp anger rises up in him. He lies there very still, but his pulse picks up. So she's all sweetness now, is she? When he came back from his shower earlier, she'd been gone, and he hadn't gone in search of her. They'd been apart all day, until dinner when they'd sat awkwardly elbow to elbow at the table, shooting uncertain glances at each other. They'd both sat in the sitting room listening to the war news on the wireless this evening – him sitting on the floor by her feet – but that had been awkward too. Ever since their brief exchange in their room, he'd felt a building, sullen resentment.

He's trapped. Hermione's trapped him neatly, with no good options. She's told him he *can* go against her wishes but made it clear that she doesn't *want* him to. It's fucking infuriating.

She had kept looking at him over dinner with this miserable, apologetic expression, her lips pressed together and eyes sliding away every time he looked at her. And then, in the sitting room, when she'd reached down and begun to play with his hair, he'd found himself pulling away. Hermione hadn't tried again. She'd gotten up and left as soon as the headline news had been read out, a stiffness to her spine, and he hadn't followed after her.

And now she's decided she wants affection? She wants to fuck? Draco lets her kiss him, his lips soft and unresponsive, a sick anger in the pit of his stomach. There's something about her delicate, almost apologetic overture that makes him want to push her away. Or push her down and use her.

Fuck.

An image comes into his head unbidden, accompanied by a surge of visceral desire. Hermione on all fours, her knees braced apart and her back arched, moaning as he fucks her from behind, hard and rough – *brutal* – with no thought for anything but his own impending orgasm. Making her

scream with pleasure that's run through with a hint of pain. Her cunt clenching and hot around his dick, dripping wet. The desire that rears up at that image is chased by unease because it feels so *wrong* to think about her like that, after what had happened. After what he'd done to her. Any kind of roughness makes him think of the revel, and he recoils from it.

Except he's angry. And right now, his dick is hard, and it's not from her uncertain kisses.

Hermione pulls away, perhaps discouraged by his lack of response. "Sorry," she mutters almost inaudibly, sounding miserable, and Draco slides his fingers into her hair and cups the back of her head, kissing her hard. She makes a surprised little sound and her lips part, and he slicks his tongue into her mouth, gratified when she moans. She tastes of mint, and she grips his shoulder as she melts to his kiss. He's the dominant one; leading it, curling his tongue into her mouth and taking it, as though he's taking ownership, forgetting to be careful, and the sounds that come out of her throat are like the whimpers of some small animal, as she presses into the kiss and her body bows out against his.

She's in a t-shirt and sensible cotton knickers, and Draco's hand finds its way from her hair, down the notches of her spine, dragging on her shirt, down to her waistband. His fingertips shove beneath, over the curve of her arse, and she takes a shaky breath. He sucks on the tip of her tongue and refuses to stop to ask permission to go further. Hermione has the control. Clearly. She has *all* the fucking control. Sometimes it feels as though he exists to do her bidding, and while usually Draco doesn't consider that a negative, Salazar's sake, he has his limits. He wants things for himself. Like atonement, even if it doesn't make fucking sense. Like the opportunity to perhaps not hate himself, one day. Like being able to contribute to the fucking war effort, in fact. Because if Voldemort wins, they'll be on the run for the rest of their lives, if they aren't captured.

His hand cups her arse cheek, squeezing, and she pants into his mouth, two unsteady breaths before she's turning her face away, and he swears inwardly, expecting her to pull away and say '*no*', but instead, she bestows a wet kiss on the corner of his mouth and then starts tugging at his shirt. Huh. After today, he would've thought she was too angry with him – Merlin knows why, he's obeying her like a good dog after all – to allow that. And the word *dog* sticks in his head, irritating him as he gives her arse one last squeeze and then sits up, wrenching his shirt over his head. He doesn't know why she'd want to see his ruined torso, but – his train of thought is derailed as her mouth latches over his nipple. Her tongue swiping over it and swirling in circles, palming her hands over his sides, her fingers digging in firm.

"*Nngh...*" He can't hold in the exhaled groan as she licks at his other nipple and then bites it lightly. Fuck, that feels weird. It sends tingles down his spine, and he can't decide if it's good or bad. Pansy never bothered doing anything like that, so it's all new to him. It's less fun than what he wants to do, though. "Come here," he tells her and sits her up, and then starts pulling her shirt off over her head. He doesn't ask, just says almost sarcastically, "You're in control, here," and there's a terrible bitterness in his voice that even *he* flinches from. She stares at him wide-eyed, and her lower lip trembles. She looks like a small child who's just been spanked, and he hates it.

Ever since they've gotten out, she's been in total control of him.

"You are, you know," he says conversationally as he puts his arm behind her and pushes her back slightly with the other one. His head dips to *her* nipples. Dark, rosy tips on breasts that make a good handful – neither big, nor small, they're firm and soft at once, and she whimpers and gasps when he plays with them. Like he does now, as her hands pull at his hair. He sucks her nipple and the surrounding flesh into his mouth, tongue laving over her, and she wriggles and makes an

"*mmph*", her knees drawing up and her hands on his head as though she isn't sure if she wants to pull him closer or shove him away. He sucks hard, slicking her skin with saliva, and when he finally releases her breast, his scalp stings from her yanking fingers, and her skin is glistening and reddened, her face scrunched up as though she's concentrating.

"You're always the one in fucking control. *Always*. I gave you that, *always*. Whenever I could. You had the control. Not me. Never *me*." Her eyes snap open, wide and clear on his. He can see an understanding dawn in the dark amber rings surrounding her blown pupils, and somehow, he hates that too. The way she's seeing through him. *Fuck*. Draco dips his gaze, eyes on her untouched breast. He gently pinches her nipple, and she makes a stifled sound. He hears her swallow.

"Okay," she whispers, and her voice is thick. Her chest is lifting and falling hard with her breaths. "*You* have the control then." He doesn't understand for a moment. "You're in control," she adds, as though she understands he needs the clarification. "Do – do whatever you want with me." He's frozen for a moment, processing that.

"Oh *fuck*," he murmurs almost viciously. And then he fixes his mouth to her other breast as he lowers her to the bed, giving it the same treatment as the first one, but harder, and less careful. She mewls as she arches her back, pushing her breast further into his mouth, and he hums with satisfaction and sucks. He lavishes her breasts with attention and as he does, he slides his hand slowly down the front of her knickers, and *oh yes*, Hermione's slick and wet. Sensitive too, from the way she whimpers and squirms as he glides his fingers down between her folds and then drags the slickness back up to her clit, rubbing in light circles.

"Oh god," she whimpers, and he keeps going – small, careful movements as he props himself up on one elbow, watching her in the near dark. Her eyes are shut, and her cheeks are flushed, the colour creeping down her throat to her chest, her lower lip caught between her teeth, and her hands holding fistfuls of the sheets. She looks beautiful. And he's in control. Some small, fierce thing burns in his chest at that thought. He keeps touching her, hand beneath her knickers, watching her get closer and closer, a rapt, focused expression on her face.

And then he stops.

A plaintive moan whines from Hermione's throat, and she grabs for his hand as though she wants to shove it back down her knickers. When she misses in her flail for his hand, she pushes her own down her knickers and lets out a little sigh of satisfaction as she begins rubbing. Draco is frozen watching her for a second – so *pretty*, so needy – and then his fingers close over her wrist. "No," he tells her firmly, and she looks at him, her eyes glazed with arousal and filled with a wretched displeasure.

"But –"

"*No*. You don't come yet," he tells her – he's in control, damnit – and she makes a heartbroken sound. Draco ignores it, kneeling and dragging down her knickers altogether as she lifts her hips to allow it, trembling. She seems half out of her head with need as he slides off the edge of the bed and stands, shoving down his own boxers to his knees, dick springing free. "Get on all fours. Hands and knees, now, on the edge of the bed." Hermione makes another wordless, wavering sound but moves obediently to do as he says, clumsy and shy as he helps and guides her, his hands on her naked back, and her hips, sliding over her arse and thighs. She's all cream and soft curves, and her pussy is pink and wet, and so fucking sexy.

He drags his thumb down between the slick folds, and she jolts a little as if startled and draws away. "Stay," he tells her and grips her hip, holding her in place as he drops to his knees. And then she jerks and makes a half-horrified sound as he buries his face against her cunt from behind, tongue finding her clit and stroking.

"*What*—" she starts, and then makes a throaty groan, her arms wobbling suddenly as Draco pushes his tongue inside her, his hands clutching her hips. "Oh *god*, Draco. *Fuck*." Hermione sounds mortified but she's moaning, and after a moment, she starts grinding back against him, her head hanging down before she drops to her elbows, her arms trembling too much. He keeps licking. Sucking. Probing her with his tongue. She makes sounds he's never heard from her, and when she finally comes, he can feel her cunt twitching and taste her juices on his tongue. His dick is stupidly hard and weeping precum, and he's desperate to shove it inside her.

So once she's finished trembling and moaning, and lies there limp and slack, on her knees with her arse in the air, her cheek pressed against the bed, he does. He stands and then pushes his dick into the slick, hot grip of her cunt with one smooth stroke. She wails.

"*Fuuuck*," he groans, drawn out and throaty, as her body twitches and grips around him, and then he loses himself in fucking her. Everything in him narrows down to his dick in her cunt – all his feeling, all his awareness, fixated on the wet silk slide in and out of her as she lies there folded over her knees, pliable and vocal, rocking back against him with each thrust. The pressure builds, and builds, eventually blossoming into a hot, tight ecstasy that bursts through him. He comes inside her – a rush of bliss and bone-deep satisfaction rolling through him – and when he withdraws his dick from her sweet, tender cunt, he can see it seeping out of her. *Fuck*. It makes a primal reaction rise in him, sharp and fierce.

"Come here," he says softly as she struggles to push herself up, and his hands move over her gently, lifting her and guiding her to lie back against the pillows, careful with her now. His anger is utterly absent. Vanished as though it was never there. He feels drained. Light, as he pulls on his boxers. Hermione looks up at him, her hair strewn over the pillow and eyes heavy-lidded, and for a moment in the silence, Draco's worried he just did everything wrong, until she smiles. Slow and lazy, and deeply satisfied.

"That was good," she says quietly, and her cheeks flush again.

"Better than good," he tells her as he climbs in bed next to her, and she nestles up to him stark naked, all clinging limpet limbs and warmth after the cold, awful distance of the day, and Merlin, it's such a fucking *relief*. He tugs her close, holding her as tightly as she's holding him, her head tucked under his chin, her breath hot against his chest. It doesn't seem as though she's angry with him anymore, and it's clear that holding onto *his* resentment and anger is only going to make them both miserable. Besides, he doesn't feel very resentful or angry right now. He kisses the top of her head, and she hums happily and then yawns.

"I love you," she says, and the nervousness in her voice kills him, as if she's afraid he won't say it back.

"I love you too," he tells her, quietly into her hair. "Of course I do."

"Good," she says, still in a very small voice, but she sighs as if contented by that. Her fingers play over his back, and the sensation of them keeps appearing and disappearing as she bumps over numb patches. It feels like a fragile truce has settled between them; she's still upset by the idea that he wants to fight, and he's still unhappy about the restrictions her distress has placed on him, but

neither of them wishes a repeat of today. Today was a misery for both of them. He shuts his eyes, Hermione warm in his arms. Nothing is more important than her – than the two of them together. If they could survive the mansion, they can survive a disagreement.

Chapter End Notes

► Notes

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Twenty-Eight

It's been ten days, and it's felt like ten months. Somehow, it's worse now Draco has his wand. He could just walk out the door and disapparate to any number of small bases of operations or encampments he knows about and could potentially take on alone, but he doesn't. He could join Order members on missions, but he doesn't. The other day, Weasley had walked past the kitchen when just back from a mission, while Draco and Potter had both happened to be in there. He'd been muddy and smeared in blood, and Draco had stared at him with naked longing – and then met Potter's eyes and seen a reflection of his own feelings there. It had been a deeply uncomfortable experience, empathising with Potter. He'd hated it.

He's having more nightmares, too – as though his brain knows he's shirking his duty in order to keep Hermione happy. And she's not even that happy, honestly. She keeps watching him with worried eyes when she thinks he isn't looking. Keeps fussing over him, the way he fusses over her, until the pair of them probably look ridiculous to everyone around them. He's heard Mrs Weasley calling them *sweet*; that, too, was uncomfortable. The stairs creak faintly as he makes his way down them in his joggers and t-shirt. Hermione is still fast asleep upstairs – a cosy little ball under the blankets, her hair in a braid and nothing but one of his t-shirts on, not even any knickers.

Before bed, Hermione had sat on his face and then tried to suck his dick while *he* tried to dissuade her, perhaps not as emphatically as he could've. Or should've. It didn't work, of course; she'd nearly thrown up, sick and retching, and he'd tried to call it all off. He didn't need to come. That *she* had come was enough for one night. But instead of losing herself in flashbacks, Hermione had been insistent, and eventually she'd ended up sprawled on her stomach with her arse in the air, and they'd had what turned out to be delicious sex.

And then he'd woken with a nightmare about the way he'd killed a pubescent girl in the dungeons by opening her wrists and making it look like suicide when, really, she'd *fought* him. Desperately. Biting and clawing, begging for her life as she struggled futilely, with no idea that what he was doing was actually a horrendous, abhorrent mercy because she was destined to be the entertainment at the next revel. They would have torn her apart piece by piece in the worst possible way while he watched. So Draco had killed her, and pressed a sharp shard of glass into her hand, closing it hard enough that blood had welled up sluggishly.

He reaches the bottom of the stairs. He feels guilty about the sex he'd had earlier. He feels guilty for feeling happiness, guilty for being alive. There's a cupboard under the sink in the kitchen, which Draco noticed one night while rummaging for snacks, has more than tins of spam, pork brains in milk gravy, tongue, and mushy peas. There's also a bottle of firewhisky, hidden by the aforementioned disgusting tins. For months now – Merlin, has it been so long? – despite knowing it's there, he's refrained. Alcohol only inflames a situation. It doesn't help unless there is no *help*,

only enduring. He feels like the refreshed memory of murdering the nameless girl can only be endured.

This is why he wants to fight. These nightmarish memories. He crouches in the darkened kitchen, the light slanting in from the hallway bright enough to see by without casting a *lumos*; he left his wand upstairs, on the bedside table. He stretches back in the cupboard, his fingers closing around the cold glass neck of a bottle, and he pulls it out with a scraping sound. It's heavy; good. Whoever it belongs to must replace it when needed because last time he longingly looked, it was only half full. And when he withdraws this bottle, he sees it's unopened. He grabs a glass from a cabinet and walks through to the dining room, sitting down heavily at the end of the table, facing the stairs. He pours a generous measure and swigs without ceremony. It burns, delicious and searing, opening up the nasal passages and making him wheeze, creating heat in his centre.

He isn't sure if it helps or not. But when Weasley walks in, he's six shots down and, given his recent abstinence, half-cut. He's too pissed to be startled by Weasley or to try to hide the bottle. The redhead seems more surprised, swearing softly under his breath as he jumps. He probably wasn't expecting to find Draco sitting there in the dark when he came down for his midnight snack, or whatever the hell had him waltzing through the dining room, heading for the kitchen. He's in plaid pyjamas, and he narrows his eyes on Draco, who sits at the head of the table.

"What're you –?" And then he takes in the bottle sitting there. "Hey, where'd you find that? There's not s'posed to be hard liquor at the safe houses."

"Under the kitchen sink. Behind the weird tins," Draco says, and is annoyed by the slur in his voice. "Don't know whose it is."

"Huh." Weasley starts walking again, disappearing into the kitchen. Draco huffs a laugh when he comes back holding a glass. He sets it down at the place to Draco's right and pulls the chair out, slouching down and nabbing the bottle. "I won't tell if you don't," he says, oddly companionable. Feeling rather like he'd slid into a peaceful nihilism between drinks number four and five, Draco shrugs.

"Why not," he says and swills down what's left in his glass. Weasley pours a two-finger measure into his own glass, then Draco's, and then they clink the rims together and down them in one. Weasley coughs and beats his chest.

"Merlin, that's strong stuff." He pours again, eyeing Draco, his expression blank. "So, what's got you up and drinking then, Malfoy?"

"My sins," Draco says shortly. He thinks of the girl's face. She'd been only about twelve; caked in filth, her eyes desperate and wet, sunk in hollowed pits. The fingernails she'd clawed him with had been ragged. He'd thought she was asleep when he'd gone into the cell and crouched down beside her to murmur the cutting curses. She hadn't been.

"Huh. That'd do it." Weasley's expression is cold. Scathing. "You have enough of 'em."

"Mm." He doesn't argue. "What about you, then?" The words keep slurring a little on the way out.

"Sins? I'm clean as the driven snow, Malfoy. I haven't done what you've done." Disgust saturates Weasley's voice as he pours another drink. He's being civil, but both men know that the redhead despises Draco.

"Lucky you," Draco says coolly. "But no, I *meant*, why're you up?"

"Oh, I just woke up hungry." Weasley grins, teeth gleaming white and eyes sharp as he scratches at the short, rather patchy beard he keeps. "Thought I'd make a sandwich."

Draco arches a brow. How typically Weasley. "Of course."

"And then here *you* are, wallowing in self-pity that you don't deserve."

"So you thought you'd come and disturb my pity party?" He slouches back in his chair, legs kicked out under the table and crossed at the ankles, shoving his hair back off his face, eyes narrowed on the redhead.

"Why not," Weasley says angrily. There's a long silence. "I read your full debrief, finally. A few weeks ago. I'm not much for reading, but it was a real page-turner. Gripping. It'd make a good one of those 'horror movies' that Hermione's talked about." Draco doesn't say a word, although his stomach turns, and the firewhisky threatens to make a reappearance for a moment. Really though, he'd already figured Weasley had read his debriefing notes – in fact, he'd have thought the other man would've done so much, much earlier. Well, he supposed Weasley *wasn't* much for reading.

"You're a monster, y'know that? Disgusting." It's said almost blandly. Weasley pours himself another drink, and his hand is shaking, the bottleneck rattling against the glass. He's almost caught up to Draco now. He grabs the bottle off Weasley and tops up. *Monster*; it echoes in his head.

"Yeah." He doesn't argue, but that just seems to piss Weasley off more.

"Does Hermione know what you did?" he demands, and Draco bites the inside of his cheek before answering, his heartbeat picking up. He was already slightly flushed from the firewhisky, but now he feels hot. Sweaty.

"No," he admits, swallowing drily. Sips at his firewhisky again, making this measure last a little longer.

"Don't want her to know what I know, huh?" Weasley taunts, bright blue eyes shining darkly in the half-light as he nurses his glass, arms crossed over his chest.

"Not particularly," Draco says honestly. "But *she* doesn't want to know, actually." He levels a flat look on Weasley. "So if you go telling her, she won't thank you. She's had the option to know, and she doesn't want to. Respect that." His heart is thundering. He imagines Weasley bailing Hermione up and spewing descriptions of the terrible atrocities Draco has committed at her. He doesn't know what that would do to *them*, but he knows how devastating it would be for *her*. She doesn't need to hear about horrors, no matter who committed them.

"Maybe she *should*. I see you there. All cosy. *Such a lovely couple*," Weasley snarls, as though he's mimicking someone. His mother, probably. "Hands all over each other. I bet if she knew what those hands have done –" Draco feels sick – "the fucking *horrible* things you did –"

"I did what I had to. I was the Order's man, Weasley. I worked under Shackbolt's supervision, and you'd do well to remember that," Draco says, cold and vehement. "When I got out and went to Potter nearly three years ago, wanting to defect, he and Shackbolt *sent me back in*." Anger rises up, hot and vicious, and he sits forward, glass thunking on the table as he glares at Weasley, hair getting in his eyes. He rakes it back impatiently. "I didn't fucking *want* to stay, Weasley. I wanted to

leave and fight on the right side. I was willing to leave my mother and father, and everything I'd ever known, to join you lot. Because I saw Snape's memories before he died, and it changed *everything*. I saw another option."

He looks down into his glass. "And honestly, because even without seeing the memories, I couldn't take it anymore." He's saying far too much, but he's drunk, and he doesn't care. Weasley is listening, eyes cold. "The cruelty, the death, the – it was *disgusting*. I couldn't take it. So I left. And your best mate sent me back in." He snarls the words, fury leaping up. "He gave me no choice, him and Shacklebolt. Either go back in and feed them information whenever I could while doing whatever I had to do to stay undercover and move up the ranks, or die. Right there."

"Harry wouldn't –!" Weasley begins, and Draco laughs bitterly.

"But Shacklebolt would." He sighs, spinning his drink in slow circles on the tabletop. "And I don't blame him. It made sense, tactically. With Snape dead, you'd lost your man on the inside. And there I was, the perfect replacement." He clenches his jaw, remembering how he'd begged not to be sent back. The way he'd turned his face away from Potter to hide his tears. "So your Order *forced* me to go back in. The blood on *my* hands is on yours too," he accuses, jabbing a finger at Weasley, and the other man gulps audibly, gaze sliding away from Draco's.

Draco downs his drink in one and tops it up; sticking to a two-finger measure at a time. He doesn't want to pass out at the dining table.

He stares at Weasley challengingly. "The people I killed and tortured – the bodies I disposed of, the innocents I kidnapped. They're all because your precious Potter and Shacklebolt sent me back in, *after* I got out. After I fucking *begged* them not to send me back." To his mortification, tears well up as he remembers the impotent horror he'd felt when they'd told him he had to go back in. He swipes his wrist over his eyes, furious, and Weasley looks at him, something in his gaze that Draco can't untangle. The redhead doesn't speak. Doesn't argue.

"Well shit," he just says at last, and snags the bottle to top himself up. He looks ill.

"I know what I am, Weasley. But I am what your Order made me."

"Yeah," Weasley says shortly, and it's grudging and unfriendly, but it's an acknowledgement. "Doesn't *change* what you are, though. And it doesn't mean you should be anywhere near Hermione." He glares at Draco, who can't disagree as he swipes at his eyes again. Weasley's not entirely wrong, but it's also far more complicated than that. He and Hermione are entwined inextricably, bound together and entangled, and it's become clear that separating them wouldn't be an easy thing.

"I do what she wants." He doesn't drop his gaze from Weasley's, staring him down even as his eyes sting with unshed tears, a knot of emotion in his chest. He does what Hermione wants. Always.

Weasley isn't dissuaded. He sneers, made sloppy by too much drink. "And what are you doing *now*, then? Sitting around on your arse, having a lovely holiday, fucking the woman that you raped. That you've turned into your wh–"

Draco's on his feet before he realises, grabbing Weasley by the shirt-front and shoving him back into his chair far enough that it teeters on the two back legs. "Don't you *fucking* call her that. Don't you fucking *dare*. She's not – not that. And *I saved her*. It had to be done. You *know* what would've happened to her if I hadn't –" Weasley shoves Draco back and manages to rebalance himself with a

flailing of limbs before pushing to his feet, his expression dark "– and if you call her that again, I'll shut your fucking mouth for you," Draco finishes, meaning it. He'd welcome the opportunity to take on Weasley again. The redhead frowns.

"Sitting around, though. You can't deny that," he counters, but he drops the subject of Hermione. "You're happy to watch people go out there and die for you while you sit here safe and sound. You killed Colin's brother, and now he's out there, putting his life on the line for *you*." Weasley jabs his finger towards Draco, sneering and disdainful.

"You think I fucking *like* that? I thought you would've heard – Hermione's banned me from fighting," Draco says, too surprised that Weasley missed the drama to be anything but honest. Bitterness oozes in his tone. "I asked Lupin. I want to be out there, but she..."

"Oh, and you just do whatever she says, do you?"

Draco looks down at his feet. Sits back down with a defeated huff, feeling suddenly exhausted, and nearly ashamed. She has him whipped. "Yeah," he admits wearily. "Yeah, I basically just do whatever she wants, Weasley. Is that news to you? After what I did to her, how am I supposed to choose to make her miserable again?"

Weasley laughs, a humourless bark, and sits down as well, pouring them each a fresh drink and sliding Draco's glass across to him with a flick of his wrist. "She's got you over a barrel," he says with a wry indelicacy. "Any time she wants to, she can just hold that over your head, huh? For the rest of your life, you're stuck catering to Hermione's every whim. *Well*. Couldn't happen to a nicer fellow." The redhead bares his teeth in a grin that looks more like a challenge, and Draco grimaces. It's not funny. He's trapped and miserable, and the guilt is beginning to slowly crush him. It's why he's sitting down here, drinking himself into a state of numbness.

"Fuck you, Weasley." He downs his drink. He feels messy drunk. Angry. Breathless. *Shit*. It all pours out of him as he glares at Weasley. "I hate this. *I hate it*. I'm trapped between a troll and an acromantula, here. Lupin finally gives me permission to do what I always fucking wanted to do – fight on the right side – and Hermione tells me it'll break her heart if I do. Instead of getting to do something, instead of getting the chance to be *useful* and try to make up for the fucking horrible, *abhorrent* things I had to do, I get to sit here. Thinking. Remembering. All the fucking things you read in the debrief." He glares at Weasley, eyes sore and stinging as he sits forward and taps his temple. "They're all up here. All the fucking time. And the longer I sit here, safe and sound, the guiltier I feel. The worse it is."

He's crying. *Shit*.

"I killed kids. *I killed kids*." Draco buries his head in his hands, elbows on the table, a tear trickling down his nose. He scrubs it away. "How am I supposed to live with that? I can't. I can't fucking *take* it. I dream, constantly – remembering. I thought – I thought that maybe if I go out there and fight, I might be able to make up for it, a little. I might be able to balance the scales. I might be able to kill some of the fucking cunts I watched *do those things*. But Hermione...she doesn't want me to." He looks blearily at Weasley, the room swaying slightly. All the firewhisky has caught up with him.

"I can't – can't make her sad, Weasley. How'm I gonna do that? After – after what've done." He gulps down his drink, tears trickling down his cheeks, and Weasley refills him, the other man's expression stark now. Bleak.

"I shouldn't've survived," Draco mumbles, lost in misery. "I shoulda died. Why do I get to live? Me? An' every day – every day tha' goes by, it's a little harder to rem-remember why'm alive. Why bother. If I can't even p-pay m' penance." He looks at Weasley, the redhead's eyes shining by the hall light, his face set and grim, and admits what he hasn't even to himself, before. He enunciates carefully, trying not to slur. This is *important*. "Sometimes, when I wake up in the night, and I've jus' had a nightmare about k-killing someone, or hurting H'mione, or just *watching* while... And I can't even *try* to atone 'cause of *her*." He sighs, hating her a little. "And then I think: it would be best if I was dead. If I just killed myself."

He laughs, hollow. "You prob'ly don't disagree, Weasley." He stares down into his glass. "I've served my purpose," he says, cold and numb. "Right? And I can't live like this much longer. It's fucking killing me." He feels sick. He buries his head back in his hands. "I don' – don't wanna hurt H'mione, but I can't do this. *I can't fucking live with it.*" He's so drunk he's not even embarrassed when he starts properly crying in front of Weasley. He's too lost in his head. Heels of his hands pressed against his eye sockets, tears trickling out as nausea roils in his belly. He wants to die. He wants it to end. He wants it all to be fucking *over*. "I want to fight," he mumbles, like a litany. A mantra. "Fight, or die."

Everything goes blurry. At some point, he finds himself on his hands and knees on the carpet, vomiting. And then the world is spinning as Weasley's half dragging him up the stairs, Draco's arm slung around his shoulders. The bannister is cold under his hand as he clutches for it. Leaning against the wall by their bedroom door as Weasley helps hold him up with one hand pressed to the middle of his chest. Like a butterfly pinned to a card. Weasley's not so bad, really. The redhead laughs and then turns away from Draco, hand still splayed on his sternum.

"He's your problem now, 'Mione," he says, and then Draco sees her there, so beautiful. So fucking beautiful, standing in front of him in a t-shirt and leggings, out of breath and worried. "But I want to talk to you about him tomorrow," Weasley says, as if Draco isn't standing – *swaying* – right there. *Rude*. Both of them look at him, and he realises he might be thinking aloud. He bites his lip. Silent. "He's not in a good way, 'Mione."

"I can *see* that, Ron," she says, all sharp and angry, and so wonderful. *Resplendent*. She chokes a teary little laugh as she takes Draco's hand, and he turns toward her, wobbling, and buries his face against her hair, his arms around her shoulders. *So perfect. Merlin, he loves her so much.*

"Beyond being pissed as a loon, I mean," Weasley says, and Draco groans and regrets whatever he'd said to Weasley. He can't really remember it now. It's like trying to squint through a darkened glass. Hermione is warm and soft, and he tries not to lean on her too much as she guides him into the bedroom.

"That doesn't sound good."

"It's – it's nothing like, well..." Weasley begins awkwardly as Hermione gently pushes Draco down on the bed. He slumps onto it, loose-limbed and floppy, sitting on the edge and nearly falling before he regains his balance. "It's just his head. His mental –" Draco can't hear the rest. Hermione joins Weasley outside the doorway, and their voices are low.

The last thing he hears before he starts to slide into unconsciousness, slumping sideways on the bed, is Hermione's sweet voice – "Thank you for taking care of him, Ron. Truly."

Hermione shuts the door behind her quietly, and turns to assess Draco, Ron's words rattling in her head. He'd insisted that whatever Draco had said to him could wait until morning, but what little he'd said before he'd taken himself back downstairs had worried Hermione deeply. *His mental state isn't great right now. He was talking a lot about what he had to do, before. I think he'll be fine, but keep an eye on him tonight.* She eyes him. Well, if he stays like this, the only thing she'll have to worry about is him choking on his own vomit. He's snoring faintly, slumped sideways on the bed, and looks disarmingly like any Muggle university student who's gotten too blitzed on a night out, in his joggers and t-shirt, with his hair long at his neck and falling well over his eyes.

She fetches her wand and bends over him, gently brushing his hair off his face, and he twitches and mumbles her name. "H'mione?" He stinks of firewhisky, undercut with the acrid smell of vomit – of which she thinks a little bit is on his shirt – and she wrinkles her nose in distaste, cleaning him up slightly with several wordless charms, including a breath-freshening one. The last one both makes him smell of peppermint and rouses him back to awareness. "What? H'mione?" He shoves himself back up to a sitting position, and she tosses her wand aside and steadies him with her hands on his shoulders.

"Careful. You're very drunk. You need to get into bed," she says slowly and clearly, and he blinks up at her, thick, dark blond lashes framing his glazed eyes so prettily. He looks bewildered, and wounded. He frowns, brows scrunching together. "Come on," she says, tugging at his upper arm, and he wobbles to his feet with a lurch, tall and lean. If he falls, she won't be able to catch him now that she's left her wand on the end of the bed. *Shit.* But he uses her for balance, and together they get him around the bed with her murmuring quiet encouragements the whole way. He stands wobbling like a newborn mooncalf as she flips the blankets back for him to crawl into, not bothering to take off his joggers.

"I'm sorry," he mumbles miserably, and Hermione hushes him, not knowing if he has a particular reason to be sorry tonight, or if he's talking about *then*. She strips off the leggings she'd hurriedly pulled on when Ron had knocked on the door, and switches them out for knickers. And then she slides in on the other side of the bed, and they roll to face each other, nearly nose to nose. She lying on her right side, he lying on his left. His hand finds her hip. His fingers are hot and clammy, and his expression is wretched. His eyes are bloodshot and wet, and his lower lip trembles a little. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean – didn't mean to get this drunk."

"Well, exactly how drunk *did* you plan on getting, then?" Hermione asks lightly as she tries to tuck his fringe behind his ear – but it's just barely too short to stay there reliably and falls straight back over his right eye. He blinks, hair tangling in his long lashes. Her attempt at lightness has failed; she can see he hasn't even registered it. He's too drunk. Too caught in whatever he was trying to escape. And then he says it, words slurred and broken.

"I just – I wanted to forget the girl," he mumbles, and it feels like a fist clenches around Hermione's heart. Her pulse races, and it feels like there's a lump in her throat when she swallows. She doesn't want to ask, but he's looking at her through the white-blond strands of his hair, and she feels like he's waiting.

"What girl?" she whispers hoarsely, the words feeling like a death knell. He presses his lips together hard enough to bleach them white, before he speaks, careful, trying not to slur. His eyes are desolate.

"About three weeks after I got you out of the dungeons, I was down there to get a girl for a revel. The Dark Lord said he wanted this one in particular, in the cell by the stairs." He shuts his eyes

for a moment. Opens them again, and the look in his eyes makes Hermione want to block her ears, shut her eyes, and hide under the blankets. She doesn't want to hear the next part. "She can't have been more'n twelve." He looks at her like he's seeking an absolution he knows won't come. "I couldn't send her up there, H'mione. For th-them to rape, an' torture, until she died. I *couldn't*."

Hermione feels very cold, her hand resting light across his jaw and throat as he talks, feeling the reverberations and the bobbing of his throat as he swallows.

"S-so I killed her. She was s'posed to never wake up, I was gonna use a *somnium*, but she woke up. I ended up – ended up cutting her wrists while she fought me. Made it look like suicide. She was crying. Screaming. She didn't know. It was...mercy." He looks at her pleadingly, and beyond the horror of what he'd said, Hermione can't help wondering why he hadn't used a *somnium* on the girl while she'd been fighting him. Part of her wonders if it was to punish himself. Or maybe in the moment, he just hadn't thought of it. *Jesus*. She feels sick. It's so awful. So terrible. While she'd been sitting upstairs in his room in the mansion, scared and alone, he'd been murdering girls to save them from being raped to death. She feels like vomiting. No wonder he had thrown up.

Draco's staring at her, eyes huge in his face. "But I still murdered her. I still killed a little girl."

And then, to her dismay, he begins crying. A heartbreakingly silent weeping, and she can see his features contorted with it before his hand comes up, hiding most of his face. She can see a sliver of his right eye, screwed shut, lashes wet as he cries. His mouth is hidden entirely, but she can see his shoulders shaking, and the juddering, rasping breaths he takes are the only audible sign of his tears. *Oh shit*. She pushes herself up on one elbow and cups the back of his head, dropping a kiss at his temple. Her fingers play through his hair.

"Hey. Hey, it's..." *It's what? Okay? Alright?* She can't say that, because it's not. Nothing's okay, or alright. He killed a little girl to save her, and everything about that is so, *so* wrong. She kisses his head again. "I love you," she tells him firmly. "I love you so much, Draco. So, so much. No matter what you've done, I love you."

Draco makes a wobbling, vocal sob that he stifles, at that, and his hand comes away from his face to wrap around her back, and then he's burying his face against her breasts. "I'm sorry," he mumbles. "I love you." And his breath is hot and damp, and his tears are soaking through her shirt. "I can't – I can't live with it. I k-killed so many people," he says, broken and hitching against her breasts, his voice muffled, as Hermione strokes her fingers through his hair, hoping to calm him. "I have nightmares about it all the t-time. Can't stop thinking 'bout it, sometimes."

"I'm so sorry," she says helplessly. "I'm so sorry."

"I wanna fight," he says, and her heart twists. "I feel so guilty. So *fucking* guilty. I don't deserve to be alive. She did. Her. Not – not *me*. An' – an' now I'm sitting here safe, and I can't even – can't even atone. I wanna *atone*, H'mione." He pulls back, huffing a breath, visibly pulling himself together as he knuckles the tears from his eyes and looks at her as he says, clear and urgent: "*I need to fight*."

There is a cold stone sitting in Hermione's stomach. She feels leaden and numb, even though from the moment he'd started talking, she'd suspected he was leading up to this. He wants to fight. He wants to make up for murdering the little girls he has nightmares about. Can she blame him? Christ, she doesn't know how he lives with it. She doesn't know how he acts so normal every day, with *that* in his head. With those memories always lurking. She finds her own memories hard enough to deal with, and as awful as they are – at least they're not *that*. That is beyond horrific. She wonders if this

was what Ron was talking about, or if there's worse that she hasn't heard. A fear of the latter writhes in her gut.

"Okay," she says aloud, because now is not the time to discuss it, or argue. He probably won't even remember they had this conversation in the morning. She keeps working her fingers through his hair, scratching his scalp as she goes, trying to be soothing and rhythmic even as horror gnaws at her. What he'd had to do. What he might not have told her. The thought that she might just have to let him fight. It might not be an option anymore. She feels sick, but she doesn't let it show in her voice. "Okay, Draco. If this is what you need. If you need to fight, then – then we can talk about you doing that in the morning. But right now, you need to sleep. Alright?" Her voice is low, and gentle.

"It's no' alrigh'," he mumbles, but his eyes slide slowly shut without him really protesting further. He's really *very* drunk. "I don' deserve..." he begins to slur after a moment, but Hermione shushes him softly, fingers still combing through his hair, and moments later, his breathing becomes heavy and snuffling; not quite a snore. She closes her eyes and presses her face down to the side of Draco's head, breathing into his hair, feeling shell-shocked and exhausted. He doesn't stir. And then she rolls onto her back next to him, staring at the ceiling as worries crawl over her, dark and cold.

She lies awake for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

► Notes

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

- ▶ Content Warning
- ▶ Housekeeping!

Twenty-Nine

Ron gives her a meaningful look as she slopes into the dining room, muzzy-headed and miserable, still in her t-shirt and the same leggings from last night, scooped off the bedroom floor. He jerks his head to the kitchen, and she nods and follows him in, feeling nervous and worried. Mrs Weasley is there, smiling and bright as she bustles about. "Can we've a coffee please, mum?" Ron asks very sweetly, and Mrs Weasley magics two brimming cups up within a moment with a good morning for Hermione, which she mumbles back with a tired smile that's entirely forced. She holds Ron's mug as he shrugs on a parka, and then he holds hers as she does the same, and then they're out the door on the porch, in the morning light.

It's chilly still, especially at this time – it was eight when Hermione slipped downstairs, and the sun hasn't warmed up the air yet. It's a cloudy day too, the sky full of puffy grey drifts, slowly sliding across the patch of sky above them, and the wetness of the ground and the last three porch steps means it either rained, or there was a heavy dew. Her toes and nose feel cold, but the parka is enough to keep her snugly. Despite that, there's a cold that just won't leave her.

"Sleep okay?" Ron asks as they settle down at the top of the stairs, and Hermione shrugs, her mouth full of a sip of hot coffee that had nearly burnt off her tastebuds. "I see Malfoy isn't up yet?" She swallows.

"I slept okay, once I got to sleep," she says. "And no, he was still sleeping when I got up. I left him a glass of water and a pain potion that should help, but we don't have any hangover cure in the bathroom. Hopefully, he'll be okay when he wakes up. I've never seen him that drunk before. Not even after the flogg—" She cuts herself off, and Ron's expression is pained sympathy before she looks away, chewing on the inside of her bottom lip.

"I know about the hangover cure," Ron says, woebegone, and she's so glad he didn't mention the flogging. "I checked when I got up. My head is ringing like a bell, and I feel *sick*."

"Well, I'm not sure coffee will help."

"Coffee *always* helps," Ron says emphatically, clutching his cup tighter in his two hands as though afraid Hermione will confiscate it for his good health. Well. She actually doesn't care. She's too nervous. "So. Did Malfoy say anything, before he passed out?" Ron asks, and Hermione's stomach churns.

She looks down at her own coffee, also cradled in both hands, to keep her fingers warm. The milky liquid shivers as she shifts her grip. She feels properly nauseated, and she hasn't even drunk at all. It hardly seems fair. "He talked about wanting to fight because he'd murdered a girl and felt guilty," she says in one quick rush, not wanting to draw it out or get into details. "Basically." She feels

compelled to add: "I mean, it was obviously a little more complicated than that, and he was drunk, and slurring, and – but that seemed to be the gist of it." She falls silent, looking at Ron anxiously. Fear is tying a giant knot behind her sternum. It feels hard to breathe, and her fingertips are tingling for some reason. She nearly feels light-headed as she stares at him.

No. She *does* – she definitely does feel light-headed. She gulps.

"There's no easy way to say this, 'Mione," Ron says, and Hermione wants him to hurry the *fuck* up. *Just spit it out*, she thinks furiously. "He said a lot, but it all seemed to revolve around how if he couldn't fight for the Order, then he should die. That he didn't deserve to be alive."

"He said the same to me," she whispers.

"And then he said he sometimes thought it would be best if he killed himself," Ron says bluntly, clearly speaking from memory, and Hermione makes a stifled sound of horror and denial before she can stop herself.

"No," she says, very small – barely a breath – and then Ron's hand is on her back, distant through the padded parka as he rubs briskly up and down.

"Hey. 'Mione. You're not about to faint on me holding a hot coffee, are you? 'Cause that'd be a terrible waste," he says, deadpan, and even though it's not that funny, she hiccups a wet laugh. "And you might get burnt," he adds, worry in his voice as he reaches out with his right hand, steadying her coffee, which is trembling in her hands. He's clearly set his own down, Hermione thinks inanely. She frowns, trying desperately to understand, but her brain seems to be sluggish and stupid.

"He actually said the words? Kill himself? Not, 'I should be dead', but –"

"*I should kill myself*," Ron clarifies, sounding grim. "Yeah. I don't like the bloke, 'Mione, but I know you love him, and, well...he doesn't deserve to end up offing himself. It's not right. Not after what he had to do for the Order."

She looks up at Ron, and there's a lot to untangle on his face. Pity and worry – the latter probably for Hermione rather than Draco – and an odd look of responsibility. Like he thinks he owes Draco. And really, she supposes the Order as a whole *does* owe him, for what he did. Just as it owes everyone who works for it, whether their work be noble, or hidden away and abhorrent. It's *their* fault he feels the way he does. She takes a shaky breath. "Well, *shit* ." She has the sudden urge to run upstairs and check on him. To make sure he hasn't woken alone, depressed and guilty, and opened his wrists like he did to that nameless girl's. She gulps. He won't. Surely not. He hasn't yet.

"I think he needs to fight, 'Mione," Ron says as she numbly drinks down some of her nearly-scalding coffee. It sets a warm fire in her stomach at least, even as it scorches her tongue a little, competing with the leaden cold spreading through her. He's still rubbing her back gently. "I know you don't like the idea, but I think you're gonna have to give him your blessing, or whatever it is he needs to be able to do it without feeling like he's hurting you."

"But I *told* him that he could," she says tightly, and tears are stinging in her eyes, emotion clogging her throat. "I told him."

"What did you say, exactly?" Ron's kind; his bright eyes like the bluest sky, and without a hint of bad behind them. Just pure, and good, and Hermione snuffles, wiping at her nose with the back of

her hand. She stares at the garden, small branches gently stirring in the breeze.

"I said I couldn't stop him," she admits, and Ron makes a sound of understanding.

"Yeah," he says apologetically. "Yeah, that's not really good enough, 'Mione. If *you* told me that about something, I'd feel like I shouldn't do the thing, and I'm not even shagging you."

"Ron!" she exclaims as she stares at him in shock, but she's laughing a little, breathy and teary. He smiles at her, rubbing a hand over his auburn beard, which actually looks quite handsome on him, despite all the teasing he's been getting.

"You need to actually give Malfoy permission, 'Mione, and mean it. He feels trapped between making you happy and not being suicidal, and I'm worried he'll end up...doing something stupid," he finishes delicately, and Hermione can see the sense in it.

"Yeah," she says at last, on a sigh. She's not willing to risk being the reason Draco kills himself, after everything he's survived. That would be unthinkable. It would be the worst tragic joke in the history of the world; the girl he risked his life to save got him dead in the end. And the guilt of that would kill *her*. Maybe if she sends him out there on the agreement that he doesn't do the most dangerous missions? A compromise? Or – "If he did, could he be on your team, Ron? Would you – would you look out for him? Make sure he's not taking stupid risks, and being reckless?"

"*Me?* Look out for *Malfoy*?" he asks, pointing at himself, disbelief in the words and the set of his mouth. And then he shrugs and grins wryly. "For you, 'Mione, anything."

She sniffs, tears welling up again. "Thank you, Ron. So much. For – for last night, and for this."

"What're friends for, huh?" His arm slides around her, and he kisses the top of her head as she leans into him, both of them cosy in their parkas, watching the scudding clouds for a while.

When Hermione goes back upstairs with breakfast on a tray for Draco, he's awake, and she sees the water and pain potion she left him are gone. He's lying on his back, forearm over his eyes, somehow exuding misery. He peeks at her from beneath his arm as she pushes the door shut behind her with one foot, the tray in her hands. A full English courtesy of Molly, and a cup of coffee that slops over onto the tray a little as she jostles it. "Good morning." She smiles at him sympathetically as he groans and struggles into a sitting position, rubbing his hands over his face. "I looked for a hangover cure, but there wasn't any. Sorry."

"*Ugh*. Morning," he mumbles, and then shoots her a nervous look. She wonders how much he remembers of last night as she sets the tray on his bedside table. "I wasn't expecting a hangover cure." He scrubs at the side of his face with the heel of his hand and yawns. "The pain potion was a pleasant surprise." His eyes are bloodshot and red-rimmed, his complexion greyish, and his hair dishevelled. Half over his eyes, half sticking up wildly. Hermione thinks: *if he's going to go out on missions, he needs it cut*. Her heart wrenches as she moves to open the curtains.

Part of her is still hoping that last night was an aberration, an anomaly, and now that Draco's sober, he'll see sense and say he doesn't want to fight after all. But she knows that won't happen. Not really. She stares out the dormer window at trees and rooftops. Her conversation with Ron had forced her to face up to and acknowledge what she'd been trying to deny for a while; that Draco's mental state was just getting worse and worse. As Hermione improved – feeling rapidly stronger and more stable in herself, so long as she stayed in her comfort zone – he was destabilising. For

whatever reason, fighting openly on the side of the Order was essential to him. And selfishly, she'd been denying him that while trying to pretend that she wasn't.

Telling him that he *could* wasn't the same thing as giving him permission.

"I'm sorry," he says as Hermione sits back down on the edge of the bed beside his feet. Draco's sat himself up while she's been lost in thought, his coffee in his hands, his expression forlorn, and embarrassed. "I'm sorry about last night. I don't remember a lot, but I do remember Weasley had to drag me up here, which is bad enough. I get the feeling I was a mess." He's picking his words carefully, and *Hermione* gets the feeling that he remembers a lot more than he's letting on. But she doesn't blame him for not wanting to go over it. She didn't know what exactly had happened before Ron had brought him upstairs, but she imagined it was mortifying.

"A little. But the messiness was fine. Really. You weren't that bad. You were just...very drunk." She thinks about the way he'd wept, after admitting to murdering a little girl out of a desperate, cruel mercy, and presses her lips together hard. The memory makes her feel sick with horror and empathy. She forces herself to meet his eyes. The whites webbed with red, the look in them apologetic and uncertain.

"I'm sorry," Draco says again, shoving his hair out of his face. "I had a nightmare, and I knew there was a bottle of firewhisky stashed in the kitchen, and...well, I drank more than I meant to." He grimaces. He doesn't mention his suicidal ideation, doesn't bring up the way he'd cried, or the way he'd insisted he needed to fight, although she feels like he does remember, at least parts of it. The careful control over his expression is a dead giveaway to her now. But he's not bringing it up – which means she has to. Hermione bites her lip, hands twisting in her lap as she makes herself just say it, still meeting his eyes as he sips his coffee.

"Ron said you were talking about killing yourself," she says bluntly, and watches Draco's expression shift. He's not as good at keeping a poker face as he used to be. His eyes skitter away as his jaw tightens, and his lips flatten, and he takes in a sharp breath. His coffee cup trembles in his hand for just a second before he steadies it.

"Weasley doesn't know how to keep his mouth shut," he says flatly, refusing to meet Hermione's eyes.

"Oh shut up," she snaps, furious. "That's good. It's good that he told me that you're thinking about killing yourself because –"

"I wouldn't actually do it," he protests, and Hermione doesn't believe him.

"Dragon-dung. You wouldn't mention it if you weren't seriously considering it." And she believes that. She can't imagine Draco telling Ron something like that unless it was at the forefront of his mind, even if he was stupid-drunk.

"I was drunk, Hermione. I was talking shit."

"You told me about the girl," she retorts, hoping to provoke a reaction, and succeeding. His eyes widen and his jaw tenses even more, muscles bunching at the hinges as he sets his coffee down. "You told me you killed her because she was going to be taken up to a revel. So you cut her wrists while she fought you, and –"

"*Enough!*" He's ashen except for colour burning high on his cheeks, his eyes unnaturally bright. Hermione feels cruel.

"How long have you wanted to kill yourself?" she pushes.

"Don't –" He's glaring at her, and it makes her feel sick. His anger being turned on her is a wholly awful experience.

"For Merlin's sake, just answer me!" she snaps, and she feels shaky, nausea churning in her stomach.

"For *years*, Hermione. For fucking years." He's scathing and bitter, and she finally drops her gaze from his, staring at her fingers twining together in her lap.

"But now it's worse because you can't fight?" she asks in a small voice, and he sighs.

"Yes. The things I've done – that girl wasn't even the worst of it. Not even close. I have done *so fucking much*, Hermione. I'm going to be having nightmares for the rest of my life. And I deserve them. I know that." She looks up, and he's watching her, a horrible guilt filling his eyes. "I might be legally exempt from prosecution after the war because I was an agent for the Order, but morally – morally, there isn't any forgiveness for what I've done." She wants to protest that but keeps her mouth shut as he goes on. "I can try to make up for it, but I'll never *actually* balance the scales. I know that. My hands are dripping in blood. I've hurt and killed so many people. Stood by and watched as terrible fucking atrocities took place right in front of me."

He looks very old and tired in the morning light as he goes on, and Hermione's heart wrenches for him. He shouldn't have to bear this burden. She remembers him crying quietly in the bathroom back at the mansion after a particularly bad night – one of the nights where he came back spattered with blood and stinking of death – trying to hide his terrible guilt from her.

"It's not your *fault*," Hermione can't help saying, even though she knows it won't help. He's determined to hate himself, and she supposes she understands why, even though it frustrates her. She doesn't know if she could live with herself if she'd had to do what he's done. She doesn't know if she could *do* it in the first place. Hermione thinks she might have fallen apart very quickly – or given herself away, with her inability to keep her cover. That he'd stayed in character for so long and played the part so perfectly is both deeply disturbing, and horribly sad. Because she sees that look in his eyes and knows that he had hated every second. "I wish you'd stop blaming yourself. *It's not your fault*. You didn't have any choice."

"I could've chosen death," he says coldly, pale in the light that falls over the bed, and Hermione scoffs.

"Don't be stupid! Whom would that have helped? No one. The information you passed along has done a lot for the war effort – Remus told me so." She's earnest, her hand falling to rest on his knee over the blankets. "You made a difference. A valuable difference. And you didn't make anything *worse*."

"I did terrible things, Hermione. Things I don't want you to ever know about."

"Well, if it wasn't you, it would've been someone else. And you tried to help where you could. And you saved me." She offers him a hopeful little smile, thumb rubbing over his knee. He says nothing

to that, sitting there as if lost in memory, his jaw tight. "You aren't a bad person," she tries, and he laughs hollowly.

"You don't *know*, Hermione. Don't tell me –" he cuts off and sighs, rubbing his hands over his face. He looks miserable and hopeless when he drops his hands. "Just don't."

"Fine," she says, holding her hands up in surrender. It's obvious she's not going to convince him of anything, which she knew going into it. Hermione just can't stop herself from *trying*. "If you promise that you'll be careful, if you promise that you won't – won't kill yourself, then you can fight," she tells him instead, the words a struggle to spit out. But she thinks of what Ron said and what Draco said last night, and she knows this is the only option. She swallows hard as he looks at her, uncomprehending. "I think you *should*," she adds, to make it clear, the words making her feel sick, her fingers twisting together painfully. She *hates* this. She wants to take him and run to Argentina. "You should fight. You should go out on missions and contribute to the war effort." She pauses as he stares at her, comprehension sweeping his face now. "Ron says you can be on his strike team, which makes me feel a little better," she adds. "He said he'll look out for you."

"I don't need *Weasley* fucking looking out for me," Draco begins indignantly, as if it's some automatic reaction, and then snaps his mouth shut as he realises. "I – *shit*. Sorry. I just – *really*?" He looks like all his Christmases have come at once. There's a triumphant joy on his face that looks almost hungry, mixed with disbelief, tension radiating off him as he sits forward, staring at Hermione with bright eyes.

"Really. If it's so bad that you're genuinely thinking about *killing yourself*, then – then what else can I say?" She shrugs helplessly, and an unhappy, guilty expression flickers over his face, marring the joy.

"I'm not trying to use that as leverage, you know," he says quickly. "I don't even – I mean, I've *thought* about it, but that doesn't mean I'll do it. I've thought about it for years, and I've always been too much of a coward –"

"You're not a fucking coward!" she half-yells, pushing to her feet and glaring at him with clenched fists, so sick of the way he constantly disparages himself. "What you did was the opposite of cowardly. A coward *would* have killed themselves. Or would've run away. But you *didn't*. You did what had to be done, and I know it must've been terrible, and that you saw and did horrendous things, I understand that, but you aren't a coward. Or a bad person. You're a good person who was shoved into one of the most horrible situations possible, and did your best. Which was pretty damned good."

Hermione's panting with emotion by the time she's done with her rant, all breathless and furious, and tears are blurring her eyes. She swipes at them, and her vision clears to Draco holding his arms out to her. His expression is apologetic, with just a hint of triumph. "Come here. Come here, Hermione. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"You're a fucking *git*," she snaps, even as she climbs onto his lap, burying her face in the crook of his neck. He holds her close, rocking slightly as he rubs her back. It's frustratingly soothing. She wants to be angry at him, but she can't when he's doing this. "I can't believe you felt that bad and you didn't say anything to *me*. You're supposed to tell me things, and instead, you're thinking about – about..." She hitches in a juddering breath, eyes stinging and wet as she clings to him, feeling the roughness of his scars beneath his t-shirt.

"I'm not going to kill myself. I promise," he assures her.

She's crying properly now. "I hate you," she sobs, and then immediately retracts. "No, no, I don't, I'm sorry. I don't hate you."

He huffs a laugh, still rubbing her back. "Not even a little bit?"

"Not even a little bit," she says, and then sniffs wetly, teary and snotty, and getting it on his shirt, as his hair tickles her face, which reminds her: "You need a haircut if you're going out on missions. It gets in your eyes."

"Okay," he agrees, so fucking amiable now that he's gotten his own way. She wants to hit him and kiss him at the same time as she sits back, wiping her nose with the hem of her borrowed shirt. It needs a wash anyway. "That's my shirt," he says, nose wrinkling with distaste, and she glares.

"Shut up. I'm still upset with you. Lying to me by omission, *again*. Trying to make me think you were alright, and I *knew* you weren't. I knew something was wrong. But did you tell me, or talk to me, or –" She's working herself up again, and he cuts her off sharply.

"You'd made your feelings clear, Hermione. You didn't want me fighting." He looks uneasy again as she sits there across his lap, damp part of his shirt balled up in her hand. "In fact, I doubt your feelings have changed. So am I just forcing you to let me, because Weasley blabbed, and now you're afraid I'll off myself if you don't? Because I don't want that," he says reluctantly, looking scared to hear her answer. She's honest.

"I wouldn't have changed my mind without last night, no. But you're not forcing me, Draco. You didn't even tell me how you felt, *Ron* did. So I know you're not trying to – to manipulate me. That's just how you feel." Hermione sighs. "And I can't say I don't understand how you feel. It terrifies me, thinking of you out there, but I know I'm being selfish. If you feel like you need to fight...then you should be able to. I never should've stopped you. I'm just scared." She meets his eyes. "I can't lose you."

"I'll be careful. I swear." His knuckles smooth over her cheek. He looks more at peace than he's seemed in weeks. There's a lightness to him that makes Hermione feel like crying for some reason – not from sadness. She just feels all wobbly and tearful as he smiles at her, the corner of his mouth hooked up lopsidedly, his eyes shining. "I'll be so fucking careful. You say I don't care if I live or die, and I don't know... I guess *now*, thanks to Weasley, I can't exactly deny that."

"If Ron hadn't said anything, I wouldn't have changed my mind about you fighting," Hermione points out, and he winces.

"True. I'll make sure to thank him," he says deadpan, and Hermione isn't sure if he's being sarcastic or not. "But as I was saying – I don't care much for my own sake. But I don't want to hurt you. I'm not planning on getting myself killed. I'll be careful."

She snuffles, dabbing at her nose again. "You'd better. And you need to let me start putting scar liniment on your back too." She's not having him go out there with limited mobility. "A haircut, and scar liniment." Hermione lays out the conditions firmly. "And you have to be careful. *Please*."

"I will." He cups her face in his hands and kisses her lightly, heedless of her rather damp state, and that beautiful lightness about him makes her smile despite her worry. "I promise."

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

► Content Warning

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thirty

"Well?" Hermione looks apprehensive as she leans against the wall beside the second-floor bathroom doorway, worry in those dark amber eyes, which she's trying and failing to hide as she twists her wand in her hands. He can't help his grin, although he feels a little guilty for it.

"Lupin put me on a mission tomorrow. Reconnaissance," he adds quickly as her lower lip trembles briefly before she firms it and tries to smile. "Nothing major. He says after so long out of the field, I need to ease back into it."

"Good." Her tone is emphatic, a note of relief in it. "He's right. Did he put you with Ron?"

"Yeah." He settles his hands on her hips, leaning in and kissing her forehead, wanting to smooth away the furrows that worry has etched on her brow. He feels too happy for her to be sad. He wants her to be just as pleased as he is. She sighs softly, breath hot through his t-shirt – the same one he was wearing last night. He's *scourgified* it, so it's technically clean, but once Hermione's cut his hair and he's had a shower, he's putting on a fresh one. A *scourgify* never does quite as good a job as a proper wash. Hermione tugs him close, her cheek against his chest. "Yeah, Weasley's leading the team."

"Good. Ron's terrible at feelings but great at tactics," she says, a little muffled. "Maybe it's all the chess he plays. Either way, he's an excellent tactician."

"Hm. I feel safer already," he says drily, although he's smiling as he kisses the top of Hermione's head. She's warm and soft in his arms and much more pleasant to hold now that she's eating properly; all her sharp edges have softened, her bony angles more well-covered. He's pretty sure her arse and breasts have grown slightly more generous too. She's filling out her leggings better, and her breasts are a larger handful than they used to be. He fits his body to hers, and *fuck*, she feels good. He kisses her ear. He feels so happy. He's going on a mission tomorrow, and Hermione is in his arms now; life is perfect. Almost. Her unhappy worry stops him short of labelling this perfection.

"Come on then," she says, pushing against his chest, and as he steps back, he sees the concern clouding her eyes. "I better cut your hair. You can tell me about the mission while I do."

Hermione could've been there while Draco had talked to Lupin and heard all about it directly, but she'd insisted she wanted to take his emptied breakfast tray into the kitchen, and that he should just go through without her. She'd meet him outside the second-floor bathroom, she'd said. Draco was fairly certain that she just hadn't wanted to be there to see his excitement in the moment. He thought perhaps she'd needed a few minutes to collect herself. It was a little unsettling; she seemed genuinely at peace with her decision to tell him to fight but still just as worried about the reality of

it. He supposed that was inevitable. The last person who'd worried about him like that had been...well, his mother. Draco thinks of her with a wince. She and his father. They had worried.

Maybe they still did. He wonders if they're alive. And then he wonders: *what if Voldemort brought my father back from Europe but didn't kill him? What if I come up against him on the battlefield?* He feels sick.

"Hey." Her hand cups his cheek. "What are you thinking?"

He blinks down at her. He's just standing there frozen, like an idiot, one hand pressed lightly against his chest still, the other drawing away from his cheek. "Nothing," he says casually, with a dismissive shrug. "The mission." That was poorly done, but she just eyes him suspiciously before her smaller, softer hand slips into his, and she tugs him through into the bathroom. She transfigures a brush into a stool and has him sit before sliding a transfigured cape around his neck, flipping the lock on the door with a wave of her wand.

"I missed this so much," she says, wagging her wand with pleasure. "I feel like I did when I was eleven and first got my wand. Everything is just so fun, still."

"I just feel like I'm back to normal. It makes me want to learn wandless magic, but they say learning a new technique is like starting all over again. There's a different way of thinking, with wandless." He watches as she transfigures a gleaming pair of scissors out of the soap dish and picks up a comb, placing her wand by the sink.

"Right." She moves to face him, appraising him with one hand on her hip. A thread of worry worms through him.

"Have you ever done this before?"

"I cut Harry and Ron's hair all the time, I'll have you know!" She says, eyes narrowing indignantly and mouth downturned. Draco grins.

"That's hardly a point in your favour, Hermione."

"Oh, shush. It'll be fine. Nothing extravagant, but fine. Short back and sides, and long enough on top to slick back, but not long enough to get in your eyes. Sound good?"

"I guess?"

"Good. Because that's about all I can do," she teases, flashing him a smile, small and nearly shy, as she starts combing his hair. She's careful and efficient, close enough to him that he can smell the faint citrus scent of her deodorant, her braid falling over her shoulder, her breasts right in his eyeline. She combs his hair gently back from his forehead and presses a kiss in the middle of it, startling and warm, and then puts her finger beneath his chin, tilting it up and kissing his mouth with a soft hum of satisfaction. "So. Tell me about the mission."

"I'm not sure if I should while you're cutting my hair." She rolls her eyes and then moves around behind him, still combing. And then there's the first metallic *snick* of the scissors, and he resists the urge to flinch and hunch his shoulders. "We're going to Kenmare."

"Oh," she says as she pauses in her snipping, as if she knows exactly why, and Draco realises belatedly that she likely does – she was probably the one who decoded the information regarding

Kenmare. She confirms that with what she says next, the scissors beginning their crisp *snick-snick* again. "There's a Snatcher encampment there. Where it seems they're funnelling the Muggle women through?"

"Yeah," Draco admits, wondering how the way Voldemort is treating the women makes her feel. He'd never told Hermione that the reason Voldemort had wanted her was to breed her, and he never will, unless she outright guesses it. The Dark Lord had always been fascinated with genetics and mutations, to the best of his limited knowledge, and Draco is painfully well informed about the hybrid abominations he'd attempted to create. Unholy couplings, forced even on pureblood witches if they'd earned his displeasure – or the Dark Lord himself attempting to use potions and spells to impregnate non-humans and beasts. Draco suppresses a shudder.

"Lupin wants us to gather as much information as possible over the next few days, with a view to taking the place out once we have the lay of the land."

"Good," Hermione says grimly, the *snick* of the scissors a little more vicious than usual, and Draco winces to himself, concerned about the quality of the haircut. Oh well; if it's too bad, he'll just clip it short all over. It'll look ridiculous for a month, but she's the one who'll have to look at him. "How much reconnaissance will you be doing?" She still sounds tense, and he remembers that it was during a reconnaissance mission that she'd been captured.

"Lupin says Weasley's usual is three days for something this size, which seems cautious," he tells her, trying to be reassuring, but genuinely does think it's very cautious – as a Death Eater, they went striding in without a second thought. Usually with the assurance of superior numbers, but not always. And he'd always come out alive. "I'll be careful, Hermione. Really. I swear."

"I can't believe a word you say," she says, voice tight, comb raking through his hair at the back of his head. The back of his neck feels weirdly bare, and his hair feels much shorter.

"Hey, c'mere. Stop butchering my hair for a moment and look at me."

"I'm not *butchering*!" She sounds a little teary, but she does as he says. Her eyes are wet as she stands in front of him, scissors in one hand and comb in the other.

"Hey. I know. I'm just teasing." He meets her eyes steadily. "I swear, Hermione, on my love for you, that I will be careful."

"If you mean that," she says with a sniff, totally unmoved as she eyes him knowingly, "then tell me what you were thinking about before."

Shit.

He swallows drily. He has to be honest, or she'll never trust him again. "I was thinking about my parents." Her lips part, shock shaping her expression.

"Oh. Oh, I didn't –" She's immediately apologetic and remorseful, and Draco shakes his head, dismissing her apologies. He's said it now. He may as well keep going.

"I was wondering if they were still alive. And what happens if I meet my father on the battlefield," he says, feeling a little ill. Hermione presses her lips together so hard they go white, and nods helplessly. And then:

"Wh-why would they be dead?"

"Because I left," he says dully, staring past her shoulder at the wall, unable to hold her gaze any longer.

"Oh my god." She looks as nauseated as he feels, staring at him with ashen cheeks and wide eyes. "So because of – of me?"

"*No!*" He's vehement. "No. Not because of you. Because I left."

"I convinced you to, though. You wanted to stay." She looks slightly panicked, and he can tell she's about to spiral. "Is that part of why you wanted to stay? Because you never said. You never... I knew you wrote to your mother, but –"

"They would've wanted it," Draco cuts in, saying the words firmly, just as much for his sake as for hers. It's important to remind himself of that. His mother, in particular, had always wanted him to get free of the Dark Lord's grip if he ever got the chance. "I know that. They would want me to. Most of the time, I try not to think about them," he explains, as Hermione takes a shaky breath and centres herself, smudging a tear off her cheek. "It just fucks with my head. I don't know how the Dark Lord punished them –" the idea of his mother being punished by being used in one of Voldemort's experiments enters his head, and he wants to vomit – or whether they're alive or dead. So I just don't."

"Fair enough," Hermione says, moving to the side of his head and starting to comb and cut again. *Snick. Snick-snick.* "I guess I do the same with my parents. So – what would happen if you met your father on the battlefield? Couldn't he defect? Wouldn't that be good?"

"Not if my mother's alive," Draco says grimly. "If my mother's alive, my father will have to return to the Dark Lord. But if he's seen by another Death Eater to be sparing me, they'll both be killed." He suddenly finds himself less enamoured by the idea of fighting and more convinced that his parents are alive than he's ever been. Voldemort wouldn't just waste two purebloods, especially one who was still willing and able to fight for him.

"Well then," Hermione says after a long pause, in which only the sound of the scissors echoes through the bathroom. "You'll just have to make sure to kill or capture any other Death Eaters." She says it so assuredly. So confidently. She moves to the other side of his head after working around to the back and making a few snips here and there. White-blond locks slide down the cape and scatter on the floor at his feet.

"I appreciate your belief in my skills," he says, "but I'm not sure how easy that will be."

"If you *need* to do it, then you'll do it," she says as if she believes he'll be able to rise effortlessly to any occasion. "You always do."

Draco supposes, rather grimly, that she's not entirely wrong. Besides, it's probably better in this case to be overconfident and not fret endlessly over the possibilities rather than make himself sick with worry. "He's probably still in Europe anyway, if he's alive. The Dark Lord would've likely just punished my mother," he says, hating that, "because that would hurt my father too. And keeping her alive gives him leverage over my father. And, he probably thinks it gives him leverage over me too, if it ever comes down to it."

"And it doesn't? Give him leverage over you?" Hermione asks tentatively, fingers soft on his hair, scissors snipping as though she's an expert.

"No. You're my leverage now."

When the haircut is finally done, she vanishes the drifts of hair and whips off the cape, turning it back into the bar of hand soap, doing the same with the stool when he stands and runs his fingers through his hair. It feels much shorter and neater. Lighter. He's feeling lighter too, after their conversation, and his excitement at being able to go on a mission has returned. "How do I look?" he asks her, and she flaps a hand at the mirrored cabinet over the sink.

"See for yourself. I think I did a pretty good job, but you might hate it."

He kisses her temple and manoeuvres around her, staring at himself in the mirror. The scar cutting from just below his left ear and up to beneath his eye is always the first thing he notices these days; a fleeting acknowledgement. It doesn't bother him as much as the ruin of his back, aesthetically. It may be on his face, but it's just a thin, inoffensive purple seam that is slowly fading in lividity. As for his hair... It looks good. He slides his hands through it and ruffles the back. Short back and sides, and a few inches on top. Long enough that he can slick it back neatly with Sleekeazy's how he's always liked to, but short enough not to fall in his eyes if it's unstyled.

"Wow."

"You sound so surprised," she says, with a smile, coming up behind him and kissing the back of his arm before peeking around it playfully to poke her tongue out at him in the mirror. "I told you I'd cut Harry and Ron's hair. All the time."

"Then why does it always look so bad?" He asks as he turns away from his surprisingly professional haircut to loop his arms around her waist.

"Hah, true. Harry because that's just his hair," she ticks off on her fingers, "and Ron because he never washes it." Then she adds with a brisk efficiency: "You should have a shower. You're going to get hair everywhere, and it itches me. I'm going to get the scar liniment and wait for you upstairs. Your clothes are over the towel rail." Hermione goes up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek, and then he lets her slip from the circle of his arms, shifting out of the way so she can crouch down and rummage through the cupboard under the sink. She finally pulls out the squat, purple glass jar of liniment and waves it in childish triumph.

Draco grins at her, heart feeling too big, emotion nearly choking him. She's radiant. Wonderful.

"What?" she asks as she picks up her wand and shoves it in the waistband of his leggings, seeming to feel his gaze on her, and bemused by his smile. He has to clear his throat before he speaks, not trusting his voice.

"You," he says, hoping Hermione takes it the right way as he goes on. "You're so much better than you were." She flushes but doesn't look displeased, just awkward.

"I feel it. Mostly." She fidgets with the jar of liniment. "I hope this helps *you*. Fighting, I mean."

"I hope so too." He shrugs. "But it can't make things worse."

Her face darkens. "Unless you get hurt. Or –"

"But I won't." He reaches out and flips the shower on, effectively cutting off that line of thought. "I'll be fine, Hermione. Go upstairs. I'll be five minutes."

"Shirt off and lie down," Hermione says with a gesture as Draco comes in and shuts the door behind him, and he obeys, peeling his shirt off, crawling onto the bed, and flopping down. He's in light grey joggers, low on his hips, and she can see the waistband of his black boxer shorts peeking out. Scarring aside, he's looking glorious. All wiry, defined muscle, lean and practical rather than bulky, his straight, broad shoulders and narrow hips making a vee of his back. He looks like he could be a statue, she thinks, not for the first time. So perfect, even with the scars. Maybe even *because* of them – what they represent. Hermione doesn't care about getting rid of them altogether. She just wants to make sure Draco's mobility isn't affected.

His haircut looks good, she's relieved to see; he's dried it with a charm, and it sits nicely. She did a good job, Hermione thinks, satisfied as she opens the jar of liniment and kneels on the bed beside his back. The sunlight falls across his head and shoulders. He pillows his head on his forearms, face turned toward her. His expression is happy; features relaxed, his one visible eye half-closed, his lashes screening it so that only a sliver of grey iris is showing. *She* doesn't feel happy. Nerves are tangled in her stomach in a knotted ball, and worry gnaws at her. It feels all sick and wrong.

She hates this. But she couldn't keep being selfish forever – Hermione knows that. Draco needs this more than she needs to keep him safe. Besides, she can't really keep either of them safe. Not while there's a war on. They need to win first. She sighs, and tries to focus on his back, lying before her. From upper shoulder blade to waist, it's a wreck of deep scarring; mountain ranges and valleys of scar tissue, crinkled and jagged, as though tectonic plates have been particularly active beneath his skin, crumpling it up ugly and purple-silvered. She did some of this. Guilt digs through her with sharp, bony fingers. Hermione inhales and settles herself as she lets the breath out. She dips some ointment out of the glass jar, and it's chill on her fingers, with an overpowering smell of menthol.

"Sorry if it's cold," she says softly and folds forward to kiss his shoulder; unscarred, smooth skin, nearly pale as white marble in sunlight. He makes a happy sound at the touch of her lips and she smiles, a little thread of her worry unwinding and dissipating in the face of his contentment.

"I'll be surprised if I can feel it at all," he says with a wry look, an eye opening properly and searching over her, and Hermione winces. She kisses his shoulder blade, over the scars, his skin uneven and yet soft beneath her mouth.

"Can you feel that?" she asks, her liniment-coated fingers resting on his shoulder, careful not to get the ointment everywhere, her mouth still next to his skin. Her eyes lift up to his face, and he shakes his head, his mouth a thin line.

"No."

Hermione licks a long stripe up from where her mouth hovers, and she sees Draco react when the sensation registers about halfway through; a little shiver rippling through him. "I felt *that*," he says. "Did you just *lick* me?"

Hermione snickers. "Yes."

"It was very wet," he says, amused, and she smiles to herself.

"Good." And then, Hermione straightens and takes the lid off the jar to dip up a bit more liniment. She'll need a lot – she'll have to ask Tonks to order more in because she wants to start applying it twice a day. "That's the whole point of this," she says and smears the first fingerful of liniment on, up near the top edge of the scarring, the smell of menthol rising in the air. Draco flinches slightly, obviously able to feel the cold cream. "Mobility mostly, but sensation would be nice too." His one-eyed gaze is on her face; she's aware of it as she focuses on his back, rubbing the liniment in firmly. She can feel the magic soaking into her skin; if she had any scars on her hands, this process would get rid of them too, eventually. "I'd like you to be able to feel it when I touch you."

"I can, sometimes," he says, voice quiet. It's mostly a lie, and they both know it. He takes a little breath. "I suppose it'll look better too."

"I don't care how it looks," Hermione says firmly as she scoops up more liniment, slathering it well over most of his upper back and moving down as she gets more, using both hands. She's definitely going to need more jars of this stuff. This one application will take a quarter of the jar. He twitches when the cold lotion goes over the parts of his skin that still have nerves as she generously smears it all the way down to his waist.

"I'd understand if you did," Draco says neutrally, and Hermione frowns, glancing at him to make sure he sees her expression.

"Well, I *don't*." Her frown deepens. "Besides, I did half of this." She trails greasy fingertips down a knotted ridge that goes from the right shoulder blade to the left side of his waist. He took this for her, and *from* her. His nails have fully grown back now, but his back, the fading burns, and the scar on his face are lingering reminders of how she was forced to hurt him. She wonders sometimes if he resents her. He doesn't seem to.

"Don't," he says softly, expression sad, and no – there's no resentment there. "Don't blame yourself, Hermione. Please." His mouth is tight with his sadness, and Hermione can't answer how he wants, so she just shrugs.

"Well, like I said – I don't care how it looks." She smooths her hands gently over his back, wishing she could kiss it and show him just how little she cares, except it's greasy with the liniment that stinks of menthol so strongly her nose is nearly running.

"You can press harder, you know," Draco says, not mentioning her guilt, thank Merlin. She doesn't want to talk about blame, or trauma, or tomorrow. She wants to be here. Now, in the moment, with him half-naked in front of her.

"A proper massage?" she asks, and he nods, catching his lower lip between his teeth, one eye wide and innocent, and *oh*, he looks so sweet like that. "It won't hurt?"

"I'll let you know if it does." He smiles faintly, that visible eye shining mirror-bright. The sun is painting him golden as he shifts on the bed, settling more comfortably.

Hermione goes up on her knees over him so she can use her body weight, and as she presses the heels of her hands hard on either side of his spine, Draco's lashes fall shut, a fan against his unscarred right cheek. He sighs, a release of tension, and she can feel how tight his muscles are. Part of her is worried she's going to injure him – split a scar open – but she knows that's irrational. He's fully healed. She slides her hands in increments out toward his shoulder blades, pressing deep into the tissue along the way as she tries to get to the muscle that lies beneath the scarring. He groans, forehead furrowing.

"Are you –?"

"I'm fine. Salazar's sake, that feels so good."

She keeps going.

"*Oof*." He groans again as she pushes her thumbs down either side of his spine. "*Fuck*, that's sore, but good. Don't stop," he mumbles, eyes still shut, head pillowed on his forearms. So she keeps going, the task oddly mesmerising, a waking dream. The scent of menthol hangs heavy in the air, like a blanket pressing down on her. Tomorrow falls away, and her fear with it. He's warm under her hands, and the soft, blissful noises he makes are lovely. Hermione loses herself in the moment as she kneads and presses, and maps his back; this new topography more familiar to her than the smooth skin he'd had all his life before.

This is the back she saw, horrified, when Draco stumbled drunk and agonised into their room, having taken the flogging to protect her. Even though he knew it would only be buying her time, not a permanent fix. Tears sting her eyes, but he can't feel them drip on his scar tissue. He only feels the firm pressure as she leans over him, using all her strength to push the heels of her hands into muscles that are taut with months and years of tension. He makes muffled little groans and exhalations of relief as she slowly eases the tight knots. He'd sacrificed his back just to buy her some time.

Merlin, she doesn't deserve him.

If he can sacrifice his own body to try fruitlessly to keep her safe for just a little longer, she can put up with some fear to help him heal emotionally. To perhaps find closure in fighting. She snuffles, and glances quickly away when he blinks his visible eye sleepily open, fixing it on her.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." She doesn't sound it – she knows that. "I'm fine. Just – shut your eyes and enjoy it." The words are hoarse and strangled, tears blurring her vision as she stares at the window with a clenched jaw, trying not to cry properly. A cloud-chased sky is visible beyond rooftops, and Hermione breathes slowly and steadily. From the corner of her eye, she sees Draco's mouth downturn slightly, but he jerks a nod and shuts his eye, turning his face down into the bed more – hidden in the hollow between forearms and sheet. The muscles in his shoulders flex and bunch with the movement, and Hermione watches the way the scars shift. A tear drips on the back of her hand.

She'd taken care of this back.

It had been one of the first times she'd touched him, rather than the other way around.

Her hands push and her biceps ache as she does what she can to erase the memory of the burden he's carried from his muscles. This back: coated in blood, laid down to yellow fat and gleaming bone. Hermione remembers she had wanted to scream in frustration when Draco had said she couldn't use magic to heal him. She had spent days nursing him through it. Through the agony, and the fever, changing bandages soaked through with sweat, blood, and weeping fluids, cleaning tissue that was turning to infection, and half holding him up as they stumbled to the bathroom. She had watched his back heal, and she'd tended it carefully. And then she'd had to undo all her own work herself when she'd *tortured* him.

Fuck. She remembers the way he'd screamed. The way he'd begged.

She gulps and sniffs as she locks her hands one atop the other and presses them to one side of the base of his spine. He turns his head slightly at the sounds of her snuffles. "The menthol," she lies, although to be honest, the heavy scent *is* stinging her eyes and nose slightly still. He makes a little *hmm*, and lets it go. Hermione knows he's not fooled, but he's still letting it lie, and she's thankful. She pushes down on the other side of his spine, and he grunts, and something clicks.

"*Nngh ...*" he breathes, and if that sound wasn't so relieved, Hermione would be worried she'd done something to hurt him. "Fuck, that's *amazing*," he mumbles. "Why have you never done this before?"

"Because you insisted you wanted to *keep* your damn scars," she says helplessly, frustration coiling up in her. Hermione had *wanted* to do this. It was him who hadn't, stubborn and immovable. Just as bad as her. She laughs through tears, wet and hitching, and droplets spatter on unscarred flesh. He flinches, feeling it.

"Shit," he mutters, and then he's rolling over with a grunt and a heave, sitting up with his hands braced behind him, staring at her, his head cocked to one side. He shifts and reaches out his right hand, caressing her cheek. "Why are you crying?" he asks, groggy with relaxation, and he's bewildered and upset as he trails his knuckles over the bones of her face.

"I don't know," she says, although that's not exactly true. It's his back, and it's the torture, and the mansion, and tomorrow. His eyes are steady on hers, calm, and grey as stones. "*Everything*," she says in a wobbly voice, and Draco shoves himself back against the pillows and then holds his arms out.

"Come here," he says, softly.

She does, after wiping away her tears. Clambering onto his lap, her knees bracketing his hips as his hands slide large and careful over *her* back, and for some reason, instead of burying her face in the crook of his neck, she kisses his parted lips.

"*Oh*," he says, muffled against her lips, and then his hands cup her face. She tastes mint – him, as she licks into his mouth – and salt. She thinks the latter is her own lingering tears as their mouths seal together, open and soft and hungry. Nudging and pressing, her tongue slicking over his. She needs to be close. She needs him inside her. If she could, Hermione would crawl inside his skin and nestle beside his heart, but she can't.

The kiss deepens. Her need builds, a sense of urgency seeded in her chest and growing fast. Draco's going to Kenmare tomorrow and it's only reconnaissance, but that was what got *her* captured. He could be captured. He could die. Today could be the last day she sees him alive. Oh god. Her shirt comes off over her head in one frantic tug as she breaks away from him, and she catches a glimpse of him staring at her wide-eyed and confused before she leans in, taking his face in her hands and kissing him with a sharp, thoughtless need. His hands find her sides, just barely brushing over her breasts, and he makes a satisfied sound low in his chest.

His urgency builds as hers does, he matching her. His hands sliding over her back, gripping her bum, holding the nape of her neck, the base of her braid, palming awkwardly over her breasts. His lips teasing and pushing, and his tongue honeyed and sweet, making pleasure shiver from her mouth right through every nerve ending. Hermione feels heated, and needy, and *impatient*. She wants all of him. All of him now. Forever. She wants to lock him inside her body and never let him free. Hers. He's *hers*, and he's going into danger, and she can't stop him. It feels so terrible. It feels like dying. The *fear*, and he hasn't even gone yet. He's still in her arms.

"Merlin, you're so beautiful," he says as she pulls back, scrambling upright on her knees over his lap and shoving her leggings and knickers down as far as they will go – not far enough. Draco's too busy staring raptly at her to help her as she struggles to get one leg out of her damned clothes. He steadies her with a hand on her shoulder, but the other is on her left breast, and his eyes are eating her up. He's devouring her with his eyes, and she just wants him *in* her. Not looking. His cock in her cunt. Fucking her. Filling her. Locked together, her legs gripping his hips, her arms around his neck, his mouth at her temple, and her cheek, and her lips as he thrusts, jolting her whole body each time he fucks home, driving her into the mattress.

"So fucking gorgeous. All peaches and cream, and your tits, and hips, and hair..." He pulls the tie off her braid as he lists his pretty flattery in incoherent drifts of words, and while ordinarily she might love it, right now she questions his sanity. Who cares about *hair*. She can see his erection, eager to escape its confines, and *that's* what matters.

"Forget that," she tells him, frustrated, and tips off him sideways, hitting the bed on her back, legs in the air, half kicking and half dragging her leggings and knickers off as he watches her with an amused, lazy grin. "Trousers," she snaps at him, breathless, as she scrambles to her hands and knees, looking at him. He huffs a laugh, but his trousers and boxers come down with brisk efficiency, his cock sticking up almost ridiculously. God, she *wants* it.

And then Draco's telling her: "Come here," and she does, and she's astride him, over him, her hands resting on his shoulders as he feels between her legs. She's not very wet – she wants it, desperately, but her body hasn't caught up with her frantic brain, and he turns his head away, hand to his mouth, and then he's rubbing over her vulva, and she's all wet with saliva. And then he has his cock in his right hand, his left hand on her hip, and he's guiding the two of them together. His cock pushes into her, just the head sliding inside – this delicious intrusion that her cunt twitches around as if trying to pull him further in, and he groans as she lets her forehead fall to the crook of his neck.

"*Ohh...*" Hermione wavers as she lets herself sink down, very slowly, and it's exquisite. He fills her, and she can feel his heart where their chests press together, and taste the salt on his skin as her mouth opens on his neck in a sloppy not-quite-kiss, his hands on her body, shifting and moving constantly like he's trying to press his touch into every inch of her. His mouth is by her ear, and he's making soft little groans as she slowly moves up and down, his cock sliding easier and easier as she gets wetter. "More," she says. "*More.*" But she can't move the way she wants. She's too slow. Too uncoordinated.

Draco's fingers catch in her half undone braid, and then he's cradling the nape of her neck and holding her still against him as he moves them both a little. A shift here, an adjustment there, and then she's still on top, but *he's* in control, her upper body draped over his, his hands on her bum, and his hips moving, and he's fucking her down onto him even as he thrusts up into her, and oh god, it's so good. *So good*. Hermione's fingers catch in the short strands of his hair, she mouths at his neck, grabs his shoulders, and short, huffing groans are fucked from her throat, husky and shapeless. Every part of her mind is focused on the sensation blooming in her core, and it radiates outward through her. Her whole body is pleasure.

He says something about making her come, and she shakes her head *no* against his neck, her fingers pressing over his lips. It's not about that. It's about this. Him inside her. Her around him.

They're caught in bliss, together. Caught in each other.

She can feel when he's getting close; can feel the tension suddenly building sharply, and the way his breathing shifts, going from fast to outright ragged, the way his fingers clutch tighter. As she feels him start to tip toward the edge, she curls her fingers gently in his hair and pushes two fingers into his mouth. She's inside him too now, she thinks incoherently. His teeth grip her digits carefully, his tongue swirling and sending electricity through her. "Come," she tells him, close to his ear, her fingers tightening in his hair, moving her hips with his thrusts. "*Come, come now.*"

He sucks on her fingers as he comes as if it's involuntary, a broken moan stifled behind his lips, his hips slamming up as he pushes her body down, his cum filling her, his thrusts juddering until he's done, spent. His head falls back against the pillows, his fingers slackening on her bum, and she sighs; blissful. Contented. Draped over him, her face still buried against his neck, her fingers pulling from his mouth – and he catches her wrist in his hand, and kisses her fingers gently before letting her go, his arm sliding around her back. He's out of breath, his heart thudding quickly, and he combs his fingers through her hair, totally undoing her braid.

"I love you," she mumbles against his sweat-damp, saliva-licked skin, his cock still inside her, slowly softening.

"I love you, Hermione. Always." He presses a kiss to her head, against her hair, shifting her so that his cock slips free, trapped now between their bodies, cum slowly seeping out of her. She shuts her eyes tightly. "It'll be okay, tomorrow. I'll be careful."

Hermione nods, tears welling in her eyes again. "I know," she whispers, unable to trust her traitorous voice.

"I'm coming back."

"You'd better," she says fiercely, holding her tears down by sheer force of will. "Or I'm coming after you. *Wherever* you are."

Chapter End Notes

► Notes

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

► Housekeeping!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thirty-One

It's twilight when they arrive with a crack on the side of the N70 in County Kerry, on the banks of a creek, about two miles out of Kenmare. It's all fields and copses of trees and shrubs, and more trees line the creek and the roadside. Draco has side-along apparated with Potter, and he lets go of Potter's arm immediately, hands on his knees, coughing and gagging briefly as nauseated dizziness sweeps over him. He staggers further away from the road, bracing himself against a tree at the creek edge. Side-along apparation is always rougher on the passenger, but even so, Potter coughs and spits into the long grass.

Weasley, Creevey, and Johnson are with them; Weasley's leading the mission. Creevey has been shooting Draco dark looks since they'd gathered for their pre-mission briefing, at the mansion the Order had held Draco in during his debriefing process. Draco strongly suspects that he's going to have to watch himself around Creevey. He doesn't think the younger man will risk the mission to get at Draco, but he might do something stupid and inadvertently put them all at risk in his fixation on Draco. He doesn't know why Lupin let Weasley put them both on the same team, considering Lupin knows from the debrief that Draco killed Dennis, unless it's some kind of test for one or both of them. Or maybe Lupin just didn't think of it. He looks up, taking stock.

The wind is chill, but Draco's in a thick navy woollen jersey, dark jeans, and his own boots. He's not cold, just invigorated.

The stars are coming out, shining faintly between the foliage, and the dark water of the creek gleams with moonshine; the moon is about two-thirds full, and waxing. The road isn't busy with Muggle cars right now, but they're well back away from it anyway, hidden amongst the trees. The Snatcher encampment is about 300 metres southwest, according to Weasley's briefing. Potter is accompanying them on reconnaissance, but he won't be joining them for the assault in a few days. And whether Draco does is conditional on Weasley's approval.

"Everyone alright?" Weasley asks in a low voice, and they sound off alphabetically; Creevey, Johnson, Draco, and Potter. "Good. Let's go." The redhead leads the way, picking his way up along beside the creek through sparse undergrowth, feet quiet on the ground. Draco falls in behind him, beside Potter. He's just as quiet as Weasley, and he feels body memory kick in, old habits sliding back into place. His boots are careful, eyes flicking between the ground and the environment around him, avoiding larger twigs amongst the leaf litter and branches at head height alike. His breath is slow and controlled, his pulse a steady thud, heat radiating under his skin as he keeps his body alert, muscles ready.

He feels alive.

It's only reconnaissance – like he told Hermione as he kissed her goodbye on the porch, her expression worried, although she hadn't said a word against it. She'd just told Draco she loved him, her voice quiet and her eyes filled with unspoken fear. His heart had panged at that, and he'd nearly backed out. *I'll be back before you wake up*, he'd told her instead, thumb tracing her jaw from ear to chin, and she'd nodded, lips pressed together. And then Weasley and Potter had come barging out, having said their own farewells to Ginevra and Mrs Weasley inside, followed by Lupin at a more sedate pace and Johnson at the rear, all of them heading to meet Creevey at the mansion. Hermione had watched them go silently, forcing a smile for Potter and Weasley.

Really though, this part of the mission is nothing particularly risky or complicated. Not what they're doing tonight, and again tomorrow night. It just requires quiet, care, and patience. And the ability to cast a good Disillusionment Charm. The Snatchers have set up their camp under Death Eater instructions in Dunkerron Castle, a four-story stone tower house that has been ruined for many, many decades. A minor Muggle tourist attraction, the intelligence the Order has already gathered says that the Snatchers are using it as a base of operations. They're moving Muggle women and girls through the place.

The wards the Snatchers set around it are keeping Muggles at a short distance – sightseers and tourists losing interest in actually entering the old ruin once they get within about a few hundred metres. The Order members who have investigated up until now seem to think that the Snatchers are taking advantage of the tourists who wander to the edge of the wards – leisurely picking off any women who appear to be of childbearing age. The Order wants to take it out entirely, rescuing the Muggles in the process, but before they do that, they need to take proper stock of the situation.

Which is where Draco and the rest of their small team come in.

He ducks a low hanging branch, a clawed shape in the gloom, the trees they're wending through turning the twilight to full dark. They can use no *lumos* charms, though; those would give them away in a heartbeat. Draco is glad he has good night vision as he hears a stumble and crunch, and then Johnson swears under her breath. It won't be so bad once they start fanning out to survey the place. Once they're out in the open more – in the fields surrounding the tower – they'll have the moon, so long as the sky remains cloudless.

He hears Creevey and Johnson whisper to each other in low voices and rolls his eyes impatiently. If he were in charge, he'd shut them up, but Weasley just glances over his shoulder and lets it slide. *Bad form*, Draco thinks, silently judging. It's a strange thought. Whenever he went on missions as a Death Eater, a large part of him was hoping for the other members of his team to screw up. To give them away. To fuck the mission thoroughly. *He* never did – he wanted to remain blameless and above suspicion – but he was always pleased when the others did. Now, however, he wants perfection. If something goes wrong on this mission, Hermione will never let him out of her sight again. And he doesn't want that. They haven't even done anything yet, and he's loving this.

Weasley leads them up the embankment and over a little rise and then holds up a hand, and they all pull up to a halt. And Draco sees it just before Weasley points it out – lights, up ahead and off to the right, about a hundred metres away, half screened by several large trees. The tower, lit up by magical torchlight, as well as what looks like a small campfire. He can see the shapes of several people silhouetted black against the light of the leaping flames. "Disillusionment Charms," Weasley orders. Draco murmurs the charm, tapping the top of his head and feeling that cold, viscous feeling trickle down over him, as though he's cracked an egg on his head, the sensation lingering. It'll feel that way as long as the charm is active. The people around him disappear, leaving only vague ripples in the air when they move. Distortions of the world.

"Alright, everyone," Weasley begins. There's a casualness to him still, but he's different out here – alert and cool, an air of leadership radiating off him as he assumes – correctly – that everyone knows what to do. They had gone over the mission plan thoroughly during their briefing; there's nothing they should need to discuss now. "Remember, stay out of range of the wards. And when in doubt, retreat. We're coming back tomorrow, so don't give us away just for the hope of more information. Yes?" There's a quiet murmur of assent. "Off you go, then. Meet you back here in three hours. Set your timers." They all wear small wristbands that will pulse when the time is up; Draco presses his now and feels a single pulse as it activates.

And then he crouches low and heads off in the direction discussed. He's circling right around from behind, heading further south than most of the others, and then right out to the west past the castle, followed by Creevey, who won't be going as far west as him. It seems as though Creevey is the least experienced member of the team, and Weasley has given him the safest placement, besides Potter. Weasley is going toward the western side from the north approach, followed by Johnson, while Potter remains nearest the creek. Draco's fairly sure the Boy-Who-Lived isn't happy about that, from his expression during the briefing. The wind bites deeper as Draco skirts the encampment, out in the open with no trees for cover, staying low and moving silently, eyes always shifting, scanning the area. There could be patrols of Snatchers around the tower, and the last thing they need is to be so focused on the tower that they run smack dab into a patrol.

Draco circles around and finally finds a good vantage point out to the southwest. After casting a number of revealing charms as he approaches, he manages to get within about fifty metres of the tower, in the shelter of a rather prickly shrub. The wards the Snatchers have to alert them to intruders are haphazard, badly set, and fairly close to the tower proper. He supposes they haven't had any reason to be worried about an attack. Yet. He goes to his belly in the grass and dirt, his wand clutched in his right hand, muttering a charm for far-seeing. And then the next three hours spin out like years.

It gets chillier, and he casts a warming charm. A Snatcher who appears to be on a meandering patrol wanders within about twenty metres of him and pisses into another bush; Draco is exceedingly grateful it wasn't his bush. His knees begin to ache, his legs slowly going numb no matter how much he wriggles his toes inside his boots. His elbows hurt. His neck. It sucks, and it's boring, and time drags. It's fucking fantastic.

He's doing something. And sure, it's just surveillance, and tomorrow will be too, but then the night after that, they have a tentative plan to attack. And Draco could be in on that – he could be part of that attack. He could be involved in capturing or killing the Snatchers and saving the Muggle women and girls currently held there. *Saving* them instead of mercy-killing them. Instead of passively watching them be raped into dull, blank objects, or tortured to death, or shoved into the dungeons to waste away. He might actually be able to do something *good*. And fuck, he's so hungry for that. Desperate.

So Draco stays alert as time oozes by like treacle. He counts the individual Snatchers he sees, and the lights at the windows. He takes mental note of the drifts of conversation that carry across to him. And he slowly puts together their patterns of movement from 6 pm to 9 pm – the time they plan to attack. The hours from dusk until full dark. He hears women crying and his jaw clenches. It makes him remember things he'd rather forget. He thinks of Hermione, his heart aching, and he shoves thoughts of her aside and focuses on the moment. The people, the numbers, the movements, the data. He'll only have pieces of it, but between them all, the team should be able to put together a fairly full picture at the debrief afterwards. And then tomorrow, they'll double-check and make sure nothing major has changed.

And if it's all still fairly similar, they'll assault the place the following night. Draco thinks of that with relish, knowing Weasley isn't likely to prevent him from joining the assault. He almost feels sorry for Potter, getting to do all the boring grunt work and take none of the dangerous, thrilling glory.

Full dark falls and the sky is a beautiful bowl above when he eventually rolls over to give his body a break and looks up, the moon a gleaming semicircle, and the MilkyWay spilling out across the velvet black, surrounded by the freckling of shining stars, strewn thick and beautiful. A woman screams, a sound that breaks into a series of choking sobs, before rising into a wail that cuts off sharply, and the beauty is shattered. His lips press together. He feels sick as he rolls back over and stares at the tower, but he can see no sign of the woman. Silence reigns again, save the faint murmur of conversation and laughter, the clinking of bottles, the occasional scuff of feet on the ground as a lone Snatcher patrols past.

Finally, just when Draco is starting to want to beat his head against the ground out of sheer boredom, his wristband begins to pulse. He presses it and slides out from under the bush, alert and aware, a groan held behind his lips as his body protests movement. He circles cautiously around, heading eastward almost to the creek before he begins to move north. He removes the Disillusionment Charm before he reaches the meeting point, once he's down by the creek, because he can't stand the slippery cold feeling a minute longer than he has to.

And that's when the *depulso* hits him. A hard smack against his side that knocks the wind clean out of him and makes his ribs groan as he goes flying back into the creek, hitting a rock hard with the small of his back. Bewilderment hits him along with the pain. He saw no one. Draco would have seen one of the Snatchers, surely. With an effort, he just barely keeps the yelp of pain that bubbles up on impact locked behind his lips – *silence, silence is key*. He struggles to his feet, dripping wet and smeared with mud, his wand still clutched tight in his hand and at the ready, when he sees a shape unveil from beneath a Disillusionment Charm. He's about to snarl a lethal curse, the incantation on his lips when he realises it's Creevey.

It's fucking *Creevey*. Rage boils through him at the realisation. Draco nearly killed the idiot. Creevey nearly compromised the whole Merlin-damned mission with that ambush. The stupid, vengeance-addled little shit. Draco flicks his wand, and the idiot's wand comes zipping into Draco's hand before Creevey can even react. Pathetic. Another flick and the man is silenced – unable to make a sound even if he tries. And then Draco is surging across the creek and up the muddy embankment, Creevey's wand jammed in his back pocket, fucking *furios*.

The younger man's face is twisted with anger, and he's mouthing something as he marches forward to meet Draco, but Draco has more momentum and weight behind him. He seizes Creevey by the front of his jersey and his arm and lifts him off his feet before he slams him down against the muddy ground, hard. Hard enough to smack the wind out of the other man. He crouches over him, lifting him and slamming him down again, and then as Creevey rolls half onto his side, winded and silently wheezing and gasping for air, Draco drives his knee into Creevey's diaphragm once – pauses – twice.

Creevey's face is dark red in the moonlight, and he's gasping silently like a fish, eyes streaming tears of pain as his gaze rolls up to meet Draco's, the whites showing all the way around as Draco leans down over him. His hand fits to the man's throat, and something wild and hot beats in his chest as he squeezes. "If you wanted payback, you little shit," he snarls into Creevey's ear, "*this* is what you should have done." He lets Creevey's throat go, sharply. "You silence and disarm your target first. You don't risk the mission by letting me yell out. Or kill you. You fucking *idiot*." He

stands – back and ribs killing him – and yanks Creevey's wand out of his back pocket, dropping it beside his face. "Now get up," he tells him scathingly, lifting the *silencio*.

He waits for Creevey to get up and then follows behind him, listening to his nearly silent, quivering breaths, feeling deeply conflicted. He's faintly ashamed for unleashing on Creevey like that, but Salazar's sake, it had felt *good*. He thinks perhaps the younger man had forgotten Draco was a Death Eater. He was so used to seeing Draco as a prisoner, Creevey had forgotten he was a seasoned, dangerous duellist and fighter. He hadn't survived for over three years as a Death Eater by being incompetent.

He follows Creevey in silence, boots squelching wetly and jeans rubbing uncomfortably until he uses his head and casts a drying charm. He doesn't bother with a *scourgify*. He'd rather just have a hot shower when he gets back to the safe house later. A bit of dried mud won't hurt him, although his jeans do feel stiff. He's pretty sure his arse is printed with mud, and up the back of his jersey as well. The small of his back feels badly bruised and swollen, radiating heat, but there's nothing he can do about that. He's not about to show his back to any of the Order members so they can put on the dittany or bruise cream they all carry, and he can't reach to do it himself. So he grits his teeth and walks on.

When they reach the meeting point, the others are all already gathered there, although it seems like Weasley has only just turned up. They all look toward the two approaching men as Creevey ducks between two shrubs, Draco in his wake. "All good?" Weasley asks, uncertain, no doubt able to feel the dull anger radiating off Draco and Creevey's discomfort, although in the dark, he won't be able to see any sign of the scuffle – certainly not front on, at least.

"Yeah." He nods at Weasley. Talking about what Creevey has done can wait until they're safely back at the mansion, debriefing.

"Y-yes," Creevey adds, surprised, shooting Draco a wary glance.

"Good. Let's go then; we'll disappearate from here."

Draco lands at the gate to the mansion grounds with a jolt and gulps down his nausea, pressing his fist against his stomach and clearing his throat hard. *Ugh*. He shakes his head and lifts it to look down the driveway to the moonlit manor house the Order is currently using as their organisational hub. A small shudder runs through him. It looks eerily like Voldemort's mansion tonight. There are small crunching sounds as the others land on the fine gravel around him, and the sound of Johnson retching.

Success, Draco thinks as he looks around and sees everyone there, igniting *lumos* charms rather unnecessarily. The mission had been as easy as he'd thought it would be, aside from Creevey's little trick. And just as satisfying as he'd hoped. "Come on, everyone. Time to head in for debriefing," Weasley says, and they all start off, feet crunching on the driveway. Draco jolts as Weasley claps him on the shoulder in an almost comradely fashion.

"What happened to you? Fall in the creek?" The redhead grins with a kind of vicious humour, a hard, focused edge about him that Draco thinks is from the mission. There's always adrenaline and tension, even on simple reconnaissance missions; Draco's feeling that himself, and enjoying it. He feels sharp and alive, hyperfocused on what is happening around him rather than how he feels inside or what he's done in the past. He exists viscerally, wonderfully in the moment.

"Sort of." Draco grimaces. He shoots a glance at Creevey, who is walking off to one side, keeping to the shadows. "Creevey may have helped."

"He is a bit clumsy," Weasley agrees, hands in his pockets, and Draco shakes his head.

"No. He came up behind me on the way back. Used a *depulso* on me and blew me into the fucking creek. I wouldn't say anything now because I'm fine, except he jeopardised the mission doing that. If I'd made a sound or been badly hurt..."

Weasley's face transforms with anger. "He *what*? I mean, I don't blame him for wanting to," he says wryly, "but –"

"You know about Dennis?" Draco asks, his voice tight, before he realises too late that Weasley was just making a joke. The redhead's expression shifts to one of delayed comprehension.

"Oh shit." He shoots Creevey a look and slows his pace, the two men dropping back behind the others, Weasley waving Potter on when he gives them a curious look. "I *did* read that. Merlin's balls, I totally forgot. You –" he lowers his voice further "– *killed Dennis*."

"Nott Sr had set him on fire," Draco gets out through clenched teeth, feeling guilt writhe up in his gut. "He was going to burn to fucking death. I ended it quickly."

There's distaste and horror on Weasley's face, but he nods. "I'm betting Colin doesn't see it that way, though."

"No. He doesn't."

"Well, *shit*. You should've said."

Draco shrugs. "You might have dropped me from the mission, rather than Creevey. Besides, I didn't think he'd be so damned stupid."

"Hm. This could be an issue. I can't just let him do that. But –"

"I already made it clear to him not to do it again," Draco says, expression grim, and Weasley huffs a slightly concerned laugh.

"Should I ask? Is that why he keeps looking over his shoulder at you like he's afraid you're going to jump him?" They're nearly at the house now; Johnson and Potter ascending the stairs. Draco shakes his head.

"You can ask him. I'm sure you will. But I just roughed him up a bit," he says honestly. "Told him to do it silently, next time."

"Hah, giving him tips, Malfoy?"

"Why not?"

"So how do I deal with this, then?" Weasley's watching him out of the corner of his eye as they approach the stairs, and Draco gets the feeling the question is a test.

"I don't know. Ask Lupin." He shrugs, nerves jangling as he sees the opportunity to go back out to Kenmare slipping through his fingers. He stops at the bottom of the stairs and fixes Weasley with a

steady gaze. "I want to stay on the mission, and I don't have an issue with Creevey being there. Or with him hating me. That's fine. But he needs to keep it together when we're out there." Weasley's silent for a moment, and then he nods.

"Yeah. Shit. I'll talk to Lupin, then."

The debrief goes on for hours. They sit around the table in the briefing room and start off by writing down everything they recall as they drink strong cups of tea or coffee – Draco has coffee – while the information is still fresh in their minds. When he's done, Draco gets up to find a bathroom. It hurts to piss, and his urine is faintly pink-streaked. He swears under his breath and lifts his jersey, craning his neck to look in the bathroom mirror. *Fuck*. There's a rather swollen, violet-red bruise about the size of his hand, right over his right kidney. He curses Creevey under his breath as he returns to the briefing room. Hermione's going to be upset when she sees *that*.

Maybe it'll help that Creevey gave it to him, Draco thinks hopefully, still in that tactical headspace. It wasn't the mission; it was *Creevey*. She might be upset, but she won't need to be worried. He glares at the man when he sits back down at the table.

Eventually, Lupin magically makes copies of their notes and skims through them, and then they share their information, figuring out total numbers, patrols, defences, and any patterns that had emerged during the three hours they'd been out there. Only six Snatchers, they think by the end of their debriefing, including the two patrolling. There are potentially a few more inside, with the women, but of course, they can't know their numbers. No more than another six, and probably only two or three. It's nearly midnight before they're done, and Lupin asks Creevey to stay behind when he dismisses the others. Draco raises a brow, wondering if the lycanthrope wants him to stay, but Lupin just gives him a tired smile and flaps a dismissive hand at him.

Interesting, and hopeful. If Lupin doesn't need him there, maybe he isn't about to take him off the mission.

"Are you coming?" Potter asks as they traipse through the mansion, and Draco stops in the entrance hall, leaning against the wall instead of heading out the door.

"I'm waiting for Lupin. And Creevey," he says, having already decided on a probable course of action, and Potter looks confused. Weasley explains, saving Draco the trouble of doing it, although his explanation is typically *Weasley* in flavour – short, unflattering, and lacking nuance. Johnson grimaces and shoots them all an uncomfortable look, eyes lingering on Draco before she says she's heading back to the safe house. Potter and Weasley stay, somewhat unexpectedly.

"So what's your plan, Malfoy?" Potter asks, sounding genuinely curious as he leans against the opposite wall, beside Weasley, fiddling with his wand – Draco's old wand. "Why are you sticking around?"

"I want to see what Lupin says," he prevaricates. Not untrue, but he could do that back at the safe house, and they all know it. "Why are *you* two sticking around?"

"Eh. Making sure you don't kill Colin too," Weasley says laconically, shrugging, and Potter makes a horrified, strangled laugh.

"Hm." Draco resists the urge to snap. He shoves his hands in his pockets and waits, silent as Potter and Weasley make quiet, inane conversation. Hermione says there's a rift between the two of them,

but Draco doesn't really see it. They still seem joined at the hip. There's a tension and strain that arises between them at times – both of them seemed displeased when Lupin went over the fact that Potter wouldn't be able to join them on the assault, for instance, but they seem fine otherwise. They talk, and they certainly manage to gang up on Draco well enough. He supposes he's never had close enough friends to understand what Hermione's talking about.

The friendships he'd had were all relationships of convenience and mutual benefit, in the end, and as soon as they'd stopped being useful to one or both parties, they'd faded away. Draco gets the feeling Potter and Weasley – and Hermione – are all more like family, except Hermione's drifted apart from them now. What has happened has cut her off; she's been isolated and altered by what happened. *Broken*, he thinks, jaw clenched, back aching, his head tipped back against the wall as he waits. But hopefully, she's healing. Although he knows there's no way she'll ever be the person she was before.

It takes nearly half an hour for footsteps to approach, and Potter and Weasley are both looking distinctly bored, having fallen silent a short while ago. Draco pushes off the wall, straightens, and catches sight of Creevey walking quickly down the corridor, staring at his feet. The shorter, skinnier man looks thoroughly chastised, his expression angry and resentful. Huh. Draco had been expecting the cards to fall in Creevey's favour to some extent, but Creevey just looks miserable, and Draco sees his eyes are red-rimmed when he looks up. He groans and looks nervous when he sees Draco there, but slightly reassured by the presence of Potter and Weasley.

"What do you want, Death Eater?" he asks, jutting his chin up defiantly, and his voice is rough and wet, like he's been crying.

"What did Lupin say?" Draco counters.

"That I'm off the damned mission if I can't '*work professionally*' with you." Creevey sounds disbelieving and utterly betrayed. He scowls at Draco, ignoring the other two. "He wants me to play nicely with *you*. After what you did!" Draco's silent, hands still in his pockets as Creevey marches up to him. "You're a fucking *murderer*."

Draco swallows. "Yes," he says. Creevey makes a harsh, angry scoff.

"Don't play this fucking game. You killed my brother. In cold blood. You cut his throat." Creevey's face is a mask of anger. "He was barely sixteen, and you fucking killed him!"

"Nott had set him alight. Would you have preferred I let him burn to death?" Draco inquires calmly, quirking a brow, and Potter makes a horrified sound. Creevey's punch is not unexpected, but Draco can't help flinching. The other man catches him square in the mouth, and he feels his top lip split. Fuck, it stings. He resists the urge to put his hands up to shield his face and holds one hand out to stop Weasley and Potter from intervening, although, in honesty, it didn't look like they'd been going to. They were watching with interest.

"Hitting me won't bring him back, Creevey," Draco says, and little flecks of blood burst from his mouth. One spray spatters Creevey's cheek. "I still killed him." Creevey's eyes swim with tears. He holds up his wand in threat, and Draco swears internally, although he'd been half-expecting it. He grabs for the thing, and there's a brief struggle before Draco elbows Creevey in the throat and then rips the man's wand from his hands, tossing it toward Potter and Weasley. Potter catches it, bright eyes wide and startled behind his glasses. And then Creevey smashes his forehead into Draco's nose, and pain blooms as sharp as broken glass through his sinuses.

Fuck. He staggers back against the wall.

"You fucking cunt," Creevey gasps, rasping thanks to Draco's elbow, and hits Draco again, a punch to the stomach this time. "You murdering fucking scum." Again, a fist to the stomach, and Draco wonders why he thought this was a good idea. He doesn't fight back, though. He's committed to the course of action. Creevey grabs him by the jersey and tries to slam him back against the wall, but he's not strong enough, and Draco just stumbles back against it slightly. They're eye to eye. Bloodshot, grieving blue locked to Draco's cold grey, probably also wet – with tears thanks to his damned nose.

"See this – this is the way you sort it out, Creevey," he chokes as they stand there facing each other for a moment. "Like this. Not on a fucking *mission*."

"Fuck you!" Creevey slams his open hand against the wall by Draco's face, and he flinches despite himself.

"I didn't have a choice, Creevey," he says, mouth swollen and nose almost certainly broken – nasal and slurring. "You think I *wanted* to do it? I fucking *didn't*. But I don't regret it."

"He was *sixteen*! He was still just a kid! You fucking monster." Creevey backs up, staring at Draco helplessly, tears running down his cheeks. "You fought on their side! You killed innocent people! Tortured them! And now you're here, and I have to *look* at you. To look at the bastard who took my brother away, and I'm not allowed to even bloody hurt you. Not allowed to give you what you *deserve*." The younger man's fists are clenched, his shoulders rising and falling raggedly with his breaths.

"Well. Now's your chance, Creevey." Draco spreads his hands wide at his sides, grinning. "Take it. Get your kicks in. I doubt you'll find it as fun as you think it'll be, though."

He certainly doesn't find it fun, although there *is* a certain cleansing absolution that comes with having the shit kicked out of him for the minute or so Creevey gets before a slightly horrified Potter and Weasley yank him off Draco, writhing and swearing, and still lashing out. Draco lies on the floor on his back, panting and trying to orient himself as Potter and Weasley sort Creevey out.

"Go home, Colin," he hears Potter say. "Go home, and get some sleep."

"But he – he –" Creevey says, sobbing, as Draco pants through the pain in his diaphragm and ribs that flares brighter whenever he takes a breath, and he tries to figure out what hurts and what doesn't. Thank Merlin for the dittany, he thinks. He'll need it.

"He's done a lot of shit, to a lot of people," Weasley cuts in, cold and hard, and Draco shuts his eyes, misery churning through him. "I read his debrief. But – *shit*, I can't believe I'm saying this, Colin, but he was our man, almost from the beginning. He didn't want to do what he did. He didn't want to do *any* of it –"

"But he still did!"

"Yeah, well... That's the shit part, innit?" Weasley says, and Draco tries not to cry. *That is indeed the shit part*, he thinks. Weasley – as eloquent as always. And yet, absolutely correct. He tunes out the short exchange that follows, focusing on the blood whooshing in his head. And then something nudges his thigh. He opens his eyes. Weasley and Potter's faces swim into view above him. He thinks Weasley was prodding him with a booted foot.

"I feel like he gets off on being hit. I swear to Merlin." That's Weasley, grimly amused.

"Christ, Malfoy. Do you hate yourself or something?" Potter, sounding slightly horrified.

Draco laughs and gurgles blood, spitting it onto the floor. A molar feels loose in its socket. Hermione is going to be so *mad*. "What gave it away?" he slurs on a gasp, rolling onto his side with a pained groan, and from there onto all fours, slowly. "Fuck, that hurts."

"I bet." Potter holds out a helping hand, but Draco waves him off. He pushes to his feet, stumbling, wobbling, and making for the wall, which helps hold him up. "*Episkey*," Potter says twice in a row, and Draco's nose snaps back into place, and then his lip seals. *Ouch*.

"Thanks," he mumbles, and Potter nods, shrugging.

"Come on," Weasley says. "Creevey's gone home, and so should we. Hermione will be worried." He shoots Draco a sideways glance, clearly uncomfortable with the sentence he'd just had to say. "And I'm tired."

Draco shoves off from the wall with a groan, falling in behind Potter and Weasley. His recently injured knee is sore again – Creevey kicked it – but otherwise he thinks he'll be fine. Just a few bumps and bruises. The other two men had yanked Creevey off Draco before he could do too much damage. The night air slaps some sense into him as they step out the door, heading toward the disapparation point and Hermione, and Draco sighs, his breath a cloud of steam in the air.

Overall, tonight has been a good night.

Chapter End Notes

► Notes

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Pidanka, who is still the best beta a scatter-brained writer could have 🙌

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thirty-Two

She's sitting in the dining room nursing a cup of tea and clock-watching when she hears the back door slam. Angelina had come in nearly forty minutes ago, and when Hermione had accosted the witch, she'd said Draco and the others were fine. "They're waiting for Colin?" she had added with a shrug, as though she was as bewildered as Hermione was. So when Hermione hears the door bang shut, it's not so much a lifting of fear as it is just relief at having him back. She knew he was fine, but it wouldn't feel real until she saw him with her own eyes.

Booted footsteps sound as she abandons her half-drunk tea and rushes for the doorway into the hall, her hair loose and fluffing around her face, uncooperative and curling. She sees Harry and Ron, who smile tiredly as she pops her head through the doorway, followed up by Draco, who – "Is that *blood*?" she shrills, although she knows full well it is. Dried blood is smeared over Draco's mouth and down his chin, and there's bruising forming on his jaw and around his left eye. He winces as their eyes meet, stopping in front of her as Harry and Ron scurry off like cowards. For all their issues, they still seem thick as thieves when it comes to situations like this; fleeing silently in unison, like they agreed on it telepathically.

"I'm okay," Draco says quickly as she scans her eyes over him. "I'm okay, Hermione. I swear." It looks like his nose has been healed, and maybe his lip, judging by where the dried blood appears to have been coming from. What the fuck. Fear slices through her, and she flings her arms – carefully – around him. He makes an *oof*, and she relaxes her grip further, head pressed to his chest so she can listen to his heart thud reassuringly, his woolly jersey scratchy on her cheek. "I didn't get this on the mission. Not really. And it's only some bruises. Nothing major."

Hermione exhales slowly. She wants to shout, and cry, and say, *this is why I said it was too dangerous*. Only, Draco's arms are around her, firm and warm, one hand rubbing her back, and yes, he's obviously a little battered, but he's okay. She tries to make herself relax; her heart is racing fast, and she feels all shaky from the shock of seeing him like this. "What happened?"

"Tell you while you put some bruise potion on? I have a bruise on my back I can't reach," he says, slightly nervously, as if she's a land mine, or a mouse trap; something on the verge of snapping or exploding. Hermione almost feels guilty.

"Come on then," she says as she pulls back but doesn't move away. Her hands on his shoulders, their eyes locked. For a moment, she's catapulted back in time. He's muddy and bloody, having just come in from a mission, all wound-tight and focused, and dead on his feet with exhaustion. She thinks of the mansion. Of the way he toed his boots off by the door, how he smelled of smoke so often, and the way he sometimes limped his way across the floor to the bathroom and sometimes

strode quickly. How she watched him from the chair she huddled in and wondered what the hell he was thinking. Whether she could be falling for him – him of all people.

"What?" he asks, dark blond brows scrunching in puzzlement, his hand gentling over her hair, and the look on his face – unvarnished adoration – makes her heart crush tight.

"This reminds me of then," Hermione says before she can chicken out, both of them knowing what she means. And then, just as Draco's expression is stiffening, she finishes almost shyly, "And that made me think how desperately I love you." His face loses that grim hardness that had been creeping over it and goes all soft and confused in an instant – young, vulnerable. And then she grabs the front of his jersey in both hands and yanks him down, kissing his bloodied mouth willingly. For a moment, she feels like she's in two places at once. Then and now, and in both, she has him. His mouth is soft and tastes of copper, as it would've then, bloodied coming in from a mission, and his hands are buried in her hair. Her body feels too full, overflowing with a sweet, aching kind of love.

"I was so worried," she says as he straightens, both of them slightly breathless.

"It went well," he tells her, taking her hand and leading her toward the stairs. "Without a hitch." Hermione wonders how he got his injuries then, frowning to herself.

"Was it Harry and Ron again?" she demands suddenly with no context as they go up the stairs, she ahead of him, her hand on the bannister as she glances over her shoulder, and he looks at her in bewilderment for a moment. "Who *hurt* you," she clarifies impatiently. Because if it was, she'll murder them. Or make them wish they were dead. He huffs a laugh.

"No. No, it wasn't them." Frustratingly, he doesn't elaborate.

"Then who?" They pass the first-floor landing, heading up to the second-floor bathroom. Hermione glances back at Draco again, and he looks uncomfortable.

"Creevey," he says at last, after a sigh and a long pause. Hermione freezes on the second-floor landing.

"*Colin*?" she asks in disbelief. Draco grimaces and nods.

"Yeah."

She leads the way down the corridor to the bathroom, utterly bemused. "Colin? But why on earth would little Colin Creevey do that? And why would you let..." She trails off, beginning to put two and two together, and uneasiness grows in her stomach. Colin had lost his little brother Dennis about a year ago, during a Death Eater attack. Hermione seemed to recall he'd been set on fire and then had his throat cut. She comes to a halt in the bathroom doorway, turning to face him, feeling suddenly like she might be sick. She looks up at Draco. White-blond hair neatly cut by her, and grey eyes filled with a wealth of guilt and self-loathing that Hermione thinks may be bottomless, his mouth a firm, set line as he meets her eyes. His expression says: *yes*.

There is so much she doesn't know about him.

"You killed Dennis," she says, tongue feeling numb in her mouth, even as a part of her tells herself – *yes, Hermione, of course he did. You know that must be why. You aren't stupid.* She turns away abruptly and goes to open up the above-sink cabinet, rummaging through and finding the bruise

potion; a runny cream in a dark blue bottle. She feels a little shocked, and thinks she probably shouldn't. She may not know what he's done, victim by victim, but she knows what he's done in the broad strokes and generalities that paint a clear enough picture for her. She needs to stop feeling blindsided by reality.

"Yes," Draco says rather belatedly, and she looks over at him as she shuts the cabinet, he still standing in the doorway in his navy jersey and grubby jeans. He looks like a beaten dog that's expecting a kick; shoulders hunched and eyes struggling to hold her gaze, his jaw clenched and his fingers twitching at his sides. She swallows, and thinks: *Colin hurt him because he killed Dennis*. And then her thoughts develop from there, forking and branching off, but aloud she only says:

"Hurry up then." Her tone is soft. "Come in and take your clothes off."

He looks as though that's the last thing he expected her to say, bemused and lost, but he swiftly does as he's told; shutting and locking the door behind him and then stripping off his jersey and t-shirt together. "*Oh*," Hermione says, as she sees the blooms of bruising on his abdomen, and his chest, and high on his shoulder. She crosses the room to him because he seems rooted to the floor by his confession that he'd killed Dennis. She wonders why on earth Lupin had let them go on a mission together if he'd known. It had to have been awful for them both, to have to face each other.

She holds out the jar to Draco. He can see himself in the mirror from here. "You can do your face," she says, and he scoops out a glob of runny bruise cream that pools in his palm. Hermione smooths some of the bruise potion over his shoulder as he dabs it on his face, and asks what her thoughts have led her to.

"Draco, did you pick the fight with Colin on purpose?" She looks up at him, and his eyes skitter away. He seems an odd mix of self-satisfied, and self-loathing, and she can't figure it out. She applies more cream to his chest, watching as it soaks in. They'll have to apply more after he has a shower, but this will begin to help. "Did you?"

He sighs. "Not exactly."

She's very calm. "And what does that mean?"

"I gave him a free shot," he says and Hermione boggles at him. "He gave me this on the mission –" he twists and shows her a nasty haematoma right over his kidney, and she gasps and mutters a few choice swear words under her breath and grabs his side before he can turn back around, applying cream to that one now as he flinches and squirms from the discomfort. It has to be causing a good deal of pain. "He gave me that on the mission," Draco starts over, "and jeopardised the whole thing. Weasley told Lupin afterwards, who gave Creevey a talking to after debriefing, but I felt like..."

"Like you should let him beat the shit out of you?" Hermione offered when he seemed at a loss for words, and he shrugged. "That's so *stupid*." She feels angry, her fingers shaking a little as she turns him back around and finishes putting cream on his abdomen. "So what, you just stood there and let him hit you?"

He grimaces. "Basically."

"Idiot," she tells him, although really, she's more upset than angry. He pushes his fingers through her hair, his eyes apologetic when she meets them briefly before she drops to a crouch and starts unlacing his boots. They seem to have been wet and then dried, and the double-knotted bow is being stubborn. She uses her short nails to pick at the cords, frowning.

"I – I killed his brother, Hermione," Draco says as he stands there, jeans' button and fly undone now, boxers exposed just a little. He's beautiful but marred, and Hermione thinks she could stare at him like this all night, until her legs go numb. He's lean and dangerous looking, a certain predatory air to him that she thinks is left over from the mission. "I think he's entitled to a lot more than what I gave him."

"Well, I fucking *don't*," she retorts tartly, getting his second bootlace tugged undone.

"You don't even know what happened," he says, sounding helpless – bewildered, and she looks up at him from her precariously balanced squat. The muscles in his abdomen ripple slightly as he slides his hand through his hair again, as if he's forgotten it's too short to fall in his eyes now. Merlin, Hermione thinks dizzily. "You don't know how I – or why." His expression is both bleak and bemused. He's remembering the horror of what he did, and Hermione would guess he doesn't understand why she's reacting the way she is. She really hopes she's guessing correctly, and that Draco was the Death Eater who'd cut Dennis's throat and not the one who'd set him on fire.

But she can't grind his face in every incident that comes up by making a big deal out of it. It would serve no purpose. He hates himself enough for both of them, and she *knows* he would've done the best he could at the time. The most merciful thing that he could do. And she's so relieved to have him home safely that she hardly cares right now. He's standing right here half-naked, and Hermione has other things she wants to think about. She's already cast a pre-emptive contraceptive charm; she's gotten good at that charm lately.

"I remember when it happened," she tells Draco as she taps the side of his booted foot meaningfully. He lifts it obediently, wobbling off-balance as Hermione yanks his boot off and then peels off his sock. "I know enough." His foot is pale and imprinted with the weave of the sock, and Hermione wrinkles up her nose and begins on his other foot. "You did what you could. And as horrible as it is for Colin, he doesn't have any rights over you because of what you did while you were an agent for the Order." Hermione says it with finality; conversation closed, end of story, because she doesn't want to think about any of that. Not right now.

She straightens and looks him in the eye. "Don't let him do that again."

He swallows, shoulders straight, all bruises and scars over lean muscle and bone, and utterly distracting. "I won't," he says, clear and simple, meeting Hermione's eyes. And satisfied by that, she pushes up on tiptoes and kisses him. *This* is what she's wanted all night, not to talk about old sins. She wants *Draco*. She wants him to lick pleasure into her, and fuck her until she's gasping and moaning, and utterly loses herself in the moment. The past forgotten, the future unthought of; just the two of them now, and the pleasure.

Draco isn't expecting the kiss.

She smiles against his mouth as he makes a startled sound, and his hands hover in the air for a moment before he gently buries them in her loose hair. He kisses her back after only a split second's pause, a little moan escaping him as he captures her lips properly. Careful and sweet, but filled with an aching need. His mouth is soft and tastes like aniseed and bitterness, and when she pulls away, he's breathless, his pupils huge, desire suddenly bright and hot in his eyes. A wave of hair falls over her eyes and he pushes it back behind her ear very gently, teeth indenting his lower lip, his gaze intent on her.

"I already cast a contraceptive charm," she says, wanting him to know what she wants, and feels heat flush her cheeks as she admits it. His breath catches, his knuckles sliding over her jaw.

"*Really?*" he asks, and it comes out strangled and wanting as he shifts unconsciously, leaning closer to her, and Hermione feels arousal run through her, liquid and electric. She sways into him, and they're like two magnets yanked together.

"I thought, maybe we could – after you have a shower," she says, hesitant and unsure, her cheeks flaming. And caught up in desire and leftover adrenaline, he shoots her a grin that makes her stomach twist deliciously.

"Why wait?"

Hermione is warm in his hands. Warm, soft, and slippery with the hot water that sheets over her darkly creamy skin, cascading off his body onto hers. She's leaning back against the wall, standing sideways in the over-bath shower, her hair hanging dripping down her back, and he's blocking her in, his mouth pressed to hers, his hands trying to be everywhere all at once. He wants to touch every part of her. He's never felt her like this before. Wet and hot, curvier than she's ever been beneath his hands, all plush and malleable, his fingers denting into luscious, soft flesh and leaving brief imprints. All his healing hurts are forgotten with her beneath his hands.

His dick is hard, and he wants to rut against her, but he isn't sure how she'll react. He doesn't want to risk it. Not right now. Instead, he leaves it alone where it is – just bumping occasionally and maddeningly against her lower abdomen – and moves his mouth up to her jaw, placing sucking kisses along it. She shivers under his hands, and her own tighten on his back – the feeling of her fingers weird and far off through the scar tissue. His dick rubs against her, and he moans and sucks sloppily on her ear lobe. She smells like vanilla and *her*, even in the water, and it's intoxicating.

"Oh," she says in a small gasp and turns her head. Catches his lips, and she's eager and greedy as she pushes her mouth into his. Her tongue plays over his and makes him want to do things that are far too rough and urgent for her. Her hands shift, fingers dragging trails up his sides and creating shivers that buzz down his spine and make him rock his hips out despite himself. "*Oh*," she moans again, and her hips are pushing out too, one leg coming up and hooking against his. *Fuck*. His hand dips between her thighs as she bites his lower lip and then sucks on it, her beaded wet lashes fluttering apart, firewhisky eyes half open and fixed on his eyes as she sucks, running her tongue along his lip.

"*Hnngh*," he gets out very eloquently as he finds her clit and watches her pupil-swamped eyes flutter briefly shut again as she releases his lip to moan, and he kisses her hard. Perhaps harder than he should, but Salazar's sake, how can he resist? She's so *delicious*. And then his fingers are pushing between her shower-wet folds while she moans and finds... *oh fuck*, she's arousal-wet too, her cunt slick and slippery before the water starts to sluice it away. He pulls back from her, and her hands – resting on his upper arms – clamp down for a minute as she moans in protest.

"Wait. Just...hang on," he tells her, shifting her so that she stands against the wall that the shower head juts out of, at the end of the bath. Leaning back, her head resting against the wall, hips bumped out a little, so he can see the vee of short dark hair and below that, her cunt; flush and wet with more than just water, and practically begging to be licked. *Fuck*, he will never be tired of the sight of her. He reaches up and directs the shower flow down, so that it falls over her breasts – he bends his head and sucks on a dusky pink nipple, and she groans, one hand flying to his head, grabbing a handful of hair.

"*Draco...*"

He draws back slightly and looks at her. Head fallen back against the wall and eyes slitted open, chest rising and falling in short heaves, the water cascading down her body, her hips outthrust by the way the bath slopes and forces her to plant her feet further forward than her shoulders. Merlin. She's *perfect*, her glazed eyes needy as she murmurs his name again, fingers reaching out and curling in his hair. Steam billows up, filling the air thickly and making the whole room hot and damp, and the only sounds are their breaths, soft noises, and the water streaming down.

Draco slowly sinks to his knees, his wet hair sliding from her fingers as his knees hit the porcelain, and his hands find her hips, fingertips slipping around to grab her arse. He gently, insistently nuzzles his face against her pussy, humming with pleasure as he laps at her clit, and she makes a strangled, wanting moan. One hand slaps out to flatten against the wall adjacent to her, and he grins, burying his face against her. The hot water is so good on his bruised body and tired muscles. Thank Merlin for magical water heating.

The water runs over him as he licks and sucks – her clit at first, but then delving further back, between her labia, pushing her legs wider so he can reach as she moans and shivers. And then her legs are too wide for her to stay upright comfortably, and her pelvis is still tilted wrong, and it just makes sense to hook first one leg over his shoulder, and then after a moment, both. And then she's sitting on his shoulders with her back pressed against the shower wall, one hand grabbing awkwardly at the shower controls for stability, the other shaped to the back of his head, holding him there as she makes stifled, whimpering moans.

Hermione tries to be quiet at his urging, in case the noise carries – they haven't cast any privacy charms. Draco doesn't care so much if she screams the place down, but she would, so he hushes her in between licks and sucks, and shoving his tongue inside her, fucking her on it, his hands gripping her arse firmly. Her moans are getting louder though, as her cunt gets wetter and more flush with arousal, and her squirming and grabbing more insistent. She's getting close.

He looks up when he adjusts her at one point, his face out of the spray of water, and she's flushed from cheeks to chest, her breathing ragged, her eyes screwed shut and brows all crinkled, mouth open. She's the picture of naked want and bliss, and a part of him is in awe of her. In awe of this. That she can allow this, and that he can do it. After everything that's happened –

"Don't *stop*," she gasps and shoves his head back between her legs.

He does his job well, two fingers pushing into her cunt, fucking her on them as he keeps teasing her clit with his tongue, and before too much more time has passed, a short, hoarse wail breaks from her throat. Her cunt twitches around his thrusting, twisting fingers as her hips jerk and her thighs go completely tense, her fingers yanking at his hair, his tongue still gently laving her swollen clit, teasing every last bit of pleasure out of it as his fingers still their motions inside her. Hermione makes a wobbling moan, her fingers twitching in his hair as the climax passes, and she eases down the other side.

"I want – down," she gasps, seemingly unable to form full sentences, and Draco huffs a laugh and places a kiss on her pubic mound that makes her shiver before he starts to untangle them. It's more difficult to get her off his shoulders, especially now she's all weak and wobbly, than it was to get her on them. But then she's sitting on his thighs as he kneels there, her arms and legs wrapped around him as they kiss wet and lazy, the water hitting the back of her head and shoulders and his dick trapped snugly between their bodies. She seems happy kissing for a while, and he indulges it, letting her ride out the afterglow, although most of him just wants to drag her onto his dick.

Eventually, he caves to that need. He lifts her up onto her feet as he scrambles stiffly to his own, bruised back aching, and then, hands on her hips, gently turns her. He places a kiss on her shoulder as he nudges her feet apart with his foot. "Is this okay?" Draco can't think of what it might remind her of, but best to check first. Although, even that doesn't always help. Sometimes things trigger her that even she didn't realise would set her off. But either way, it's quickly become a habit to check every time he tries something new.

"Yes," she breathes. "That's good." And she seems to get the idea, bracing her hands up on the wall and pushing her arse out and up – so soft, and round, and perfect. It's not the best positioning, but Draco makes it work. His dick pressing against the entrance to her cunt, and *oh fuck*, now it's inside her, and as always, his mind is blanked of nearly all thought except *hot*, and *tight*, and *so good*, and *fuck*. He moves. Fucking her, his hands on her waist and hips, and sliding around to smooth over the fullness of her breasts, his mouth pressing to the ball of her shoulder, kissing and sucking without thought.

It feels like bliss and pressure, building and building, and his breath comes fast, and a delicious heat suffuses him from dick to fingertips, and if he wasn't being wet by the shower, he'd be damp with sweat anyway, as he moves into her, and she pants, and moans, and pushes her arse back against him. He thrusts faster and harder as the pressure builds. He gets closer and closer. He can *feel* it. *Right there*. So *close*. And then he shoves deep, and her cunt clutches around him, and he comes. His last few thrusts lose all rhythm as he groans and moves unsteady and hard, his fingers digging into the curve of her waist. He thrusts deep into her one last time with a soft, drawn-out groan, and then he presses his lips against her head, her soaking wet hair plastered to her scalp.

"H'mione," he says unsteadily, his voice unexpectedly rough. "Fuck, you're perfect."

Hermione's fingers reach out awkwardly behind her as she slumps with her cheek pressed against the wall, searching for his hand, and it looks uncomfortable as fuck. He pulls out of her quickly, and then tugs her upright properly and against him, turning her to face him. She slides her arms around his waist, face pressed to his chest as the water keeps going, deliciously hot. She clings to him without moving, for long enough that a twinge of concern grows. "Are you alright? Hermione?"

"Yeah," she says softly, a thrum of strain and fear running under her voice. "I'm just really glad you're home safe," she adds, and Draco's heart lurches for her. And he thinks: home. He supposes it is now. Anywhere that Hermione is will be home to him. He kisses the top of her head.

"We should go and be glad in bed then," he tells her. "Before we both turn into giant prunes." His fingertips are already wrinkling up. "You can help me put more scar liniment on." She nods, but it still takes a moment before she lets him go.

Chapter End Notes

► Housekeeping!

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

- ▶ Content Warning
- ▶ Housekeeping!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thirty-Three

For every two steps forward, there's always a shuffle back.

Hermione wakes from uneasy dreams the next morning, having suffered a restless, nightmare-ridden sleep, and turns to Draco, looking to have him sweep away the clinging negativity. There's something delightful about morning sex, Hermione is discovering. Still hazy with sleep, limbs lax and lazy, a hum of energy buzzing through her, not yet tired and beaten down by a long, exhausting day. The sun spills pale gold warmth over their bodies, and everything feels fresh and new.

"Morning," Draco says, warmth in his voice, eyes shifting from the parchment in his hand to her and then back again. He's been awake for a while already, she thinks drowsily as she watches him, sitting there looking through what she suspects is the debrief report assembled by Lupin. There's a coffee on his bedside table – she checks and yes, he got her one too, and from the steam curling off the surface, he charmed it to stay hot. She smiles at that, feeling deliciously warm inside. When she rolls to him, Draco sets his papers aside, all his attention shifting to her. And when her hand creeps to his crotch and she smiles meaningfully, he's all too happy to oblige her desires.

Everything feels delicious and sweet as Hermione kisses him, tasting coffee hot and bitter on his tongue. Hedonistic. She sheds her clothes like autumn leaves, and the sun streaming across the bed is a balm on her skin as she lies there, watching him strip too. Draco's shirt comes off over his head in one drag, and he's lean, like a big cat – all svelte, sleek, and wiry. She loves the sight of him. His boxers come down next, and he's already hard as he stretches out beside her and kisses her gently, his hand smoothing over her side. And then they sink into the bedding, pressing together, entangled as they kiss.

Eventually, his mouth goes from her lips to her bare shoulder, her stomach, her hip, and then her clit. She lies back with her fingers curled in the short strands of his hair, and comes with a gasping, sighing moan. And then she tugs at his hair, pulling him up her body, over her, fitting against her so perfectly, and she moans as his cock slides inside her. He's lighting up her nerve endings, bliss rippling through her as he moves above her, held up on his hands, and then his elbows, her hands clutching at his shoulders as she holds him close to her.

It's something in the way he mouths at her throat. He's done it before without any issue, and Hermione can't remember it being done to her then, but regardless, this time, right now, it flips a switch in her head. Suddenly a sick, crawling sensation digs through her belly, cold and slimy. She wants his mouth off her – the ticklish, tingling arousal shooting from her neck to her clit feels *wrong*. Repulsive. His cock inside her feels invasive, and shameful, and makes her want to scream. The weight of him over her, up on his elbows, feels heavy and suffocating.

Hermione stiffens, a low moan escaping her throat, frozen, eyes screwed shut, as Draco's head stays bent to her throat, his mouth nipping and licking, his hips moving, slowly stroking a wretched pleasure into her cunt. She *hates* it, but she can't seem to move, or speak. If she could, he'd stop in an instant. He would, she knows. But she's lying there like a slab of meat, the words trapped on her tongue, her hands leaden. She whimpers again, opening her eyes and trying and failing to speak, and perhaps he feels how stiff she suddenly is because he lifts his head and looks at her. She doesn't know what he sees in her face, but it must be terrible because he goes ashen and horrified, and shoves up from her without pause.

His cock slides out as he kneels upright between her legs, and she goes scooting back, grabbing a pillow and hugging it to her. Eyes shut, face buried against it, distress and embarrassment searing through her as she tries not to lose herself in muddled, nightmarish memories. Faces, pain, and hands. Other...things. She retches into the pillow, gagging, trying not to throw up.

"*Shit*. Hey, it's alright," Draco says softly, his voice tight, sounding out of breath. "You're safe. You're *safe*, and you're in control. You're the one who has control," he goes on, and Hermione feels the bed sheet being draped lightly over her arms and body as she huddles forward, clinging to the pillow, her eyes still closed and her stomach roiling as she presses her lips tightly together. She feels like vomiting. She's crying quietly, wetting the pillow with her tears. "It's alright," Draco repeats, and Hermione clenches her jaw, trying to let the words sink in. Trying to accept it. "It's over," he tells her, and she takes a juddering breath and lifts her head with an effort, opening her eyes.

There are two wet marks on the pillow. She shoves it aside and pulls the sheet up under her armpits, arms wrapped around her knees as she meets Draco's gaze. He's sitting on the bed edge turned to face her, in his boxers and – inside out – t-shirt already, his hair mussed and his expression fraught with worry for her and guilt that he shouldn't be feeling. "Hermione?" he asks carefully, and she rubs her eyes and swallows hard, still feeling sick. Still fighting the feeling of violation.

"I'm okay," she whispers and holds out a hand to him, letting him know it's okay to touch her. Draco looks grim and sad as he settles onto the bed beside her, and she shuffles over to him, under the sheet still, and presses up against him. His arm comes down tight around her.

"I'm sorry," he says, and there's strain in his voice. Uncertainty, and misery.

"It's not your fault."

"What triggered it?" When this happens, whether it's while they're just kissing or more than, Draco likes to know what set her off. Hermione doesn't particularly like telling him because she notices that, of course, he then tries to avoid doing whatever it was. Not on purpose. But subconsciously, he seems to be avoidant. And sometimes it's as simple as a touch to her side – or like this, a kiss to her neck – and he's done it before without any problem, and probably could do so again. Right this minute, even. Or, well, in an hour's time, perhaps. But sometimes things just go wrong. Maybe she shouldn't have tried to chase away her clinging bad dreams with sex. Hermione sighs, her arm draped over his waist, her head on his chest.

"The way you kissed my neck," she admits unhappily but honestly. "It's never been a problem before. It just...felt wrong this time."

"Okay," he says simply. Just that. Okay. The simplicity takes half the tension out of Hermione. And then he kisses the crown of her head, and they lie there for a while in a restful, easy silence before he runs his fingers up and down her arm. Soothing and nice. "Do you want your coffee? I can round

up your clothes if you like," he offers, and Hermione smiles. Her clothes ended up everywhere. Leggings flung across the room, t-shirt on the bed, knickers on the floor somewhere.

"Yes, please," she says, watching him with love sharp in her chest as he patiently gathers up her things, the possibility of sex – or him coming – entirely set aside without comment or complaint. They can always try again later, Hermione thinks.

"I'm scared," she admits, sitting on the edge of the bed, staring up at Draco with worry churning in her gut as he pulls on the dark, woollen jersey he wears for missions. The first rays of the setting sun shine bloody through the window. They're leaving for the Order's mansion now and disappearing to Kenmare at 7 pm, two hours from now. Earlier than initially planned, but Ron wants to get there early enough to do some last-minute reconnaissance before they go in, in case the situation has changed.

"I'll be fine, Hermione," he says, eyes flicking to her as he tugs his sleeve down over his wand holster. His eyes are grave, his features set and calm, giving nothing away. He's already in that cold, composed state he sinks into before a mission – so similar to how he'd been at Voldemort's mansion, much of the time. Like a statue. Always wearing a mask, both visually and mentally, his surface thoughts kept well hidden from his Master. But then Draco smiles, faintly. And he takes her hand and tugs her to her feet, pulling her into a hug. He's *not* the same as he was then.

"Honestly. I'll be fine. I've been in far more dangerous situations as a Death Eater and come out unscathed. I'm good at this, Hermione. I'll be home by 2 am if it all goes smoothly." He rubs her back. He smells like soap and wool. "You can apparate over to the estate if you want. Wait with Lupin. I should be back *there* by midnight, for the debrief."

"Maybe I will apparate over before midnight then," she says, still unhappy, holding fistfuls of his jersey. It's been three days of stress and worry, ever since his first damn mission. She wouldn't stop him now – she couldn't, not now she sees how much it means to him. He's in his element, out in the field. By Ron and Harry's accounts, he's careful, efficient, and very skilful, and when he gets back, he's filled with a focused, alert kind of energy that radiates off him. Purpose – that's what it is, she realises as she looks up at him now and sees it in his expression, her hands still fisted in his jersey at his sides. He has a purpose. Hermione can't take that away from him.

"I'm going to try to work this evening, though," she says, forcing a smile. "Distract myself."

"That's a good plan." He kisses her temple, trying to reassure her. Hermione is not reassured.

"Hi, Hermione." Hannah pokes her head into Lupin's office, looking windblown and pink-cheeked, in a thick jersey, and Hermione automatically checks the time. It's nearly 6 pm. Draco will be apparating into Kenmare in an hour, along with Ron, Angelina, Colin, and Tonks. It's really not enough people, but then the Order doesn't *have* enough people. Harry is sitting the mission out despite many fraught arguments about it with Lupin, Ron taking Harry's side, of course.

"Hi, Hannah." She adds, "What's up?"

The blonde girl usually never turns up in Lupin's office, and she looks like a witch on a mission – she has a satchel over her shoulder and digs through it as she crosses the office. Hannah yanks out a thick sheaf of parchments, all tied up with string and checks the label attached. "I'm playing messenger owl today, and you're my second-to-last delivery – I've got some new intelligence for

Lupin, or so I've been told." The sheaf of parchments hits the desk with a thud, and then Hannah rifles through again, yanking out a much slimmer file. "And these are some documents for you to decipher – and probably generally organise," she tacks on with a grin, passing the file to Hermione.

"Thanks," Hermione says genuinely. The others tease her gently at mealtimes about being a swot, as if they're still back at Hogwarts, studying. They don't seem to understand that the satisfaction of being able to crack a Death Eater code is comparable to a successful raid, for her. Anyone with a decent, logical brain could do what she does, but Hermione has a knack for seeing patterns and an ability to bury herself in her work for hours without being overwhelmed by frustration. It makes her *good* at it.

Now that she can't bring herself to fight, it's the best way she can contribute. And it helps that she can do it any time of the day or night, tucked away in Lupin's quiet office, usually alone. The stress is low, and if she's having a bad day, she can usually either set the work aside for later or, sometimes, lose herself in her work. She's useful but not essential, and that's how she likes it.

Hannah had said 'second-to-last delivery'. "Where are you headed next?"

"Grimmauld," Hannah says and blushes. Long since re-secured and made safe for Order use, it's often used as a hub and waypoint. People stay there short-term in between assignments, they meet there for romantic assignations, and they leave news and messages for family and friends. "I have a letter from Neville's grandmother for him," she says, which explains the blush. "She sent it to his last safe house, but as it turns out, he'd moved on to Grimmauld already. He's waiting for permission to set up a post at the Shrieking Shack."

"God, really?" Hermione grimaces. "I suppose it could be useful, but it's deep in territory controlled by Death Eaters." It's a risky move. She remembers a time when she would've considered doing something like that herself, with Harry and Ron. Not any more. The idea makes her feel cold with dread and fear. The possibility of recapture makes her feel more frightened than anything else, now, aside from Draco being captured or killed. Hermione wants to think that if she's captured, she'll be decisive enough to kill herself rather than consign herself to the horrendous suffering she *knows* will come, but she's afraid she won't. Not if she knows Draco is still out there, alive.

He'd come for her, whether she's alive or dead. Rescue, or vengeance.

She shivers, trying to shake off her dark thoughts as Hannah speaks.

"Well, you know Neville." The other witch beams with unconscious adoration, flipping her hair back over her shoulder as she straps her satchel shut and pulls her wand out of her arm holster. "If he's suggesting it, he probably has a good plan." She smiles at Hermione. "Anyway, I should go. I'll see you soon, at dinner!" Hermione isn't sure if she'll bother with dinner, but she nods and smiles at Hannah anyway as the witch whisks out of the room with a wave, clearly keen to get to Neville. And Hermione turns her attention to the file in her hands.

By 8 pm, Hermione has sorted her work into three rough piles; completed, needs to be done in the next few days, and doesn't need decoding, just organising. She can't stop worrying about Draco. And Ron, and the others, but honestly, more Draco. So much more. They'll be about to make their move soon if they haven't already, and panic is rising in her chest. She's so afraid. What if he's captured? They'll take him to Voldemort, and oh god, she knows what the sadistic monster will do. He'll make it slow. He'll make Draco beg for death, and then withhold it. He'll –

Her thoughts spiral down, and Hermione finds herself burying her head in her hands and breathing slowly and carefully, trying not to panic. She needs a distraction. She looks up, gulping down her tears, and her gaze falls on Lupin's file. Maybe she can get it preemptively organised and ready for him. Hermione pulls it over and undoes the string, opening up the stack of parchment only to be greeted by a MACUSA emblem. She flips the folder open, and a face she *knows* is grinning out of the magical photo on the top file. Suddenly, her panic goes from a hum to a roar.

She snatches up the file and tosses it down next to the pile, which reveals another familiar face. She swallows down bile. This is a distraction, certainly. Of the worst kind. A horrible, sick feeling warps up in her. The stack of parchments suddenly seems to be emanating evil. Corrosive. Tainted. Her skin crawls and her throat feels tight. Shame burns out beneath her skin. MACUSA has sent Lupin the dossiers of the wizards who were at the dinner. She recognises them all.

The *names* mean nothing to her – D. Jones, J. Garcia, C. Miller, H. Hill – they go on and on as Hermione spreads the parchment files out around her with shaking, sweaty hands. About twelve of them. Her heart is racing, and there is a sharp pain in her chest. She feels dizzy. No, the names mean nothing, but the faces...the faces are imprinted in her mind, nightmarish, warped. Snatches of memory swim up in her mind, vivid and sickening, overwhelming her.

The wizard who had force-fed her the meat, as she'd knelt obediently by Draco's side – that had been Caleb Miller.

The one who had held her head still while she'd thrashed and wept, and had spat in her mouth had been José Garcia. She'd thrown up, and he'd ground her face into the mess.

Daniel Jones had put his fingers in her until she'd bled while Draco laughed and made small talk with the others about what they were doing to her, and she'd wept silently.

The first one to urinate on her had been Harry Hill. She chokes a sob and backs away from the dossiers. He'd put her under the Imperius and made her –

Hermione clamps her hands over her ears, eyes shut, refusing to remember, *refusing*, but the memories keep coming, a dam broken, and she is crushed beneath the weight of the torrent. There's so much. And there's always something she doesn't expect. Some small thing, or a large one, that she didn't remember. That claws its way up into the forefront of her mind, brutal and vivid. Cruel. Horrific. She lets out a strangled sob, backing up against a file cabinet with a crash she doesn't register, sliding down it and ending up sitting on the floor. Knees drawn up and face buried against them, her hands still pressed over her ears as though she can shut the memories out.

She can't.

They keep swirling through her head; vivid and visceral. Eyes shut, heels of her palms pressed into her ears so that all Hermione can hear is her own pathetic moaning reverberating in her skull, her blood thundering. It's as though she can smell it. Feel it again, ghostly echoes on her skin. The *taste* in her mouth. She's crying. Sobbing, as she bites the inside of her cheek raw, copper on her tongue, the iron tang of blood cleansing and grounding, but not dispelling the memories. She can't get a handle on herself. Hermione's spiralling, and she knows that, but she can't stop it.

There are voices; someone must have heard her blundering into the filing cabinet, probably. Or maybe the whimpering moans she's making are louder than they sound inside her head. Either way, Hermione hears voices, muffled and dim through her hands, her heaving breaths, and her whimpers.

"Oh dear. Oh dear, Hermione." It's Mrs Weasley, filled with concern and warmth, but Hermione's too far gone to yank herself out of her spin, even as mortification scorches through her. "Hermione, my dear, are you okay?" Her voice is close. Hermione hears it, but it's a background hum to the panic seizing her, sweat breaking out all over her skin, her heart pounding, her mind a maelstrom. She still shrinks back though. She doesn't want the motherly witch trying to touch her. Her whole body cringes from the thought, and she huddles up smaller. "Harry, love," Mrs Weasley bellows, "you'd better come quick!"

And then the woman stays close, murmuring reassurances and attempts at comfort that fall on deaf ears. Hermione is locked in memories. In nightmares, reared up sharp and bleeding in her mind.

After a while, she realises someone is talking to her. "Hermione?" It's Harry. She doesn't know how long he's been trying to get through to her, but her throat is sore and her chest hurts, her eyes wet and swollen with tears and her nose running. She's breathless and gasping, choking on her tears, and her mind is crowded with horrors. Filled to overflowing. There is so much that she remembers. So much that she wishes she didn't remember. And so much more locked away in the recesses of her mind, waiting to be triggered. She huddles down with every muscle in her body rigid and screaming with tension, and sobs, shoulders shaking and face wet, buried in the hollow between her knees and her body.

She wants to disappear. To vanish.

"Hermione. 'Mione. Shit. It's okay. You're safe, " Harry says, his voice muffled and meaningless. It's not okay. Nothing is okay. Shame sears through her, hot and disgusting. Hermione feels filthy. Dirty. Ruined and tainted, as she remembers what they did. Jones had hurt her the worst. He'd liked making her bleed. Making her scream, and beg for the pain to stop. Damaging her in ways that Draco had needed to heal later, as she'd sat there catatonic and violated. But Hill and Garcia had liked humiliating her the most – in ever more awful, inventive ways, using the Imperius to force her to be complicit. To do as they told her.

She tries not to think about it, gagging as the memories lurch like corpses in her mind. Before that night, she could never have imagined the sheer extent of human depravity. Hermione had *thought* she'd known, but she'd had no clue. She'd been so fucking innocent. And now she's not. She never will be again. She twists to the side, hand slamming sweaty to the floor, and retches. Gagging, bile sharp and acrid in her throat and the back of her nose as she huffs desperately for air, willing her stomach to settle.

A hand settles at her shoulder, and she makes a horrible gurgling sound of protest as she flinches away, scrambling back, stomach still threatening to vomit. Scooting back across the floor, clumsy and frantic. A small sliver of her mind is hot with embarrassment and begging her to pull herself together, but she's too lost in the depths of sickened panic. "'Mione! It's just me. Harry. It's okay. You're at the safe house. You're *safe*." He pleads with her urgently, and she looks up at him, teary and snotty, eyes feeling swollen, blurred with tears. All she can think of is the pain. The violation.

The way Draco had *watched*.

"No, I'm not," she says in a very small, tear-choked voice, scooting back against the wall beside her. She buries her head back into the hollow between her body and knees, and closes her eyes. *He watched*, she thinks, and the thought kills her. It drives a knife through her chest and twists. She *knows* Draco had no choice. She knows how much he hates himself for what he'd had to do – he feels like he failed her, he loathes his inability to protect her, it haunts him. But still, the image of

him amused and unconcerned, laughing with the American wizards as they brutalised her, is burned into her mind. She can't forget it.

He watched while they hurt her. And then afterwards, he'd healed her with trembling hands as he apologised over and over like his heart was breaking. She'd fallen into the slumber of Dreamless Sleep to the sound of him sobbing in the bathroom, broken and wretched. Her heart lurches.

"I want Draco," she says in a tiny voice, nearly inaudible.

There's a heavy sigh. "He's on the Kenmare mission, Hermione. You know that, right?" She does. Or rather, she remembers now that Harry's reminded her of it, and now she feels a resurgence of fear for Draco joining the chaos of her feelings. Every fibre of her body wants him, and she feels like vomiting, and she wants to *claw* the fucking memories out of her brain, and she wants to stop thinking, and everything is *so awful*. Her mind keeps looping, around and around – blood, laughter, flesh, pain, violation. Harry goes on when she doesn't respond. "He'll be back soon. But in the meantime, you should have a Calming Draught. Please, 'Mione?"

"No." She shakes her head, panic seething hotter at the thought. She hates that calm, dull deadness more than she hates this. "No. Leave me alone."

Harry doesn't leave her alone. He keeps trying to convince her, and then, when he finally runs out of arguments, he falls mostly silent, but still stays. In a way, she's nearly glad for his company. *Nearly*. Hermione can still hear him breathing though, and every so often he says something. She hates that. She wishes he'd just sit silently. He sounds exhausted and drained, guilt saturating his words, and they slice into her, awful and wounding even though he means them well, she supposes.

"I'm so sorry, 'Mione." *Sorrys don't fix anything*, she thinks bitterly.

"If I'd known what they were doing to you..." *You would've what? Still done nothing?*

"We should've gotten you out sooner." *Well, you didn't. You didn't, did you, you bastard*, she thinks with a rage that frightens her, her hands curling into fists, nails denting deep and painful into her palms.

"We should've –" he goes on, and she tunes him out. Trapped in her memories and her fear for Draco, her tears a steady leak, her eyes sore, her head aching, wrapped in a ball as Harry prattles on.

Kenmare is glorious, and awful. Mostly awful. They go in at 9 pm, after extensive reconnaissance that shows tonight the Snatchers are just as disorganised and sloppy as the past two nights. They're sitting around the fire drinking, three single-person patrols circling the tower, and like the past two nights, noises from inside that make Draco feel sick and coldly furious. The screams drift over the field toward the small team, who are clustered by the stream – despairing and pained, wrenched from women's lips. They remind him of Hermione, and his heart twists, and his grip on his wand firms, his skin clammy.

They remind him of raids he went on as a Death Eater, too; of the rape and torture that went on in the aftermath, an orgy of violence that Draco could only barely avoid joining in on. As innocents screamed and begged, and the best that he could do was provide the mercy of death or unconsciousness. And a swift death dealt grimly was one thing in war – Draco can understand that – but the sadistic degradation of the Death Eaters is something else entirely. Evil.

They're raping those women. Innocent Muggles who have been captured as breeding stock, slaves, and entertainment, and who are being used for sport until they're collected by Death Eaters. For three nights now, Draco has watched silently as the men have taken turns sitting outside drinking at the fireside, and inside the tower doing things he doesn't want to think about. And every time one wanders out and claps his mates on the shoulders, laughing, Draco wants to murder them. He's been complicit in that shit for years. He stood there around fires like that one so many times before, hating himself as he'd listened to the sobs and the moans, and rejected the offers made with an aloof chill.

And now *these* Snatchers are doing it, and Draco has spent the past two nights, and tonight, just waiting. Listening. And he's desperate to fucking kill the lot of them. Because now he can. *Finally*.

Instead, they're clustered in a small group down by the stream, in amongst the trees, with Weasley going over the plan one more time before they go in. It's unnecessary – they already covered the plan in detail with Lupin back at the Order's estate, and nothing has changed. Creevey and Johnson are taking the patrols out and then establishing a perimeter, with Johnson in charge of ferrying the captured Muggles out to Creevey by the stream, to apparate away. Back at the pre-mission briefing, Johnson had grumbled about Creevey having the easiest job, as usual, and couldn't they have someone more skilled on the team. Draco had almost felt sorry for him – he'd looked utterly crestfallen as Lupin had sighed wearily and reminded Johnson that Creevey had to learn somehow.

Those two aside, Nymphadora is heading into the tower immediately, and Weasley and Draco are mopping up the Snatchers by the fire before they head inside. It's all very clear.

Johnson looks just as impatient as Draco feels right now, shifting from foot to foot, filled with tense energy. Creevey keeps shooting Draco weird looks that make him feel oddly uncomfortable, and Nymphadora's hair is a bright, garish orange. And the occasional scream, or sob, keeps drifting on the air. *At least the Death Eaters didn't fuck about*, he thinks. They went in hard and fast, and didn't waste their time with unnecessary fuss. They all know what to do.

"Let's go, Weasley," he says urgently, and Nymphadora shoots him a warning glance. Her serious expression and tired eyes look ridiculous paired with her neon orange hair.

"This is a mission, not a personal crusade, Draco. Keep your head in the game."

He gives her a scathing look in return, suppressing an eye roll. He really doesn't deserve her doubt. Unlike Creevey, he hasn't jeopardised the mission previously – he's stuck to protocol rigidly. He's been fucking perfect. "I'm *fine*. But we're wasting time."

"Then shut up and listen, Malfoy," Weasley says, and Draco clenches his jaw, irritated.

"I'm listening." He stares at Weasley, waiting for him to finish. The redhead looks around the group, his face hard as a whooping yell splits the air, and Draco looks back to see a shower of sparks fly up from the bonfire, five silhouetted figures around it. They're drinking and laughing, and Draco eyes them sharply. Hungrily. His blood is hot, and adrenaline floods him. He's so ready for this. So fucking ready.

"Use incapacitating spells unless you see your target, or you might hit a hostage." He casts his eyes toward Draco. "We're not taking prisoners, but no Unforgivables. *Yes*, Malfoy, I mean you."

Draco bites back a sarcastic response. The Order has already made it clear that Unforgivables are verboten, but lethal spells are fine. Why the difference, he doesn't know, but he can stick to the rule

easily enough – he never used Unforgivables often anyway. Other spells are just as effective, and don't require emotion to cast. He nods, and Weasley draws his wand. "Right. Disillusionment Charms until you get up to the tower, everyone. Try not to catch each other in friendly fire once you're in, yeah?" Weasley grins, cold and eager. "Let's go."

Draco takes the first Snatcher by surprise. A silent *sectumsempra* that crumples the man, bleeding and dying, and absolutely helpless. Standing one second, and on the dirt the next. He won't be making anyone scream again, Draco thinks, satisfied. Nymphadora is already slipping inside, her Disillusionment Charm dropping as she ducks through the tower door, and Weasley has just used a *diffindo* that drops the second of the five Snatchers around the bonfire. Neat and tidy. They'll clean the bastards up easily. This'll be a walk in the park.

"What the –" one of the other Snatchers starts, twisting to face his two fallen comrades but slow with drink, and Draco casts a silent *expelliarmus*, and then a *depulso* that blows the wizard into the bonfire. Draco grins coldly. The flames lick up hot and devouring with a flick of his wand, and then the Snatcher's screams fade into the background as Draco throws up a *protego* just before a curse splashes against it. The other two Snatchers have their wands out now, and Weasley takes one and Draco the other. The burning Snatcher finally stops screaming as he duels his opponent, who isn't half bad.

It's invigorating.

He shields and ducks as the Snatcher throws up shields and flicks Draco's spells away, exchanging fire for a few moments before one of Draco's spells finally gets through. He hits the wizard with a *petrificus totalus*, of all things; the man falls, stiff as a board, and Draco stalks forward as Weasley's opponent drops to the dirt on his back, eyes glazed and dull in death. Draco grabs his downed opponent and hauls him up by the front of his shirt, hefting his stiff body up with a grunt.

"Malfoy," Weasley snaps sharply. "What're you –" Draco drags the Snatcher to the fire. "*Fuck*, Malfoy, that's not –" He throws the man on. He can't scream, jaws locked shut, but the Snatcher's eyes follow Draco desperately as he walks away, a weird, dizzy satisfaction burning vicious in his chest, his breath coming hard.

"*Diffindo*," Weasley snaps from behind him. "Merlin's fucking *balls*."

The tower is badly lit, and a maze of stairs and small rooms, most of them intact but with enough ruined walls that rubble is strewn across the floor to be a hazard. They've swept the ground floor, and it's clear, with no sign of Nymphadora. And then, as Weasley and Draco start up the stairs, her shock of orange hair appears at the top, three women following behind her in various states of undress, one of them splattered thickly with blood. "Outside's clear," he calls, and she comes thundering down the stairs, the women clustered behind her like ducklings. He scrambles up the stairs over two bodies, followed by Weasley.

"I took the first floor," Nymphadora snaps as she squeezes past them. The stairs are narrow, and Draco flattens himself against the wall to let the terrified women go past. "Don't know if I cleared it," she says succinctly.

"I'll double-check the first, you take the second," Weasley says, and Draco nods. He takes the stairs fast, too eager to get into battle, and sloppy with it. His adrenaline is flowing, and it's been too long

since he's fought – and he's never wanted to do this so much before. He's on the right side for the first time. Helping save people rather than hurting them. He's about to make the second-floor landing when a person comes barrelling down the stairs toward him. They all but run into each other, and the other wizard begins screaming the Killing Curse. "Avad–"

Draco swears as his adrenaline spikes further at the thought of imminent death. There's nowhere to go on these narrow stairs. No way to dodge reliably. So he lunges forward instead of dodging, grabbing the man by the wrist and yanking as the man spits the Killing Curse. The Snatcher's curse cuts off into a scream as he goes plunging down the stairs, hitting the flagstones of the first-floor landing head first. There's a crunch, and the scream cuts off very abruptly.

"*Fuck. Fuck-fuck-fuck*," Draco swears as he scrambles up the last few stairs to the second floor, his heart galloping and his hands shaking from the near-miss as he – cautiously – steps into the small corridor. He's alert, and focused, and so *alive*. There are two doors that he can see, and the corridor bends off to the left. He ducks that way with his wand ready, and finds just more empty corridor. He checks fast and carefully to find the two rooms down that end are empty. The next room, back toward the stairs, holds a Snatcher who tries an *expelliarmus* on him. There's a naked woman dead on the floor, and for a moment, all Draco can see is Hermione.

Draco shields, uses his own *expelliarmus*, and then he loses it, just a little bit. When he comes around, the Snatcher is definitely dead, and *he's* wet with blood. And the young woman on the floor is of Asian ethnicity – she looks nothing like Hermione, not even close. *Shit*. Maybe Nymphadora was right, and he *does* need to get his head in the game. A worm of panic rises in him. He suddenly feels like he's losing it. Draco sets his jaw and tells himself to get it the fuck together as he feels for the woman's pulse, but she's as dead as she looks, though still warm. The Snatcher must have killed her only moments ago. He leaves her body and moves on.

He heads for the last room and pushes the door open to see a girl who can't be more than about thirteen, jammed terrified into a corner, as if she can sink through the wall by sheer force of will. She's huddled under a filthy blanket, and with a lurch of despair, Draco thinks she's naked beneath it. *Keep it the fuck together*, he tells himself.

"It's okay," he begins and then sees movement from the corner of his eye. "*Confringo!*" he spits on instinct, just barely having time to half turn away, forearm coming up to shield his face as the Snatcher explodes in a shower of liquefied flesh. The girl screams. She *keeps* screaming.

"*Silencio!*" Draco snaps as she sits there screaming, face, exposed arms, and blanket covered in the Snatcher. The sound cuts off, though she's still silently screaming, wide-mouthed, her eyes dumb with an animal fear. The poor child doesn't understand what the fuck just happened, Draco thinks grimly as he yanks her to her feet by one arm, her mouth shutting, and the blanket slipping from her grip. She is indeed naked under the blanket, and Draco grabs the blanket off the floor and shoves it at her, an aimless anger churning through him. Just a few months ago, he would've been taking her to the dungeons, not safety.

He hates himself.

She clutches the blanket to her front, not covering much, but his eyes are on her face as he takes her by the arms, turning so he can see past her to the door. Safety first. Merlin, he has to pull himself together. She's sobbing silently. He shakes her hard enough that her teeth clatter, and that seems to get her attention. She stares at him, dull with shock through the mask of a liquefied person splattered over her face.

"I'm getting you out," he says, loud and clear, as he stares into her dazed, dark eyes. He thinks of Hermione again. "You'll be safe. Okay?"

He doesn't know if she does understand because she just stares at him blankly. The girl's been kidnapped, brutalised for days, and then had Draco blow a man into a rain of pink liquid meat in front of her. She's most likely deep in shock. She drops the blanket as he drags her by the arm to the door, as though she lacks the presence of mind to even hold onto things, her feet stumbling. She trips and falls at the doorway, and Draco swears. He has to get her downstairs, outside the tower walls, and hand her off to Johnson.

He lifts her up, and like the child she is, she half climbs him and clings to him, arms around his neck and legs around his waist, head tucked under his chin, and fucking Merlin, he doesn't know where to safely grab her to hold her secure without going to hell. He remembers the blanket and *accios* it off the floor with a flick of his wand, shoving his wand in his teeth as he tucks it around her, trying to give her some measure of modesty. He gets her covered up with the blanket and wraps his left arm around her back. This is going to get him killed. He can't move freely, can't see properly, and one arm is out of action now. He moves out into the corridor, and just as he approaches the doorway to the stairs, someone hits him with an *expelliarmus*.

Fuck. Well that was quick, he thinks with an odd calm. His wand goes flying, and he silently curses the girl clinging to him. He steps back as the Snatcher moves into the doorway with his wand raised and words on his lips. There's nowhere to go, and a tired resignation lurches in Draco's stomach; an acceptance that this is it. He's done.

It's not so bad.

He twists sideways, trying – probably uselessly – to shield the girl with his body as he thinks of Hermione. At the end, she's all there is. Just her. He feels guilty for hurting her like this, after everything he's done to her, the feeling stabbing through him.

"*Sectumsempra!*" There's a thump. Draco isn't dead. He turns his head and sees Weasley standing there over the body of the Snatcher, panting, his face streaked with blood and his eyes gleaming bright. The redhead stares at Draco for a second, and then bends and retrieves Draco's wand from where it's rolled against the wall near him. He tosses it to Draco, who snatches it from mid-air.

"Thanks," Draco says numbly, and Weasley nods.

"Hand her off to Tonks. She's coming up the stairs now. And then take the fourth floor. I'll be on the third."

"Fourth floor," Draco repeats, and then Weasley is gone, and Draco carries the girl out to the landing. Nymphadora is halfway up the first-floor stairs, and Draco carries the girl down to meet her on the first-floor landing.

"Weasley says to take her," he says to Nymphadora's questioning look. She nods, eyes hard and sad as she pries the girl off Draco – she's clinging to him like a limpet now that she's decided he represents safety after all. The witch bundles the blanket around the girl as she stands silently on wobbly legs, and it makes Draco think of Hermione, after the revel, as he'd tried to put his shirt on her and cover her as she'd stood there, dull and broken. Nymphadora hurries the girl down the stairs, tucked against her side, and Draco swallows hard and heads back up the stairs, moving fast.

The top floor is just two big rooms, split by a corridor. Draco's heart is pounding with adrenaline, and his legs are burning slightly thanks to the stairs as he turns to the left room. His exposed skin feels stiff with blood thanks to the Snatcher he'd beaten to death, and the liquefied remains of the other one, and he knows he must look more monster than man at this point. He's unwounded though, and focused. He's had two near-death experiences today, and doesn't want another. So now, on the fourth floor, he doesn't take chances. Once this floor is cleared, they'll be done, after Weasley clears the third floor.

Draco reminds himself to keep an eye out for Nymphadora – when she's done with handing the girl off to Johnson, he imagines she'll join either him or Weasley.

"*Reducto!*" he snaps at the left-hand door, standing out of the line of fire as the door blows into a cloud of splinters, and there are screams. A curse comes whipping out of the gloom, a red bolt that flies past a good two feet to Draco's right. He can't see anything inside; the room is enveloped in a shadowy darkness. He follows its trajectory back and lets loose with a *stupefy* in that direction, followed by a *petrificus totalus*, and another *stupefy*. There are captives in there, and he can't risk a wounding hex or curse, even if that would be easier. That's one of the negatives about being on this side, he supposes. He needs to be more careful. His actions actually matter, now.

As a Death Eater, Draco had figured that killing civilians was more merciful than leaving them alive to be captured and taken away, or tortured and then killed on the spot – or just thrown on a heap and burned alive. So the only time he tried to be cautious with his spell work was when they had orders to capture someone alive. He *preferred* not to kill Order members during engagements, but he had to keep up appearances lest his Death Eater comrades become suspicious, so while he went for wounding curses that gave Order members a chance to flee, he would kill them if need be. As horrible as it had been, it had been less restrictive, at least. He swears inwardly, trying to figure out what the hell to do.

Several more curses come streaking out in immediate succession, as if the caster is frantic and fearful, and there's a small shriek of fear and then a cluster of panicked sobbing from the Muggles trapped inside the room. *Shit*. Draco sends off another stunner, and an orange bolt comes flying back. There's only one Snatcher in there, he thinks. And then he hears movement from the other room, and swears under his breath. The other door rattles and begins to open. His mind races.

He could turn and fight whoever is coming out, safe out of the line of fire of the Snatcher he's currently engaging, except then the man could come up and flank him while he's occupied with this new combatant. Or potentially more than one. *Fuck*. It takes Draco a split second to think it through and decide – he moves out into the dark, open doorway, and slashes off three *diffindos* in the direction of the Snatcher, each slightly lower than the other. He hopes the man isn't using a human shield. There's the meaty thump of a body hitting the ground and he casts a *lumos*. A wizard lies on the ground, the top half of his head missing, sliced through from just beneath the eyes.

Draco gulps down nausea and looks around. There are three women and a girl on the floor, as he suspected, huddled in a corner on filthy mattresses. They're clothed, mostly. One of the women tugs the girl close and tries to shelter her with her own body as the girl cries quietly, little hitching sobs that shake her frame. Draco clenches his jaw as they stare at him silently. Well, he's hardly a reassuring sight, he supposes. The sound of a door opening reaches his ears. "Stay here," he says, an order. "Stay here, and I'll get you out safely soon. Yes?" One of the women nods mutely, fear and anger burning in her eyes, and he nods back. "Stay," he says again, then moves to the doorway, cautiously and quietly.

There's Snatcher poking his head out into the corridor. He sees Draco in time to shield the curse Draco sends flying at him. In situations like *this*, the Killing Curse would be useful, Draco finds himself thinking as the Snatcher blocks and flicks away his quick barrage of curses. Especially when the Snatcher can – and is – using Unforgivables. The duel goes for several minutes, and Draco's bleeding from a deep slice to his arm before he finally gets an *incendio* past the Snatcher's defences. The wizard goes up like a human torch and stumbles blundering into the wall of the corridor, falling, screaming and thrashing.

Draco moves up to the wall beside the other room's doorway, flattening himself against it and throwing up a shield as he ducks his head around the corner. He sees one man, and two women from his quick glance, although there could be more. A spell streaks out the doorway, and Draco swears under his breath, bracing himself as he ducks out, aims, and flicks off a *depulso*. The wizard goes flying back against the far stone wall, arms flailing, and Draco scans the room swiftly to see if there are any other Snatchers. There aren't. The wizard moans and stirs, and Draco snaps his attention back to him just in time to see one of the two Muggle women struggle to her feet. The dark-haired woman is dressed in nothing but a dirty bra and a blanket around her waist like a skirt, as she lifts a chunk of rubble over her head and slams it into the Snatcher's head with a yell of fury.

She scrambles to her feet, clutching the blanket around her waist, and then kicks the man's corpse. "You fooking *cunt*," she snarls and then takes hold of the other woman, a blonde, and hauls her to her feet, the pair of them swaying together, the blonde clinging to the dark-haired one, sobbing. Draco watches silently for a moment as they press their foreheads together and share a brief, wretched kiss, and then he clears his throat, feeling oddly intrusive.

"We have to go," he says. "There are more women in the other room." The dark-haired woman looks at him assessingly, eyeing his wand. "I'm here to rescue you," he snarls impatiently. He grits his teeth and tries to be reassuring. "It's going to be okay." The woman laughs, half hysterical as she looks down at the man she just killed.

"Oh, *okay y' say? Fook*, more-e-ya it's *okay*. It's up t' shitter, is what it is," she says and he hardly understands even half of what she says through her thick accent. She glares at Draco, tears streaking her cheeks that she dashes away.

"Just follow me," he says bluntly; no time for kindness. "Hurry up."

They follow, silent and distrustful, flinching away from the other Snatcher's burned corpse in the corridor as Draco strides past, uncaring. And when they get to the other room, the dark-haired Muggle is helpful in getting the other women up and moving. Draco's leading them down the stairs when he runs into Weasley with three more women. He's helping one walk, the woman leaning on him heavily. "Clear upstairs?" the redhead asks, and Draco nods, shooing the Muggles ahead of him and behind Weasley, bringing up the rear.

"Yeah. Down here?"

"Seems to be. I think the whole place is clear now, but stay alert." Weasley glances over his shoulder back at Draco as they make their way down the narrow stairs, the Muggles bunched between them. "Good work," he says shortly, and Draco manages a faint smile, blood flaking off his face with the motion as he runs through the past half hour in his head again. Some things could've gone better – he thinks of the moment where he'd slipped, mentally – but overall, he feels good. There are over a dozen Muggle women and girls that they've just saved, and he got to kill Snatchers. And both things felt fucking *amazing*.

When Draco apparates back to the Order's mansion estate, Ginevra Weasley is waiting by the gate, wrapped up in a parka, hat, scarf, and gloves, her breath puffing white in the air as she clutches her wand. He thinks her presence worries everyone as they shake off their nausea and notice her standing there, but then Draco realises it's *him* she's looking at. He forgets the stinging pain in his forearm – the deep slice healing thanks to a splash of dittany. He feels suddenly sick for reasons entirely separate to having just disappeared, his chest squeezing tight and his heart rate shooting back up.

"Malfoy," Ginevra says and then pauses. He could strangle her.

"What?" Draco demands, stalking forward, and she flinches back half a step before firming her stance, glaring at him.

"Hermione's alright, but she saw some files that upset her, and now she's – she's not responding. She's –"

"*Fuck*," he swears, and disappears on the spot, leaving Ginevra mid-sentence.

Chapter End Notes

► Notes

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

► Housekeeping!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thirty-Four

He staggers when he arrives at the safe house, feeling sick and gagging as he pushes the shed door open, spitting on the lawn and taking a deep breath. Disapparating twice in a row is not kind on his stomach. He strides down the garden path toward the house, casting a quick *scourgify*. Hermione isn't going to want to look at him covered in blood and fluids, especially not if she's in a state. Draco's not sure how well the Scouring Charm works – he feels like he can still feel a faint filth on him, and his hands feel slightly gritty to the touch. Bone, he thinks, and grimaces. *Scourgify* works best with liquids, a little like *tergio*. And meat and bone aren't exactly liquid.

He yanks the door open and lets it bounce off the wall, swinging shut with a bang behind him as he heads for Lupin's office. She'll either be there or in their room, and Ginevra had mentioned files that had upset her. The door of Lupin's office is open, and he can see Potter's head behind the table Hermione has co-opted as her desk. He's crouching, and as Draco rounds the table, he sees Hermione. Scrunched down into a little ball, her breathing weird and shallow, and thick-wet with tears and snot, her hair loose and a veil around her, but otherwise whole and unharmed. Potter looks up as Draco glances at the table, thinking '*files?*' and wondering what he's dealing with here. What is he going to have to coax Hermione out of?

"Thank god. Malfoy," Potter says, voice full of relief, but Draco is looking at the table, horror crawling up his spine and establishing a chokehold on his throat. There are a number of files spread messily out on the tabletop, photos attached. *Oh fuck*. He recognises those men. They're the wizards from the dinner. Voldemort's potential American allies. Draco suddenly feels like he's been punched in the gut, all the breath driving out of him, nausea churning. *Why. Why did she have to see that*, he thinks numbly as he looks back to Hermione. *And why now? When he was gone?*

"Hey, 'Mione," Potter says again, and his eyes flick to the files spread across the table and then meet Draco's, and they share a look of sickened horror. "Malfoy's back. Safely."

She doesn't move. She gives no indication she even heard Potter. Draco crouches as Potter stands and takes a few steps back. "Hermione," he says gently, very aware of the other man watching, and listening. She twitches at the sound of his voice, and her breathing pattern judders for a moment. "What do you need? What can I do?" he asks, variations on what he's always asked her, ever since her capture. Placing the power in her hands, and himself at her service. She swallows audibly, and her shoulders hunch and then relax a little; an agony of tension running through her, and Draco longs to touch her, but he can't.

He sits next to her tailor-fashion, legs crossed and forearms braced over his thighs. He sighs, staring at his left arm, jersey sleeve pulled up, so now he can see the Dark Mark on the underside of his forearm, and the cut on top. It goes from wrist bone to two inches below his elbow, diagonally,

and was deep enough that it left a scar despite getting dittany on it quickly. "The mission went well," he says, his voice quiet, just wanting something to say. "We saved thirteen Muggles."

"You didn't save *me*," she whispers, face still buried so that her voice is muffled. "Not that evening. You just let them do it." Draco's heart breaks in his chest. She lifts her head and looks at him. Her eyes are puffy, bloodshot, and swollen around, her cheeks blotchy and tear-streaked, nose reddened, and her lower lip is trembling. There's no real blame in her eyes, no anger – but the wounded misery there is almost even worse.

"Get out, Potter," Draco says, his gaze locked onto Hermione's, and there's a sigh and then footsteps, and a moment later, the office door closes. He swallows around the lump of emotion in his throat. "I know. I just sat there, and I did nothing." The words come out dull. Dead. She sits back, feet sliding forward along the floor until her ankles bump up against his left shin, her head falling back against the wall as she looks at him, exhausted and so sad, and Draco wants to disappear. He wants her not to look at him like that, but he knows that he deserves it, and worse.

"I wish I could hate you for it, sometimes," she says, her voice hoarse from crying. "Like now," she adds unnecessarily. She looks down at her fingers, twisting together in her lap. Her hair falls in fluffy waves around her face, straggly here and there at the front where her tears and snot have gotten in the curls and dried. "But I know you didn't have a choice."

"I *do* hate myself for it. All the time," he tells her tiredly, rubbing his right thumb over the back of his forearm, along the fresh scar. "It doesn't matter that I didn't have a choice. I still did it. And I fucking despise myself."

They both sit in silence for a moment, her feet bumped up against his shin, and he remembers. That evening is carved into his mind in blood. Branded into him. He remembers *everything*. Every violation, every scream, every time they drew blood, every time she threw up. Mostly, he compartmentalises now. He purposefully suppresses the memories because it does no one any good for him to wallow in old shame, and pain. It's self-pity, not punishment. Or if it is punishment, it only benefits his sense of self-hatred. It doesn't help Hermione. But when he *does* think of the dinner, even the lesser things are like thorns broken off beneath his skin, infected and agonising, poisoning him.

The way one of them had yanked Hermione off the table by her ankle while her hands were bound behind her, and laughed when she hit the floor, sobbing from the pain. Another had made her lick the soles of his shoes. And then a different one tried to make her eat her own vomit. One had told her to tell them all what she was. He'd forced her to give a speech as to how she was a worthless mudblood whore whose only purpose was to serve them – physically, sexually, and emotionally – and she'd cried. And there is a reason she throws up if she tries to suck Draco's dick.

"I failed you," he croaks, guilt crushing him as it always does when he remembers. "I know I couldn't do anything except what I did, but that doesn't mean I *didn't* fail you. It just means that I was always doomed to fail you." Elbows on his knees, he rests his head in his hands.

He doesn't know exactly how much Hermione remembers; the Imperius tends to make memories hazy, and he thinks, from the way her behaviour shifted that evening, that she started dissociating pretty heavily after the first time she passed out and was *ennervated*. But she obviously remembers enough. Most of her nightmares seem to be about that. And seeing all the wizards' faces probably uncovered memories she didn't realise she even had. Draco's jaw is so tense he feels like his teeth

are creaking, a headache beginning to pound behind his eyes, tension and pain building in his shoulders. His eyes are dry, though.

"Doomed. Yeah," she says bleakly. A shaky sigh escapes her. "I wish you'd been able to save me." It comes out very small, a tiny confession that he has to strain to hear. That takes him a second to process. *I wish you'd been able to save me.* He swallows hard, biting his tongue, fighting his emotions. His voice is rough when he speaks.

"So do I," he says brokenly because what else can he say? He looks up, meeting her eyes, and she's watching him with those misery-struck firewhisky eyes. No blame, just pain.

"I know," she whispers. "I know you would've, if you could've." She sniffs wetly, wiping her nose on her sleeve cuff. "And you did save me, when you could," she adds. "I just wish..."

"Yeah." He drops his gaze again. Only a few seconds later, Hermione's hand settles on his knee, and when he looks up, her expression is needy and brittle. Draco knows what she wants. He draws her onto his lap, and into his arms, heedless of the remnants of filth still clinging to his clothes, and holds her very tightly. No one comes in to disturb them.

When Hermione finally pulls herself together enough to sit up and actually look at Draco properly, with eyes not blurred by tears and haunted by old horrors, she sees Kenmare written all over him. He's covered in what looks like dust, and she's afraid it *isn't* dust. She can see the stain of pinkish-red here and there like blotches of watercolour paint, and the brown of old blood is still streaked sparsely in his hair. His eyes are hollow, but behind his grief and pain, there's a fierce kind of triumph. She sits sideways in his lap, and he looks down at her and brushes a bit of her hair back from her face but doesn't speak.

"So the mission went well?" she asks, and he clenches his jaw, muscles bunching, eyes cutting away. He's not happy with the question, and Hermione frowns.

"Yes. But I think we should talk about – about the dinner," he gets out, explaining his unhappiness, and Hermione feels her chin tremble as tears suddenly threaten to well up again. They're on a hair-trigger, her chest tight and her eyes wet. She'd thought he might want to talk about it – or rather, that he might think they *should*. She doesn't.

"I – no," she says, voice taut with strain, her chest feeling tight and sore. "I only just calmed down," she tells him very honestly, feeling as brittle as a dead leaf, picking her words carefully and speaking them slowly as she holds her tears down by sheer force of will. "I don't want to – to talk about it. I *don't*."

"But –" he begins and Hermione shoves herself off his lap. She lands on the wooden floor with a bump and scrambles to her knees.

"No. *No*," she nearly snarls, and he flinches. "I don't fucking want to. I don't want to talk about it, I don't want to think about it – it won't change anything, it won't *help*. So no," she says as she wipes at her face and gets to her feet on wobbly legs, Draco shoving himself to his feet as well so that he can steady her with a hand on her elbow. His expression is worried and guilt-ridden, and Hermione sniffs and firms her chin. "I won't."

She just spent who knows how many hours trapped in the halls of her own mind, drowning in nightmarish memory, vaguely aware of Harry sitting there watching her like she was mental. Which

she was. *Is*. It's humiliating and upsetting, and she feels sick, awful, and shaky now. Wrung out, exhausted, and stupid. Falling to pieces over some photos. It's pathetic, really. Her eyes slide to the desk despite herself; the dossiers are gone, and she feels a small shudder of relief, her hands – unconsciously balled into fists – relaxing slightly. They may only be photos, and it may be pathetic, but she can't deny the effect they have on her. Hermione turns her gaze back to Draco with an effort as she takes a deep breath. She refuses to fall apart again when she's only just calmed down. She lets out her breath slowly.

"Tell me about the mission." Hermione runs her eyes over him again, taking stock. His left sleeve is shoved up, a healing purple slash up the length of his forearm that makes her hiss with worry, but otherwise he looks unharmed. Grubby, as though he'd been *scourgified* by a quick, haphazard spell, but unhurt. A little ripple of relief runs through her. She'd been so scared for him, in amongst the maelstrom of panic and horror that she'd been locked into. "It went okay?"

He nods and looks down at himself. "It did. But I should have a shower. And maybe you should have one too." He eyes her, and gestures to a bit of whitish grit on her sleeve. "I used a *confringo* while I was in close quarters. I think that might be –"

"Oh god." Hermione brings her hand up to cover her mouth, stomach churning as she realises she has a *person* smudged on her clothes – on her left sleeve, and the seat of her leggings, and then down her left leg a bit. She's been covered in blood, guts, and other filth before, when she used to participate in missions out in the field, but it was always disgusting. It always made her want to throw up. Every time. It wasn't something she had ever gotten used to. Perhaps Hermione just never had the stomach to be a fighter, even before she was captured. She certainly doesn't now.

"Sorry. I didn't have time. You were..." Draco gestures helplessly and shrugs, and Hermione nods even as she grimaces. She wants to brush off the marks she can see, but she doesn't want to touch what she now knows is a person, blown to smithereens. A Snatcher, probably, nearly atomised by Draco's curse. At least that thought is a grim distraction from what she *has* been thinking.

"It's fine." She looks down at herself. It's not a lot, really. Just a few smudges on her clothes. "I'll go change and get you some fresh clothes, and meet you in the bathroom?"

Draco looks at her as if he's worried she'll fall apart if she steps out of his presence. She can't blame him, after what he'd come back to – she'd been a wreck, and unfortunately, she still feels like she's hovering worryingly close to the edge. "I can come with you," he offers instantly, and she forces a smile, the skin on her cheeks feeling taut and stiff with tears, and probably snot. She may not need a shower, but she needs to wash her face at least. Pragmatic thoughts sweep in, gradually overwhelming the memories she had been drowning in, and that still echo in her head, sharp and bloody. Shards of memory are strewn through her mind like a minefield, glittering, dangerous, and liable to cut her to the bone.

Like the way he'd smiled and said, "*I find it only enhances the experience when she cries.*"

Hermione sucks in a sharp breath, panic rushing through her again. And then she grabs hold of his jersey in one hand, stepping close enough that she can smell his sweat, and the scent of metallic blood, and that faint ozone scent that destructive magic carries, and it all yanks her back to the present. He's here now. *She's* here now, and the past is gone. It's over. Right now, Draco is home safely and only slightly injured, and he needs a shower, scar liniment applied to his back, food, and a cup of tea, she tells herself firmly.

"No. I'm fine," Hermione says as she forces herself to let go of his jersey, and he looks at her doubtfully. "Honestly," she insists, and she's aware of how ridiculous and unbelievable it must sound after the meltdown she just had. But these breakdowns always pass, and afterwards, while she feels more vulnerable and fragile, she feels better for it too in a way – hollowed out right to her spine, but *better*. Like some more of the poison was drawn out of her.

Hermione was confronted by the faces and the memories, and she's still here. Still standing, with Draco's help. Without him, she'd still be a mess on the floor, but with him – *with* him, everything is different. He's her anchor. The one stable point in her life. He was tortured for her – *by* her. He would have died for her, and he would have saved her from the dinner if he could have. If there had been any way at all that wouldn't have led to worse consequences for her. She knows it intellectually, even if sometimes she just feels pain.

But Hermione doesn't want to think about that right now. Instead, she leans in on impulse and kisses Draco, who's looking at her with worried, tired eyes, his mouth twisted with lingering guilt. She's uncaring of whether his lips are as dirty as the rest of him, but they don't seem to be. They're soft, and wonderful, and he makes a tiny sound in the back of his throat that's nearly a moan as his hand comes back up, clutching her elbow. His lips part and her tongue sweeps along his bottom lip, darting into his mouth and just brushing his tongue. A curl of arousal bursts to life in her stomach, bewildering and beautiful. Hermione draws back before she loses her head and deepens the kiss – she's too fragile right now, with everything just beneath the surface, threatening to break back through. It would be playing with fire.

"Come on," she says and takes his hand, tugging at him. Draco follows her, his eyes full of her, an adoration in them that carries a weight. He'd follow her to his own death if she led him to it by the hand, Hermione thinks with a shudder. He'd bare his throat to her wand and believe he deserved it.

They are each other's greatest weakness precisely because they are each other's source of strength. If she is without him, then she falls apart at the first hurdle, and if he were to be without her, she thinks he would kill himself, in battle, or through neglect. She swallows, sobered by the thought. And then his fingers slide through hers, interlocking, and her heart swells. Because apart they might shatter, but together – together they can go through hell and come out the other side, broken but unbowed.

"It felt so good," he tells her as she sits on the toilet lid in clean clothes, her face scrubbed pink and glowing, and hair in a loose braid. She's watching him through the shower curtain; his silhouette moving like a shadow puppet show. A beautiful show. He's all lean and lithe, shoulders straight and hips narrow, his thighs making her eyes linger even in silhouette, and she smiles to herself as she fiddles with the lid on the scar liniment jar. Listening.

He's been talking non-stop about the Kenmare mission, like a child talking about Christmas. Excited and overflowing with energy, giving her an outline of what had happened – with some things redacted, she suspects, based on the way he pauses at times, mostly when talking about how he killed the enemy. He goes from telling her a smooth, flowing story – albeit one that jumps around a lot in his excitement – as he lathers his hair, or tries to scrub his still-scarred back, to breaking off and becoming stilted. Hermione doesn't pry. She doesn't really care how Draco kills the bastards, she realises with a cold shock. He could've skinned them alive for all she cares – as long as they're dead, and he's alive.

"I saved a girl," he tells her as he gets out of the shower, a towel wrapped around his hips, water dripping from his hair, sliding down the planes of his chest and over the flat, hard lines of his abdomen. And running down the channel of the scar cutting across his face – which he won't let her put liniment on, irritatingly. She hates that. He plucks up his wand and casts a silent charm that dries him instantly.

"Tell me," she says encouragingly because she knows how much that must mean to him. He has nightmares about the girls he's killed, in particular; an abhorrent sentence to ever be able to think. But more girls were captured and taken than boys, and he had been witness to ugly deaths, and uglier existences – and taken too many lives, giving them a horrible kind of mercy. Better to die quickly and cleanly at his hands or wand, than to suffer as entertainment at a revel, or as one of the Death Eater's slaves. Or so he'd thought, and she agrees. "What happened?" she asks him. He casts her another worried, doubtful look, and she realises belatedly what his fears are.

"I know what the Snatchers would've been doing, Draco. You don't have to sanitise it for me," Hermione says tightly, and hopes she's telling the truth and isn't going to collapse into a wreck all over again halfway through his story. And so he tells her as he dresses, turning away from her to provide some modesty that Hermione doesn't feel she requires anymore, even now, as fragile as she is. His body doesn't represent pain or fear to her now – it's safety and comfort. Protection and pleasure.

But he jerks his boxers swiftly on – found her huddled under a blanket, terrified – a streak of pain in his voice as he confesses, "she made me think of you." His boxers are followed by a pair of joggers, continuing his story. – clinging to me, wrapped in a blanket while I held her up. A hell of a way to fight, with only one arm free and not able to move easily. Which was why –"

Draco's mouth snaps shut and he looks at Hermione with those unreadable quicksilver eyes, his hair flopping over his forehead, and his mouth settling into a shape that says as clear as day to her – *I'm not telling you something because it'll upset you*. And this is where she *will* pry.

"Which was why *what*," she demands, and wants to smack him as he turns his back to her. Ostensibly he's turning so she can apply the liniment to his back, but she knows it's really to hide his face. "Let me do your arm first," she says sharply, tugging him around to face her.

"I can do it," he protests weakly, and Hermione bats his hand away from the jar, sitting on the bathroom counter now.

"No. *I* will," she says decidedly, and then she grabs his left hand in her right and dips some liniment out of the jar, carefully dabbing it on, very slowly. Draco sighs, and when she sneaks a glance up, she sees frustration written on his face, his nostrils flaring and his mouth a thin line now, his brows dark blonde slashes above his eyes. He knows what she's doing. "Which was why *what*," she asks again – a lot of "w's" in that sentence, she thinks randomly – her fingers and thumb wrapped around his wrist as she smooths the liniment on the fresh scar. "Let me guess – when you nearly died?"

He looks away, silent. And that tells her all she needs to know.

"*Fuck*," she swears, and tears fill her eyes in a sudden flood, threatening to well over.

"Well, obviously I *didn't*, Hermione," he says with an edge of irritation, and even that minor annoyance is so rare it feels a little like a slap. She swallows.

"I can see that you didn't. But – but you *nearly* –" She stutters to a halt. It's terrifying. It scares the shit out of her. The *first* mission he's been on that involves battle, and he nearly fucking died. This is why Hermione hadn't wanted him going out there. Because she could lose him. So easily. All over some stupid girl. "Tell me," she demands, half angrily, making herself start applying liniment to his arm again. And he tells her how a Snatcher came through the door and disarmed him, and he couldn't dodge because of the girl, and Hermione feels like a terrible, terrible person for hating the poor girl and wishing Draco had just left her.

"– and then Weasley came through the door and dropped him with a *sectumsempra*," he finishes as Hermione stares up at him, still holding his wrist although she's done with the liniment. He looks worried and guilty, and Hermione feels bad for making him feel that way. He'd been so *happy* over saving the girl who would've gotten him killed if not for Ron's serendipitous appearance, and now he looks uncertain, and remorseful. Like he's done something wrong, and he *hasn't*. She swallows and tries to force down her visible fear with it, suppressing it so she doesn't unfairly inflict it on him.

"You owe Ron then, hm?" she says, proud that her voice only wobbles slightly, and smiles up at him. Draco frowns at her a moment, as though the sudden lack of angry fear emanating from her has set him off balance.

"I suppose I do," he says mildly, eyes still searching over her face, and Hermione tries very hard not to look on the verge of tears, which she is. Fear is eating her alive. *He almost died*.

"Turn around and I'll do your back," she says, patting his side, and he furrows his brow at her but does as he's told. Now her face is hidden from him, and so she gnaws her lip a moment, hard, as she smears on the liniment. Blinks back tears. Scrunches her face up in a silent scream, trying to exorcise some of her emotion that way, and then asks, "So what happened after that?" And now she doesn't really have to talk, either. Just listen to him as he gradually gets into the swing of the story again, and that purposeful, proud satisfaction seeps into his tone once more. He's finally doing something good – outright good, for the war effort. Something that doesn't involve being a model Death Eater, only able to try to mitigate harm. No; he saved innocent Muggles, without having to hurt them first, and he killed the people who hurt them.

And he *didn't* die.

When Hermione's done, he turns around and kisses the corner of her mouth very gently, his thumb sweeping over her chin in a caress. He doesn't say anything, but the look in his eyes is knowing and grateful. "Thank you. For letting me do this," he says softly, as they stand very close, one of his hands cradling the base of her skull now, and the other spanning her side. She presses her lips together and shrugs.

"You need this," she says very quietly, and her voice gives her away – it's strangled, and heavy with emotion. She runs the backs of her fingers down over his scarred left cheek, and speaks again before he can say anything. "I wish you'd let me put liniment on this." Her thumb traces the scar.

"It doesn't restrict my movement," he counters. "But I've said before I'll get rid of it if you don't like how it looks."

Hermione frowns, frustrated at his refusal to understand that she doesn't find it ugly. None of his scars are ugly to her. "It's not that. It's because *I* put it there. I *hate* looking at it and knowing I did that to you."

"That's why I love it," he admits, slightly awkward, shoulders hunching a little, as if he's embarrassed. "Because you put it there. I don't want to lose it." And then his fingers brush over the line of it, light and fast as his eyes hold hers, and Merlin, the love in them is like a bottomless well. She could fall forever. Hermione doesn't know what to say to him. She licks her lips and his eyes follow the motion. His hand cups her cheek.

"I'll get rid of it if you want," he says, his gaze holding hers again, that purple groove cutting across his cheek, from just below his left eye to just beneath his left ear, and Hermione thinks again how terrifyingly close he came to losing his eye. Because of her. "If it upsets you."

"No," she whispers, shaking her head fractionally. "No. Leave it, then." She goes up on tiptoes, liniment-greasy hands sliding behind his head and using her wrists to guide him down so she can place a kiss on the scar. She loves him so much. And Merlin, she's so scared.

She meets Ron in the kitchen when she goes down to get food and tea for both her and Draco while he heads out to give Lupin his belated briefing. He nods at Ron as he kisses Hermione's temple and leaves her in the kitchen, and Ron nods back. The total lack of sniping and bristling tension makes Hermione feel as warm and happy as if they'd hugged. Hopefully, Ron will put in a good word for Draco with Harry, she thinks, as she listens to the back door click shut. He's said he won't be long. She hopes he's right because she still feels a little fragile.

Ron hangs about in the kitchen like he knows she'd rather not be alone and tells her about the mission from his side of things. The conversation with him that follows is enlightening, and what Ron tells her is probably not information Draco would be happy knowing she was privy to, but Hermione doesn't care. She listens and asks questions as she puts together four cold sausage sandwiches – two for Draco, one for her, and one for Ron, who'd fluttered his lashes hopefully at her and made her laugh. Besides, she supposes she should pay him for his insider information, and for keeping her company.

"– just tossed him on the fire," Ron says as she butters the bread, and suddenly she feels rather less hungry. "And then *left* him. I had to put the bastard out of his misery. When I told him no Unforgivables, I didn't think I'd have to specify no unnecessarily burning people to death!"

Six months ago, Hermione would have been just as horrified. Now, she just shoots Ron a sharp, sideways look. "They were raping women and girls," she says coldly, and while the thought of Draco doing that makes her feel sick, she feels no sympathy for the Snatcher. Maybe her captivity took away some of her humanity along with her innocence. Ron grimaces, but inclines his head in acceptance.

"Well, true," he allows. "It's not like I feel *bad* for the bastard, it's just... fuck, it was brutal." He shudders. "It gave me the heeby-jeebies, the way Malfoy did that, without an ounce of expression or anything. Like the bloody Exterminator."

"Terminator," Hermione corrects absently. Ron shrugs and goes on talking as he watches her make the sandwiches with hungry eyes. And then she passes him his sandwich and asks him about the girl, and the Snatcher, and what he says first isn't exactly what she was expecting.

"He was shielding her, 'Mione," Ron says around a mouthful of his sandwich as he leans back against the kitchen bench, watching her put the kettle on to make two mugs of apple pie tea – one of Justin's purchases. "It was the damndest thing." He sounds almost wondering. Hermione glances up sharply.

"What do you mean?"

"When I saw him in the doorway, right as I dropped the Snatcher with Snape's curse. He thought he was going to die. And he'd turned, to shield the girl. Maybe he was hoping she might survive, at least. He could've kept facing forward and used *her* as a shield, but...he didn't."

Hermione suddenly feels like crying, picturing that. "Of course he didn't," she says aloud, and a tiny part of her wishes he had put his life above a stranger's – but then he wouldn't be the man she loves. Fear trickles through her. No doubt there were other close calls he had tonight. Other near-death encounters. Draco had saved six of the women and girls himself, and he had still been glowing with a bone-deep satisfaction over that when he'd left for his debriefing. And that happiness – that absence of self-loathing – is so wonderful to see.

But what if he dies?

Chapter End Notes

► Notes

Chapter 35

Thirty-Five

Draco snaps awake to the sound of quiet, muffled sobbing, the room still and dark, a trickle of pale streetlight coming in the gaps in the curtains. Hermione is curled into a little ball beneath the blankets, and when he pulls them back, she's still asleep despite the fit of weeping that's overtaken her. "Hey. Hermione," he says softly, daring to brush back a bit of hair that's fallen over her face, obscuring the tear streaks and pained expression. "Come on. Wake up." Half the hank of hair slithers back over her face, and he plucks it up again, tucking it behind her ear this time. She's making whimpering, miserable noises, her hands curled up under her chin like little animal paws, her brows all scrunched and distressed as she mumbles words he can't make out.

"Come on. Wake up," Draco says, slightly louder, and risks running his fingers down her arm this time, and her eyes fly open as she wrenches in a shuddering gasp. It feels like a punch in the gut every time, when she flinches back from him with stark terror all over her face, still gulping sobs, tears rolling fat down her cheeks. And then she recognises him, and her expression transforms, and the relief he feels is immense. "Hermione?" he asks her softly as he lies there propped up on one elbow, his hand drawn back from her, looking up at her. She's scrambled back up the pillows a little, half sitting and with her knees drawn up, gasping in air like she was drowning, in danger of hyperventilating.

"Hey. Hey, it's okay. You're safe. Breathe. *Breathe*, Hermione," he tells her as he begins to sit up, and she flings herself at him, sending him back down. On his back with Hermione on him. She's finally approaching a healthy weight, all her angles and bones no longer jabbing into him, making her feel soft and lush as he holds her tight and buries his face in the crook of her neck as she sprawls over him. She's still whooping for air, and Draco rubs her back up and down in slow, careful strokes as he takes his own deep, long breaths and talks her through them. Eventually, her breath more or less syncs with his, and he feels like he can try to talk to her.

"Are you okay?" He keeps rubbing her back as though she's a small child, wondering grimly what nightmares had haunted her tonight, given what she'd seen. The dossiers on the American wizards had to have brought everything back.

He'd been coldly furious with Lupin for not thinking of that, and he hadn't held back, snarling at the man. Lupin knew that everything that entered that office eventually passed through Hermione's hands. It had been fucking stupid to have the files delivered there. Irresponsible, and stupid. He'd ended up dressing down Lupin for a good five minutes, too angry to be even vaguely polite – '*dog*' might have featured in there somewhere, followed by '*stupid fucking beast*' – and to Draco's surprise and Lupin's credit, the older man had taken it all with a calm, remorseful *mein*. And then he apologised. It had taken the zip out of Draco's broom, somewhat, and he'd sat down with his shoulders slumped, to have Lupin offer him a cup of tea.

The debrief had been, well, *brief*. Lupin had understood he wanted to get back to Hermione.

And right now, her arms are tight around his neck as she clings to him, nearly tight enough to strangle him. As if she's afraid he'll disappear. "I had horrible dreams," she says at last in a choked voice, and her shoulders shake and her breath hitches. She sounds bleary with sleep still, her words slurred, and thick with tears, the story incoherent as it spills out. "I dreamt that – that you got

captured out there, that they took you. Instead of killing you, they captured you. And they took you to Voldemort, and it was like the – the dinner except you were there alone. Just you. And they were hurting *you*. So *badly*. So badly, I thought you were going to die." Draco wishes grimly that was how it *had* been. Him instead of her. That would've been better.

"It's okay. We're both safe," he says softly instead, his hand gentling over her hair now, fingers coming through the waves. And then sliding down her back before starting again at her head.

"But you're *not*," Hermione whispers, all clogged up and snotty, face right beside his ear with how she's lying atop him, and he can hear the wetness of her tears and her runny nose. There's dampness on his neck, and he thinks it's either tears or snot but isn't bothered – either is far better than a liquefied Snatcher. "You're not safe. You're going to go back out there." The last turns into half a wail, and Draco hisses in concern, trying to hush her with touches and failing.

"I'll be fine," he insists. "Nothing's going to happen to me, Hermione."

"You can't say that." She wriggles off him and sits up beside him, cross-legged, wiping her face with the hem of her shirt. Her eyes are dark and liquid, her features delicate in the near dark; her jaw sharper and lips plumper, her cheeks glinting with tears as she twists her hands in her lap. "You nearly *died* tonight. What if Ron hadn't been there? What if they'd taken you prisoner?"

"But they didn't," is all he can say, a pitiful rejoinder and no comfort to her at all, he's sure. She stares at him miserably. Helplessly, and pleading.

"Have you thought about what they would do to you?" she asks, and he can see her nightmares in the way her fingers twist together in her lap, her shoulders hunched, horrors in her eyes. "Because I *have*. I can't stop thinking about it. And it feels like you're not even taking it seriously."

"I *have* thought about it," Draco says, a flimsy protest. He's more honest than he should be. "That doesn't frighten me," he says, and means it. The idea of torture and death doesn't put him off fighting. She doesn't react to that the way he stupidly thinks she will. Her face crumples, and her eyes well over, her expression all worry and nightmares tangled up tight. And fear. Blatant fear. Stark and overflowing. Guilt swarms up in him.

It's his mission tonight that's done this, not just the dossiers – although they didn't help, certainly. But Draco's known she's been struggling silently with him being out in the field. She hasn't said anything – when he's asked, she's insisted she's fine. He knows that's a lie though; a brave face she's putting on. He sees how much strain these past three excursions have put her under, culminating in this, tonight, set off by the shock of the dossiers and the memories. He wishes he could bite back what he's just said. The last thing she needs to hear right now is that he's not afraid to die. That was half her problem with him fighting to start with. Because she was afraid he didn't value his life enough.

Fuck.

"Have you thought about what that would do to *me*, then? If you don't care enough about yourself?" she demands, and misery burns in her eyes. *Shit*. He fucked that up so badly.

"Wait – I didn't say I don't care about myself, Hermione," he says swiftly, already knowing it's a lost cause. She's not listening. "I don't *want* to die, or be captured. And I don't want to do that to you, either. That's not what I meant. I just meant –" Draco breaks off. He doesn't know what he

meant, honestly. Just that he wasn't controlled by fear. That he wasn't going to let the possibility of death or capture stop him from doing the right thing.

She's breathing hard again, but short this time, shallow and frantic, her face still engraved with that horrible misery and fear, joined now by anger. "*Have* you thought about what it would do to me, to know you're captured? What could I even do? Try – try to rescue you? *How*? The Order wouldn't help me. They didn't even help when it was *me* captured," she says with a broken little sob, and he wants to hit Lupin now, rather than just yell at him. The way they'd just abandoned her had been inhuman, and awful. She's going on, utterly distraught. "But I wouldn't be able to just *leave* you there. Captured. Tortured. God, I'd have to *try*, and I'd probably fail, and then they'd have us *both*, and –"

"Hey," he says firmly, trying to stop her before she spirals into hysteria, but it's too late. She barrels on over top of his attempts to calm her, her words sliding into incoherence, spilling out of her like the release of poison, bottled up. A slew of jumbled, bitter fear.

"– fucking *terrified* for you," he makes out, at last. And then she takes a heaving breath that judders out of her, and then admits, coherently, "I – I sat there tonight for hours, and I was so *afraid* for you, and I couldn't stop thinking about what they did to me, and what you watched them do to me, and *you weren't there*."

And *oh*, that's it, Draco thinks, with a grim satisfaction that gives him no joy. *That's* the thorn that was under her flesh, drawn out, the wound bleeding freely now. Hermione dissolves into tears, and he tugs her close, bundling her into his arms and hating himself afresh as he rocks her like a child. She'd needed him, and he hadn't been there for her. In fact, he'd only contributed to her fear. Because he was off fighting, risking capture and death. A squirming unease blooms in his chest right behind his sternum, sending tendrils through him. Maybe he shouldn't fight, he thinks, with a sudden, sharp guilt. Not if it was going to do this to her. This strain, and struggle that she's kept locked inside the best she could, until now.

Eventually, she seems to cry herself out. The tension of the past several days, and the shock of having the dinner thrown in her face again, and the nightmares that had arisen from those – she exorcises it all, clinging to him and not quite with it. She's exhausted, and the nightmares and memories are obviously still vivid. But the silent tears stop flowing finally, and then she yawns as the adrenaline leaves her system, and her fingers curl tentatively in his shirt, her limbs slowly going lax against him as he soothes her absently, his mind ticking over.

He *had* nearly died. That had to be acknowledged. Yes, he'd come home fine in the end, but for a moment, he'd been a heartbeat away from death, and only sheer luck had saved him. Luck, and Ronald bloody Weasley. And while it didn't worry Draco for his own sake, the thought of dying and leaving Hermione like this makes his heart lurch. He *can't*. It's selfish, and it's cruel. He rubs her back as he rocks her, apologising quietly. And he tells her that he won't fight again, and he means it.

"I'll stay here with you. I won't go back out there. I swear," Draco says, and he's not even sure if she's still properly awake, but he says it anyway. As fucking amazing as it felt to be out there, he can't do this to her again. He can't see her like this and know that he's responsible. "I won't fight again," he says, a cold misery replacing the unease in his chest, making his limbs feel heavy and his senses dull. Her breaths are deep and slow at last, her fingers falling limp, her head a heavy weight against his chest.

Draco lies back against the pillows with her still draped over him, and he stares at the ceiling; the shifting shadows. Trapped again, he thinks tiredly.

When Hermione wakes up, she's in bed alone, and the bed next to her holds only a trace of warmth. Draco must have gone for a shower, she thinks, eyeing the time – it's nearly 7 am. She bites her lip, remembering last night in snatches and blurs that make her feel hot and sick with embarrassment and guilt. Not because of her meltdown in the evening, which had been bad enough – she feels the need to apologise to Harry – but because of last night. When Draco had woken her from a fucking horrendous nightmare, and she'd been a wreck and said things she really wishes she hadn't said.

It's a little hazy now, but Hermione seems to recall Draco saying he wasn't going to fight anymore, while she was clinging to him, sniffing herself to sleep. She sits up on the edge of the bed, groaning to herself and burying her head in her hands. *Fuck*. That isn't what she wants at all. Well, it *is* in a way – if he decided happily of his own accord to never fight again, Hermione would be overjoyed, and so relieved. The ball of tension that seems to be permanently knotted into her stomach would evaporate, and the fear that's been making it hard to eat over the past few days would dissipate. Yes, she would love it if Draco stopped fighting. But not because Hermione emotionally blackmailed him into it. Because then *he'll* just be miserable. And that's no solution.

She sighs and decides to see if she can have a quick shower in the first floor bathroom while Draco's – presumably – having his. She feels all gross with old sweat from her nightmares, and remembering what she'd said to Draco last night is making her break into a fresh sweat. *Have you thought about what that would do to me?* she'd demanded, as if it was all about her. As if he didn't have the right to have his own wants and needs. She's always been a control freak – Hermione is aware of that flaw – and her total lack of control for so long may possibly have made her need for control worse. But she can't control other people. Horrible guilt writhes in her belly and remains there the entire time she showers, playing things over in her mind, around and around. An ouroboros in her head, twisting and devouring with no end in sight.

They're stuck. Trapped in a no-win situation, with no real compromise. One of them has to lose, and Hermione thinks it needs to be her.

Draco's waiting in their room when she gets back, her hair dry and loose, Sleekeazy's scrunched through it, in leggings and one of *his* t-shirts. He's stretched out on his side of the bed, holding a mug of something hot. Steam rises off it in wisps and coils, and his eyes are burnished silver in the morning light, his faint greeting smile a benediction. There's a mug on Hermione's side of the bed, and her heart aches.

"I made tea," he says, holding his mug up unnecessarily, and then indicating her bedside table. He looks so fucking sad. He's smiling, but she can see it in his ash-grey eyes, and the tightness of his mouth, and the set of his shoulders. She can read him like a book now. She doesn't need legilimency when she knows his body this well. "How did you end up sleeping?"

She shrugs. "Okay, I suppose. And thank you. For the tea." It's weirdly stilted as she stands there staring at him, twisting her wand in her hands. The air in the room feels heavy and thick. Hermione gulps and comes right out with it. Sort of. "I'm sorry about last night."

Draco stares at her, bewildered, as his brows scrunch down. "Sorry?" He sets his mug aside, all his attention on her, and she wants to sink into the floor. "Why are you sorry?"

"Because of what I said. About you fighting," Hermione says, which is hardly elucidating, but it's harder to get the words out than she thought. She feels sick, and small. She doesn't want to do this, and yet she knows she has to. Draco stands and crosses the room to her and takes her hand, leading her to sit at the foot of the bed, sitting side by side and turned toward each other so that their knees bump together. His hand is warm and large, enfolding hers entirely. The scar up his forearm is already dulled noticeably by quick application of liniment, but Hermione finds herself staring at it.

"I told you I won't fight," he says tightly, and Hermione looks up to see his eyes are unreadable now, his mouth a blank line. A grim determination hangs about him.

"That's not what I want, though." She takes his left hand in her two, on her thigh, playing with it. Thumbs running over his palm, fingertips tracing the lines and trailing up his slightly curled fingers. She stares at his heart line; a deep, strong slash. She doesn't believe in any of that nonsense. "I'm scared, Draco. I'm constantly worried you're going to die. Or that they're going to come back and tell me you've been captured. The reconnaissance wasn't so bad, but last night..." She glances up at him. His features are still held carefully neutral. "That MACUSA file didn't help, admittedly. But even before then – I was racked with worry, honestly."

"I *said* I'll –" he begins, a sliver of anger slipping in, and Hermione shakes her head.

"I haven't finished," she says, frowning, and he clenches his jaw, that fixed neutrality giving way to impatient irritation. She swallows hard. "So I freaked out – yesterday evening, and then again in the night. I've been trying to hide how stupidly scared I am –"

"It's not stupid," he says quietly. Sadly.

"Well. Still. I've been trying not to put my feelings on you, and then I had a meltdown because of the stupid files –"

"That's not stupid either," he interrupts again, defending her, and she shoots him a wry look, feeling rather tearful. She appreciates his support, but she just wants to *say* it. And she's getting there. In a roundabout way.

"Either way, I needed you, and you weren't there, and it made me so *angry*. Probably unfairly, because you can't exactly be glued to me every minute of the day," she admits, still playing with his hand. His thumb twitches as she runs her nail over the base of it. She can see the blue-green veins at his pale wrist and the Dark Mark emblazoned further up. "Even if you were off doing something safe, you might not always be able to drop everything for me. But it made me even more worried for you. All I could think about was the dinner, and you fighting."

"I'm sorry," he says softly when she pauses for breath. She shakes her head.

"Don't be." She meets his steady gaze, seeing the sadness, regret, and resignation in it. She hates that she put those emotions there. "You were doing the right thing," she tells him. "Fighting is the right thing to do, for you, and for the war." She looks down at his hand again, turning it over. There are little nicks and scars on the back of it, and his nails are only a fraction away from being fully grown again. "The Order needs every fighter it can get. And you may be only one person, but from what you said and what Ron told me, you're invaluable out in the field." She feels a cold lump sitting heavy in her chest as she forges on. "I won't lie. I don't *want* you to fight. Of *course* I don't. It scares the shit out of me, and personally, I think you've done more for the war effort than anyone should be expected to."

She thinks of his innocence lost, of the scars on his soul that he can't ever erase, of the way he's abandoned his parents to Voldemort's mercy for *her*. Draco is never going to forget the things he did at Voldemort's command, in the service of the Order. He'll live with the guilt and the horror until he dies. If she loves him, then she can't stop him from doing this.

And she loves him, more than anything.

"But I see how it makes you feel. Being out there." Hermione doesn't go into detail. Both of them know exactly what she means, and somehow it feels too private to list aloud the feeling of purpose it gives him, the sense of atonement, and the pride. "And you need that, Draco. Yes, it terrifies me, but I can't take it away from you. I *won't*. You should be out there in the field if that's where you want to be. You need to fight. I know that." Hermione slips her hand over his; too small to cover it.

"I can live with my fear until the war is over," she says, not thinking about how she'll feel if he *is* captured, or does die, "but I don't think you can live with *not* fighting, whichever way it ends."

Hermione can see it now; Draco would never get past that, whether they win or lose. She sighs. "So I want you to fight. Just –" she wobbles a smile at him, lips pressed together hard and tears in her eyes "– please be more careful?"

He looks at her as though she's given him the moon in the palm of her hand. As though he's an animal she's freed from a trap instead of killing. There's a bright, fierce joy on his face, only slightly tempered by his sadness for her. Because he knows what she's giving up. What she's accepting, by doing this. But it's the right thing to do – Hermione knows it is. It's the only reasonable choice. His hand turns and his fingers catch hers as he stares at her, expression filled with relief, and love that is so sharp it hurts.

"I will," he says intently. "I'll be so fucking careful, Hermione, I swear to Merlin." He stares at her as though he's looking inside her head and seeing all her fear and her love for him laid bare. She blinks back tears and sniffs wetly, her fingers clutching his very, very tightly. Tight enough that the small bones of her knuckles hurt. "Thank you," he says, and then he kisses her, a needy, joyful thing. And while she feels less joyful and more like she's just stepped off a cliff, his mouth on hers is exactly what she needs.

Draco's here, and he's alive. He survived, and he'll keep surviving. Everything will be okay.

The kiss turns into more, the tea he'd brought up forgotten as they fall back onto the bed, him half over her but it's okay. She's okay, she tells herself as she clasps his shoulders, and his back, and handfuls of his short hair, her mouth pushing up eagerly into his, and his hands sliding gently over the swells of her breasts, and the jut of her hip. None of this makes her think of *then*. That was then, and this is now. Just the two of them alone in their room, and he worships her with adoration in his eyes and awe in his touch. He's wanting and happy, his gratitude overflowing, and there are no bruises, or blood.

Although there's a trace of bittersweetness to the kiss, for Hermione at least.

But Draco's tongue traces the seam of her lips, and arousal flares hot in her belly, little lightning forks of want, like sparks thrown off by a fire. They burn her up, her skin feeling hot, the pads of his fingers like brands, trailing shockingly over the cool skin of her stomach and bumping up over ribs to her right breast, cupping it in a gentle cage of scorching fingers. He's like fire, licking over her, hot and devouring as his mouth demands and plunders, joyful and triumphant.

Her body lights up even as a trickle of worry for him slides down her spine, almost forgotten but not quite. Hermione shoves it away as she parts her lips and kisses him back hard, teeth crushing lips, and a moan shudders from her as his tongue dips into her mouth. A sweet lick, like he's tasting her as his finger and thumb roll her right nipple gently between them and a cord of arousal strings taut between that sensation and her core. *Oh*. And then his tongue is rough and soft at once, teasing over hers, and the desire that rears up at the way he just takes over her senses snatches the breath out of her.

Fuck, he makes her want him so much. This sweet, patient onslaught. Like a slow-motion tsunami of molasses. Drowning by inches in nectar as he sucks on her lower lip, and kisses the corner of her mouth, and teases her with tongue and lips as if he's playing a game of hide-and-seek with her. It's the best kind of frustrating, and it drives her slowly crazy as the shirt of his that she wears gets pushed up under her armpits, and his fingers keep playing over her breasts, down around her bellybutton, and slipping just beneath the edge of her waistband. Brushing over short hair, and her hips bump upward, her clit thrumming and her vulva needy for stimulation and sensation. She wants his fingers, and his mouth, and the bliss of his cock.

And the whole time, his tongue is teasing hers, with fleeting touches, and dips, and glancing sweeps along her lower lip, and quick curls behind her teeth that make her shiver deliciously from head to toe. But she can't pin him down, and it's making her *crazy*.

"*Nngh-mmph*," she protests and clasps her hands together at the back of Draco's head, pushing her mouth up open and seeking, greedy and sloppy. Too full of a heady, thoughtless desire to be self-conscious, her right leg hooking over his, and her kiss a thing of sheer desperation. He moans as their mouths meet properly, her tongue claiming his mouth as her sovereign territory. Hermione makes a sound of victory that's also more of a moan. Her fingers yank at his hair as she invades and conquers, running her tongue over the blunt edges of his teeth and curling it around his, huffing little breaths for air through her nose. Now that she's caught him, she's not letting him go easily. She sucks on his tongue and he moans again, and she can feel his cock hard against her leg as he thrusts against her slightly.

His cock can wait, Hermione thinks.

She's dizzy and her lips are puffy and tender when she finally pulls back from him in order to strip off her clothes with a clumsy haste, sitting in the middle of the bed as she wriggles her leggings off. She's leading the game now as he follows, obedient and eager, and she feels nearly powerful. In control of something, at least. She can't stop Draco from fighting, but she can be in charge here. She could tell him to go to his knees and lick her feet, and she believes he *would*, just because she asked him to. Her wish is his command. It's intoxicating.

He undresses with rather more dignity than her, pushing to his feet and stripping everything off with quick, efficient motions, his eyes fixed on her, hungry and wanting, his lips reddened from kissing. He's all lean, long muscle, mouth-watering and perfect, and his erection is flushed and sticking out rather insistently. Hermione can't help a smile. Far from frightening her, she's instead developed a fondness for it and how ridiculous it looks, really. Ridiculous looking, and *wonderful* feeling.

But right now, Hermione thinks she wants his mouth. She goes up on her knees on the bed, naked and playfully imperious as she points at the bed beside her. "Lie down," she commands him, and he gives her a crooked, knowing little grin as he moves to obey as if he knows the game she's playing, and he thinks she's adorable. It makes her *happy*. It makes her feel *normal*. Like any other witch

with her boyfriend, having fun, with no nightmares lurking in the dark recesses of her mind, and no traps of trauma to be sprung accidentally. Of course that's not the case. But right now, Hermione is going to pretend it is, unless or until something gets triggered.

Draco stretches out, head on the pillows and cock sticking up. "Now what?" he asks her, that lopsided smirk still playing about his lips, and that soft, needy awe in his eyes.

"Now I thought I could..." She trails off, flushing. Her fingers twine together in her lap as she kneels there naked, suddenly too shy to say the words. His expression softens further.

"C'mere," he says, reaching out, one hand splaying over her thigh, fingers curling behind and tugging gently.

"Can I – I mean, can you do it if I'm facing the other way?" she asks, cheeks blazing as she has vague ideas of what she can do if they do it that way. She might not be able to do a proper sixty-nine thanks to her triggers, but she may only need one hand to support herself, which leaves one free to do other things. Maybe. She bites her lip, and he grins.

"I don't see why not."

And then she's settling over him, regretting it even as she does, because it feels even more exposed than the other way around, especially in the bright light of the morning with the curtains open. But his hands are on her thighs, and he makes a low sound of satisfaction, and then his mouth is on her vulva, hot and wet. Sudden. Hungry. Like he can't wait another second. She makes a whimpering exhalation and catches herself on the bed on her hands as she falls forward. His mouth is wide open, his tongue flat and soft, slicking between her folds, and swirling over her clit, and she groans again.

"Nnngh...oh my god, Draco," she gasps, on all fours over him, except his hands are over her thighs, tipping her back a bit and holding her vulva firm against his mouth. He hums and makes pleased noises – little mmphs, and growls, licking a hot, sharp pleasure into her. Her clit feels electric, and her cunt feels empty. And just as she thinks that, he pushes his tongue into her, his shoulders lifting and back arching slightly. It's an abrupt bloom of ecstasy that's nearly too intense, and she can feel herself get abruptly slicker as arousal grips her in a fist while his tongue slides up to her clit, searching along the way and hitting every nerve ending she has. "*Oh fuck.*" She has one hand stretched out and braced on his upper thigh now, and the other resting so that her fingertips brush over his balls and the base of his shaft.

"Good?" he asks, all muffled with his mouth still against her vulva, sending a frisson through her, and she feels her insides all clench up, and *oh*, she wants to come. His tongue spears into her again, and she makes a strangled sound and presses her fingers against his balls – the skin soft and velvety, the contents so fragile. She cradles his balls a moment, curious, rolling them in her hand, and he makes a huffing sound. She releases them, tracing over the top, drifting to his cock. He pushes up on his elbows slightly, swirling the tip of his tongue around and around her clit, and a sweet, bright sensation builds, driving her toward orgasm.

His cock twitches as she drums her fingers tentatively against the shaft, her face only inches from it. She swallows. Her fingers curl around his cock, and it's iron hard and hot, and the skin is silky soft to the touch. He sucks on her labia, abdomen flexing beneath her as he feasts on her slick vulva. And the way she feels his body shift beneath her as he licks, and sucks, and fucks her with his tongue, his muscles hard and moving under her, is somehow so hot. She's in an ocean of pleasure. Riding him. God, she feels nearly dizzy with it.

She grips his shaft firmly and begins moving her hand up and down, and his fingers squeeze tight on her thighs, and he makes a breathy "*hnnh*," his motions stuttering for a moment. "Don't stop," he gasps, like he's dying. "*Please*, don't stop." He's begging, need thrumming in his voice as Hermione tries to keep going with firm, steady strokes, which is harder than she thought, as distracted as she is by what he's doing to her. His tongue on her clit in endless circles now, inexorable and building her closer and closer to orgasm, the feeling getting sharper and more insistent. She's so wet. Her body is tensing and coiled with the need to come, and her juices have to be slicking his face.

But he's taut beneath her too, hips making tiny jerks as if he wants to thrust up, his cock leaking just a few drops of precum, glistening at the flushed head, and Hermione licks her lips unconsciously. This isn't then. This isn't *them*. This is him. Draco. The sun streams over their bed, and her cunt is aching for his cock, twitching with the sensations he licks into her, his face pushing up into her so eagerly, his whole body shifting and tensing with the effort to please her.

And she's on top. She's in control. Hermione's *always* in control, as Draco tells her so often. Less often now. She doesn't need to hear it as much just lately.

She laps the precum from the head of his cock with the flat of her tongue, and one of his hands goes from her thigh to the bed with a thump that startles her. "*Fuuuuck...*" he groans, and her eyes cut curiously sideways as she tastes the bitterness of his precum on her tongue, lips hovering just above his cock. "*Hermione*," he breathes as if she's just stabbed him through the heart, and his hand is white-knuckled around a handful of bedding. His other hand is gripping her rather firmly, and he isn't licking anymore. And Hermione doesn't feel like throwing up.

She smiles to herself.

"Don't stop," she tells him, and he croaks, "I won't," a promise in a voice so hoarse it hardly sounds like him, and buries his hot, wet mouth against her again with what feels entirely like desperation, his hand returning to her thigh, holding on just a little too tightly. She lowers her head and sweeps her tongue over the head of his cock again as she clutches the silky hot shaft of it in her hand. He whimpers, a needy sound that turns into a stifled groan. She's moving her hand up and down in small strokes again and keeps her eyes open, staying firmly in the present, staring at her fingers wrapped around his cock.

She sweeps her tongue wet with saliva around the head and then licks at it, almost mimicking what Draco's doing to her clit. It may not quite be a proper blowjob, but paired with her hand moving up and down, he seems to love it, his body thrumming with tension, little sounds of needy approval escaping him. His fingers are trembling. His breath is coming raggedly, his chest shifting unsteadily beneath her. And her own orgasm is building closer and closer, sensations radiating through her in a rippling, squeezing maelstrom of pleasure. Like a balloon growing bigger and bigger, skin tight and pressure building, until finally, with her thighs shaking and twitching, Hermione breaks.

"*Ohh...nngh-mmmph...*" Her moan is shapeless and gasping, and then muffled as her mouth sinks over the head of his cock entirely, her lips stretched around it as she takes it in. She sucks hard and sloppily as climax rips through her in a torrent. Her cunt spasms and her whole body goes taut, her hand squeezing around his cock, her mouth wrapped wet and hot around him. And he's moaning against her with his own pleasure even as he keeps licking determinedly, shudders running through him, and it's a perfect, exquisite chaos as she sucks messy and shallow. Her orgasm leaves her in a blissful puddle of afterglow, his tongue finally slicking from her clit to her cunt, swirling over her entrance, and she's sure he can feel the muscle spasms pulsing through her vulva and her cunt.

Hermione's sprawled over him now, mouth firmly over his cock, but too limp to do much more than suck on it like an ice lolly, her hand moving rather pathetically as she soaks in the afterglow of her orgasm. She's still eager, but she has more enthusiasm than skill, especially feeling all liquid and uncoordinated as she is. And anyway, she's afraid to take in more of him than she has, in case it goes wrong. So she just sucks, and licks, and swirls her tongue around, draped over his chest, gradually regaining her coordination. And then she starts sliding her hand firmly up and down again, adding a little twist every now and then. And she's sucking, saliva trickling down over her hand, everything wet and slick, and now and then she can taste the bitterness of precum, and he's making little huffs of needy, whimpering sound, tension stringing him so tight she thinks he'll snap.

He pushes two fingers inside her at one point – or rather, he teases them around her slick entrance until she makes a frustrated noise and pushes back, and his fingers slide inside, and *oh, oh*. Draco fucks her slowly on his fingers, twisting and curling and making her tremble and moan as she sucks at the head of his cock and works it with her hand, and then after a short while, she feels a shift in him. His hips push up and his cock starts to almost *thrum*, it's so hard, his breath even shorter and harsher than before, and Hermione can tell he's close. She moves her hand faster, and he groans, his fingers going still, deep in her cunt but motionless, and she twitches around him on purpose. He makes a shocked sound and wriggles his fingers, and she lets out a wavering moan that's so throaty and needy that it makes her hot cheeks flare even hotter.

"I'm gonna –" he says roughly, his fingers sliding out of her and grabbing her thigh wetly. "*Fuck*. I'm gonna come. You – you can – you don't have to –" he gets out brokenly, and Hermione acknowledges him.

"*Mmm*," she says breathlessly and pops her mouth off the head of him, hand working fast, pulling her head back a bit and blinking with a flinch of surprise as he comes with a strangled groan, his fingers flexing on her thighs. Cum shoots up in thick whitish spurts, coming startlingly close to her face – and *oh*, Hermione doesn't think that would be good, so she draws back further as she keeps working him through the orgasm. His cum splatters down hot over her hand, and she bites her lip, staying in the now. And now she wishes she could see Draco's face. That she could watch him as he came.

And then his hand is covering hers, gently, and she thinks maybe she nearly lost herself for a minute there. "Hermione?"

"I made you come," she says, feeling light-headed, and pleased, and a little shaken all at once.

"You did," he agrees. "And it was fucking amazing. C'mere. Come on." She slides clumsily off him with his help, her legs all stiff, and he grabs a shirt off the bed – his, which she had been wearing – and swipes his cum off himself quickly before he holds an arm out to her as she blinks at him, feeling moon-eyed. Dazed. "Are you alright?" He looks nearly worried. "You didn't have to –" He breaks off, looking at her speechlessly, with his cheeks all flushed pink and his eyes starry, pupils blown, and his lips reddened and swollen.

She slithers into Draco's arms and buries her face against his side as he awkwardly flips one of the blankets half over them. She breathes. "I did it," she says, a weird sense of victory flowing through her now. She didn't throw up or freak out, and she's proud of herself. And it's a feeling she should never have to feel, that she only feels because of terrible things, and yet it's still a good feeling. She smiles against his skin. "I did it. And I didn't, well...panic," she finishes awkwardly, belatedly aware of how not fantastic that sounds. But she knows he understands.

"Yeah," he says, and it sounds almost like he's trying not to cry. "You did." The breath he takes is a little shaky. "*Fuck*. I love you, Hermione. So much."

She smiles wider, feeling dreamy, all her worries banished for a while. "I love you too," she says, and kisses him over a burn scar on his side, just between two ribs.

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Pidanka, for being the very best beta, and picking up on all my weird sentence constructions, my inconsistent use of commas, and correcting my HP inaccuracies. And also for coming up with so many amazing ideas, which are always an improvement ♥

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thirty-Six

Time passes. Days. And then several weeks. Draco watches Hermione carefully for signs that she's crumbling beneath the strain – for any indication that her fears about him being out in the field are becoming too much for her again. He doesn't know what he'll do if she is. Pull back? Be like Potter, restricted to unfulfilling reconnaissance missions in some miserable attempt at a compromise? Probably. Because regardless of what she says, Draco won't be responsible for breaking her again.

But while Hermione's up and down and not always coping – much like him on the inside – there's never another incident like the night of the Kenmare attack. He wonders how much memories of the dinner had to do with it. That evening had been a cascade of trauma and stress for her.

Since then, Draco has been on reconnaissance missions in Appleby and Tutshill, and carefully planned raids in Banchory and Caerphilly, the latter of which had involved taking out a nest of werewolves. He's been frustratingly cautious and managed to avoid any more injuries, which has helped reassure Hermione, he's sure. And despite his frustration at the extra care he's taking, it's been good. He works well with Weasley and Johnson, usually with Nymphadora or Potter, depending on the risk level of the mission. They make a good, well-oiled team now. As for Creevey...well, he hasn't attacked Draco again, but he keeps shooting him odd, intense looks that make the hairs go up on the back of Draco's neck. He supposes that Creevey still harbours a hatred for him, and fair enough. But the younger man keeps it to himself now, which is all Draco wanted.

And Hermione is coping. Which is the most important thing, to him. The second most important is that he gets to fight. And he does. He makes a difference, and it means something.

It's an ordinary Tuesday morning when it all changes.

"Oh shit," Hermione stares down at what she's just written. Her hand starts trembling as she scrawls the 'a'. Tonks looks up from her position, seated opposite Hermione at the table in Lupin's office – she's been looking through reports. Her hair is a minty green, and she raises an eyebrow at Hermione.

"What's up?"

"Hang on," Hermione says distractedly, entirely focused on scribbling out the rest of the intercepted owl she's decoded. She double-checks the message and her deciphering, and then triple-checks,

aware of Tonks's curious, slightly worried eyes on her. She checks the date of the owl. This one came in yesterday; part of a large packet of non-urgent owls. Hermione worked through most of them while Draco was out on a mission – his fourth over the past few weeks. But once he got back, she had set the remainder aside so that she could go and fuss over him and spend the next several hours reassuring herself that he was alive and well. It's becoming a habit, and often seems to end up with them both in bed, clothes on the floor and mouths on each other.

While he's gone, though, working herself until she can't think seems to be the only way Hermione can – just barely – keep a handle on her fear. She worries about Draco constantly when he's out in the field. She clings to the fact that so far, he hasn't been injured again, Ron has given her no more near-death stories, and he comes back to her so happy. It's as though it's giving him back himself. He feels like he's rebalancing the scales, she knows. And while Hermione doesn't think it really works that way, or that it's necessary, he does. For him, it lifts some of the terrible burdens placed on him by the Order and Voldemort, and ultimately, that's what matters.

She blinks and focuses her scattered mind. Right now, what matters is the message in front of her.

Bertha has been moved to Mould-on-the-Wold while the Dark Lord is in America. Be aware not to use the farmhouse to move prisoners.

She repeats it aloud, and Tonks stares at her, eyes boggling wide and hair turning bright, fire engine red. They've come across mention of Bertha before and had long ago worked out that the codename can only refer to Nagini, the last horcrux left. The last stumbling block to be overcome before Voldemort can be confronted. The Battle of Hogwarts had failed because Voldemort had sent Nagini away, safe and hidden, and since then, he's kept the snake at his side or near to him. If Nagini is just hidden in some safe house while Voldemort is absent... This could mean the end of the war within weeks. Days, even. Just like that, it could all be *over*.

"Oh my god." She stares at Tonks, agape, hardly able to process what she's just decoded. Disbelieving. In shock. "It could be a trap."

"It wouldn't be a very good one. We're hardly going to send Harry in, and he'd know that."

"*Oh my god*," Hermione repeats dumbly, still holding her quill.

"I'm going to go get Remus," Tonks says, scrambling to her feet, urgency rising in her voice. "Stay – stay right here," she adds, although why Hermione doesn't know. She's hardly planning on going anywhere, she thinks, feeling strangely numbed. And besides, she's deciphered the information. She's hardly necessary – she's done her part. "Don't tell anyone yet," Tonks adds, which explains the instructions. And then the older witch clatters out of the room, her hair flying behind her like a flag, the door banging open as she disappears.

Hermione stares down at the piece of parchment for a long moment, running through what could happen thanks to this one small scrap of paper. Playing out all the possibilities in her mind. Wondering what Lupin will do. And then her heart suddenly begins to race, sweat springing out and fear making a sick, cold ball in her stomach. She knows with a terrible certainty which team Lupin is going to send. Even if he sends more than one team – if he can scramble more than one to go today – Hermione *knows* he'll send Ron's. Which means Draco will go. He'll go to face Nagini, who will undoubtedly be under heavy guard; no doubt actual Death Eaters, not just Snatchers or Voldemort's other assorted minions.

Hermione feels ill. She gulps, clutching her quill too hard in her hand as she sits there, waiting for Lupin and Tonks to return, her heart pounding in her chest.

Everything happens very quickly after that. When Lupin comes back with Tonks, Hermione shows him the missive she deciphered, and he presses his hand over his mouth, as if overcome by emotion. He walks to the large wall map and stares at it, his focus on Mould-on-the-Wold, the decoded message clutched tightly in his hand. "A farmhouse," he says quietly, as if to himself. "Well, that narrows it down."

"Have we done reconnaissance there before? Getting the lay of the land?" Tonks asks, standing beside her husband with her hair still blazing red, eyeing the map. "We might have a local map with more detail."

Hermione swallows thickly, a lump in her throat as she shoves to her feet and moves to a file cabinet. "We do," she says, digging through the files that she had organised weeks ago and pulling out the one on Mould-on-the-Wold. A team led by Oliver Wood had gone in months ago looking for Death Eater activity, taking photos, as well as making a detailed map. The Order has always made a point of keeping abreast of what's happening on the ground in wizarding villages. She flips the file open and pulls the map out, checking the date in the corner. "This one's nearly seven months old, but it has all the dwellings on it," she says, laying it flat on the table as she sits back down, and Lupin and Tonks turn to look.

She listens quietly as they discuss the situation, obviously meaning to send in a team now – as soon as they can – and then they call Harry and Ron into the room, and Hermione excuses herself. She's just getting in the way, and she can't work while they're planning. She doesn't go upstairs; if she does, Draco will know immediately that something is going on, and she doesn't want to be the one to tell him. Not when the thought of him going on the mission makes her feel cold, sweaty and as though she's about to start hyperventilating. But when she walks into the kitchen, he's in there. In a long-sleeved t-shirt to cover his Mark and joggers, feet bare and hair damp and shining in the light, two mugs on the bench as he gets the milk out of the fridge. The kettle is on, a bit of steam wisping out of the spout.

He looks up, and the corner of his mouth hooks up. His expression turns soft. "I was just making coffee." And then his eyes narrow. "Are you alright?"

Hermione gulps. There's no way she can hide it, and he's probably going to get called through in another ten minutes or so anyway. She rubs her hands over her face and then feels his hands at her waist. She looks up at him as he brushes a lock of hair back from her face, concern in his expression as he waits for her answer. "I decoded a message about Nagini," she says reluctantly, looping her arms around his middle and pressing her cheek against him. "Apparently, the snake has been hidden in Mould-on-the-Wold under guard while you-know-who is in America." She feels the tension thrum to life in Draco, running through him like an electric current. He stiffens and straightens, and although he keeps sliding a hand up and down her back, it feels slightly forced now.

"Without the Dark Lord?" he asks, and Hermione can feel the eagerness churning up in him. Thanks to his viewing of Snape's memories so long ago – the thing that led to his defection in the first place – Draco knows about the horcruxes, something that otherwise only those closest to Harry and high up in the Order have been made aware of. "Shit." He draws back enough to look

Hermione in the eye, and his expression is complicated. A burning eagerness is mingled with a touch of worry for her. "Are they talking about it in the office now?"

She extricates herself from him as the kettle begins to whistle, moving around him and lifting it off the hob. "Yes. I think they want to send a team in as soon as they've figured out a rough plan."

"Weasley's?" he asks, standing there in the middle of the kitchen with his hands at his sides, his wand in his hand now, fidgeting with it as he rocks on his heels, bouncing on the balls of his feet. He's all but flinging himself into battle already, Hermione thinks with a pang of fear as she takes over making the coffee, pouring the milk he'd gotten out and shoving it back in the fridge before adding the boiling water. Trying to distract herself from the suddenly threatening tears with menial tasks. If she cries, it'll look like she's trying to convince him not to go, and she isn't. She accepts what he needs to do. She just hates it, particularly at times like now, when she knows he's about to go rushing into imminent danger without a second thought.

"I think so. Ron's in there. And Harry, although I doubt he'll be going." She can't help the resentment that shapes her expression for a moment, corners of her mouth pulling down. Ginny gets to keep Harry safe at home. It isn't *fair*. "Hopefully, they'll be able to scrape up more people. Nagini will be heavily guarded." She sets the kettle back down rather harder than needed, chewing on the inside of her cheek. She imagines Lupin and Tonks will both be joining the team, and likely Justin and Hannah as well, but that only gives them seven fighters, and Colin.

Hermione wishes – not for the first time – that she wasn't too twisted up to fight. But she knows if she goes out in the field, she'll be more of a liability than anything. As determined as she might feel to contribute, if she actually had to face an enemy fighter, she'd probably freeze up and get herself killed. Tension builds in her skull. There's an ache behind her eyes, and the hinge of her jaw feels tight. She should be able to be an asset. She should be there with him, watching his back. At least then, if it all went wrong, they'd be together. But she wouldn't help. She'd *make* it go wrong, probably.

"You don't want me going," he says, and Hermione shoots him an almost angry look as she stirs the coffee. Tears are stinging her eyes.

"Of course I don't," she snaps. "You know that." She flings the teaspoon into the sink, and it clatters over-loudly. She blinks hard and swipes at her eyes, glancing up at him as he stands there helplessly, looking like just as much of a useless lump as Harry or Ron, suddenly. This is one area where Draco can't really console her. He can't make her feel better, or reassure her. He can *try*, but it never really works because the only thing that will make her happy is him not going out on dangerous missions. He swallows and shoves his hand through his hair, looking as unhappy as she feels.

"I can not go," he offers, his expression tight, and she shakes her head in the negative, leaning back against the bench as she holds out his coffee to him.

"Don't be stupid. Of course you have to go," she says, trying to make her voice firm, but it trembles very slightly. Draco gives her a look of abject gratitude. He steps closer and puts his coffee back down on the bench, and then he wraps her in his arms, his lips pressed to the crown of her head. His embrace is crushingly tight, and he murmurs a *thank you* that makes her heart swell and hurt. His heart is racing against her ear, beating hard behind his ribs as she squeezes him back tightly around the middle. She hates this fear and worry, but she loves him so much more. She sighs.

"You should go and see how the planning is going," she says, and he lets her go with a kiss that makes her feel breathless and giddy despite the fear that bears down on her.

"You'll be okay?"

"I'm fine." She offers him a tired smile as she picks up her coffee, cradling it in two hands. "I might go sit on the porch for a while." Spring is in full force now, and she's enjoying it. The warmth, the green, and the new life in the back garden. If she's wearing a jersey, she doesn't even need a parka anymore. He gives her a quick but careful look and then nods. Neither of them is totally happy – she can see his concern for her eating into his joy – but they're both okay. And that's enough. "Go," she says again, nodding at the doorway, and he takes his coffee with him, a lightness in his step that she loves to see.

It only takes half an hour or so before the back door opens and people spill out, just barely prepared for the unexpected raid. Hermione stands and greets them, shifting out of the way. Draco takes her in his arms, heedless of everyone else for a moment as they stand in the corner of the porch, Lupin, Tonks, Angelina, Hannah, and Justin already heading down the garden path. It'll be just Hermione, Harry, Ginny, and Mrs Weasley left at the safe house. Ron hovers behind Draco, waiting.

"Well?" Hermione asks Draco, nerves making her feel sick to her stomach, fingers fiddling with the buttons on the light coat he's wearing. His hands are on her, pushing through her hair and touching her face like he's soaking her up.

"We're all apparating into the village, in teams of two, with about a dozen farmhouses on the outskirts of the village to investigate. Creevey, Shackbolt, and a few others will be joining us. There's not much of a plan since we're going in blind. Just checking every building in every farmhouse until we find Nagini and then sending up a locator charm."

Hermione grimaces. It sounds horribly ill-thought-out and dangerous, but intellectually she knows it's worth the risk. It's a horcrux; even if people die, strategically, it will be worth it. She bites her lip. She can't take it if he dies. He hugs her tightly, as if he knows what she's thinking. "It'll be fine. I swear. But I have to go. We don't have time to waste," he says. And then, in front of Ron, he kisses her gently on the lips and tells her, "I love you."

She firms her trembling chin. "I love you too. Please be careful."

"I will." He lets her go then and descends the stairs, pausing at the bottom as Ron strides over to Hermione at her gesture, and she gives him a quick hug.

"Please keep him safe," she says to Ron as she releases him from her hug, cutting her eyes toward Draco, who's listening.

Ron huffs. "And what am I, chopped liver?"

"I know you won't do anything stupid and reckless," she says, which still feels odd to be saying about Ron, but it is true, "but I don't know that about *him*."

"I'll bring us both back alive, 'Mione," Ron says with a grin as he walks back a couple of steps and then turns and trots down the stairs. She clutches the porch railing hard as they walk off toward the garden shed, Draco's stride easy and long, his hair shining in the sun, twirling his wand idly in his fingers. He doesn't look back, which is good because she's crying.

In the end, the team consists of five pairs. Wood and Shacklebolt, Nymphadora and Creevey, Abbott and Johnson, Lupin and Finch-Fletchley, and Weasley and Draco.

They have to side-along apparate to Mould-on-the-Wold in several trips with Lupin, Nymphadora, Shacklebolt, and Wood because none of the rest of them have been to the small market town in Gloucestershire before. It sits on a small hill surrounded by sheep farms, one of which is where they arrive — in the cover of the lee side of a stone outbuilding, in a field. Fluffy sheep with their winter fleeces still on are ambling about, baa-ing, some taking an interest in the small group of Order members and trotting over to examine them. One butts against Draco insistently as he pushes at its head, muttering for it to go away, which it refuses to do.

Weasley laughs at him and the persistently friendly sheep once he's apparated in, and Draco scowls in order to hide his twitch toward a smile.

"Right. Disillusionment Charms everyone, but stick close in your pairs. Don't lose each other. Send up the alert once you've found a warded farmhouse — we can presume that's where the snake will be," Shacklebolt says. Draco finds it still strange to see his old handler in person — he's only seen him once, briefly, since their escape. Once Draco had lost his use, it seems Shacklebolt had dismissed his existence entirely. Part of him wants to hex the bastard for the way he threw Hermione to the wolves. For the way he used Draco and threw him aside. But now is not the time. "There will undoubtedly be disapparition wards around the place, so keep them pinned in the house until reinforcements arrive, and they shouldn't be able to flee."

Everyone nods in understanding, Draco included, and then they're all peeling off in pairs, almost invisible save for a slight, tell-tale waver in the air. They've memorised the houses they need to check. Draco and Weasley have the two on nearly the other side of the village, and they take off at an easy lope — they can't risk apparating in close enough to set off any wards, not that anyone had been to those two farms in order to be able to apparate them close. Wood's team had drawn up their map months ago from a nearby hilltop, using a Farseeing Charm.

So, lucky Draco and Weasley have a fifteen-minute run ahead of them. The tussock is uneven under Draco's booted feet, and there are too many bloody kissing gates and stiles to navigate before they get onto a narrow country road, running along unseen. Faster than a jog, but not a sprint.

Mould-on-the-Wold is a town of nearly 2,000 people, most of them Muggles, but there's no traffic on the road. Draco imagines much of the populace has taken to staying inside as much as possible — the Muggles won't know what's going on in their village, but they will know that something isn't right. They'll leave, or hide. And some of them will be getting picked off as entertainment and slaves. He grimaces, disgusted, trying to focus on the mission as they traverse the roads and keeping a close eye on the ripples in the air beside him that indicate Weasley's presence. He can hear the other man's breathing, getting heavier the further they go.

"Fucking hell, why didn't we bring disillusioned broomsticks?"

"Don't know," Draco says shortly, huffing a breathless laugh. "No one thought of it, I guess."

"Well, it would've made things bloody easier," Weasley puffs, irritated, making Draco grin.

"I'll remember that for the next time we hunt a horcrux."

"Fuck you, Malfoy." There's a pause, and Draco feels as though Weasley is looking at his own almost invisible, wavering outline, even though neither of them can actually see each other. "Why

aren't *you* tired?"

"Exercise," he says, one word, because quite honestly, he *is* getting very slightly winded, even though they've only been running less than ten minutes. Draco's not as fit as he'd like, it seems.

"Fucking *exercise*," Weasley grunts disparagingly, and then silence falls again, leaving only the sound of their breathing. And then, just as they reach the first farmhouse, after nearly fifteen minutes of loping along at an easy run, the wristbands they wear hum, and Draco skids to a halt and turns, casting an eye over the sky. Despite it being early afternoon and quite sunny, he sees the red bolt lance up into the sky. Shacklebolt and Wood have found Nagini.

"*Fuck!*" Weasley swears as they both spin and start hurtling back in the direction they'd just come from, Weasley taking wheezing breaths as Draco laughs silently. "I swear to Godric – if we end up spending this attack running – instead of – fighting –"

"Save your breath, Weasley," Draco says, and then does so himself. They're running faster than before, and his leg muscles are beginning to feel the burn as he breathes deeply and steadily, trying not to pant. Luckily, Shacklebolt and Wood's location is almost halfway between where they first apparated into Mould-on-the-Wold and the farms assigned to them, down a side lane, so they get there quickly, out of breath and sweating. From the looks of it as they get close to the farm, Shacklebolt and Wood haven't yet triggered any wards because the farmhouse is quiet as they approach carefully, looking for any sign of the others.

The farm is bordered by dry stone walls, and a few trees and shrubs shield part of the two-storey house from view. A couple of men stroll between the house and the outbuildings, looking as though they're on patrol. Draco doesn't recognise them at this distance, but they seem far more alert than the Snatchers at Kenmare were. They disappear out of sight behind some outbuildings.

"How are we supposed to find the others?" he asks Weasley as they approach the farm entrance cautiously, keeping low and close to the hedgerow, and the other man grunts acknowledgement.

"Look for the ripples?" But it seems as though the others were already doing that because Lupin blinks into view crouched down behind the dry stone wall, near the gate onto the farm, raising his hand slightly as he looks in their direction. They hurry over toward him, Draco with his adrenaline rising, his heart already pumping from the run. He feels energised rather than tired as they crouch down close to Lupin and the others. They're all there, save Nymphadora and Creevey, who had one of the farms further out from the village.

"– they should be here any minute," Shacklebolt is saying of Nymphadora and Creevey, all the rest of them visible now, crouched in the shelter of the dry stone wall. "We won't wait for them. Wood and I have seen movement in the farmhouse and the large shed there –" he nods to a large, low-roofed structure that looks more like a hay barn or shelter for the flock in winter than a mere shed. He's drawn a sketch in the dirt outlining buildings, and jabs the large one on the left. "We'll take the farmhouse. Go around the back and get in that way, while disillusioned." Shacklebolt seems to be taking the glory on this mission – and the danger, to be fair. The farmhouse is the likeliest place for Nagini and any Death Eaters to be.

Lupin nods. "We'll be a distraction then. Once we breach the wards, most of the guards will spill out into the yard," he says, indicating the area between the farmhouse and the outbuildings with a circle of his finger. "Hannah, Angelina, Justin, and I will head there. Ron, Draco, you go around to the right while disillusioned," Lupin says, sweeping his finger through the dirt, "and check the barn. It's unlikely, but Nagini could be in there. Remember to remove the charm before you join us."

Draco nods – he doesn't need to be told, and neither does Weasley. Friendly fire is a killer, with Disillusionment Charms. "Everyone clear?" They all nod solemnly. "Right. Let's go," Lupin says without any further ado, and they move.

As expected, a Caterwauling Charm goes off as soon as they enter the property, and figures boil out of the buildings with their wands out – enough of them to make Draco swear under his breath, his adrenaline rocketing. Too many, really. They're outnumbered even if Nymphadora and Creevey turn up. He and Weasley book it around the back of the building, and he beats Weasley by several strides, only for the other man to catch up and crash into him while they're both still disillusioned. They go tumbling, Draco swearing furiously as they roll through the dirt, holding his wand up over his head to try to protect it, and then scrambling to his feet with undignified speed and looking around.

Even disillusioned, that roll kicked up a lot of dust and would've made them easily visible. But they're alone. His shoulders slump as he lets out a sigh.

"Fucking careful, Weasley. You'll get us killed," he hisses, dropping his disillusionment a second before Weasley does. The redhead appears slightly worse for wear after his clumsy accidental tackle – grubby with dirt, some smeared on his cheek and caught in his pathetic attempt at a beard, his hair a mess. Draco is annoyed that he probably looks the same.

"You just stopped!"

"Yes, because I didn't want to go running headlong into trouble!"

"Dragon dung you didn't. You love doing that," Weasley snipes absently as he takes point, creeping along. Draco casts a *homenum revelio* under his breath before he responds. Both of them can see the glow of three figures clustered in the large shed up ahead, ignoring the small mass of people revealed in the farmyard. It sounds like a pitched battle is taking place, and it looks from a glance like people have settled into cover and are taking quick shots at each other. But Draco has to focus on this, not the battle.

"I'm being *careful*," he says as they reach the small, open-sided firewood shed just before the barn, staying low.

"I'll careful *you*," Weasley mutters incomprehensibly, but when Draco glances at him, the redhead's grinning.

"Hermione says you have to keep me alive," Draco shoots back as they pause behind the stacked cords of firewood. There's one figure by the barn door, and two more further back, close together. They seem to be doing something. Packing something? The glow of the *revelio* is fading, and Draco can't tell.

"She didn't say you needed all your limbs," Weasley mutters darkly. "Come on then, let's go. The others need us. Take out the guy at the door, and then take cover to the right, yeah? You take the one on the right, me the one on the left." He's talking about the wizards inside, and Draco nods.

"Yeah." And then they're both running in, casting as they go. The best defence is a good offence. Draco lashes off a *depulso* and then a *confringo* in quick succession, and he thinks Weasley must use similar because the old barn doors fucking *explode*, inwards and into splinters. The wizard peeking out from behind the doors – not having had a shield up – suffers a similar fate, and for a moment, the air they're running into is a cloud filled with wood chips and the red mist of an

obliterated body. Draco presses his left forearm up over his mouth and nose, so he doesn't inhale anything as he barrels into the stone wall to the right of the doorway. Splinters and blood rain down over him.

"Fucking hell," Weasley is swearing, disgusted, and when Draco looks over, the other man is coated in reddish paste and pale brown dust. He swallows hard and resists the instinctive urge to lick his lips. From Weasley's horrified look at him, Draco is just as coated as he is. He doesn't care. His blood is running hot, and he's in the zone. That hyperalert, calm, happy place he goes to when things get very real – balanced on a knife edge, with sheer, terrified panic on one side and a cold, bloody rage on the other.

He laughs. "*Eau de person*," he yells to Weasley, who's ducking his head around the doorway to try to get a look inside. And then a lance of green spears out of the barn, along with a snarled "*Avada Kedavra!*" and Weasley jerks backwards, white as a sheet where he isn't filthy. The Killing Curse had come within centimetres of him. And Draco recognised that voice. "It's Rodolphus!" he hisses to Weasley, frustrated that the Death Eaters inside will probably hear.

"Who?" Weasley whisper-yells.

"Rodolphus Lestrangle!" the man in question calls helpfully from inside the barn and then cackles a mad laugh. Draco's skin crawls. The last time he'd seen his uncle, the Death Eater had been doing things to a disembowelled, dying woman that Draco would rather not picture again. He'd had to dispose of the body afterwards. Despite himself, he remembers vividly, and he chokes down a retch, turning his head and spitting on the ground. "Is that you, Draco?"

He doesn't answer. Weasley shoots him a weird, uncomfortable look as if he expects Draco and Rodolphus to have a polite chat before they try to kill each other. "*Bombarda!*" he hisses and aims blindly into the barn. There's a small explosion, and Rodolphus's laughter. Weasley follows up with a *confringo*, but they can't see what the fuck they're doing, it's so gloomy in the barn. "*Incendio!*" Draco snarls, a gout of fire springing up in the place he struck, and a set of shelves laden with small bits of potions-brewing equipment burst into flame, illuminating Rodolphus and Augustus Rookwood.

Both tall, dark-haired men of medium build, they nonetheless look entirely different. Rookwood is athletic for his age and as well groomed as ever, grey-streaked brown hair and beard clipped short, eyes cautious as he raises a shield. Rodolphus doesn't bother with a shield – hunched slightly, he holds his wand ready to cast, looking as mad as his wife is, with dark eyes peering out from behind straggling hair. They've been caught in the middle of packing vials of potions into cases. It seems from the equipment scattered around that the shed has been repurposed as a potions lab, most of the vials filled with what seem to be defensive and healing potions, from the colours.

"*Diffindo!*" Draco snarls, going for Rodolphus on the left, and the man bats the curse away even as Weasley makes a sound of disapproval, and Draco ducks back into cover.

"I take the left, you take the right," Weasley says sharply, and Draco clenches his jaw. This isn't fun anymore. Not when he's facing down his damned sadistic uncle and Rookwood – who may not be as insane as his uncle, but is definitely just as dangerous. But he *wants* Rodolphus. He wants to kill the bastard, painfully. He's seen what the Death Eater has done over the years, and he'll never be able to get the images out of his head. He wants him *dead*.

"I take Lestrangle," he tells Weasley from behind cover, a hard edge to his voice as he meets the other man's eyes, blue peering out of a mask of red-brown.

"I'm your uncle! Treat me with some respect, boy," Rodolphus yells glibly, and Draco can't hold back the sound of disgust he makes. He spits on the ground, bile sharp and acid at the back of his throat.

"You're an evil cunt!" he yells back furiously and feels an Unforgivable on the tip of his tongue, barely biting it back. He's not supposed to use those, he thinks, with a resentful glance at Weasley.

"Language! Whatever would your poor mother think," Rodolphus taunts, and Draco's heart convulses and skips a beat. It feels as though someone grabbed it in an icy fist and squeezed, his lungs catching on nothing and his stomach lurching. He's aware of Weasley's eyes on him and wonders how much the other man has figured out about what Draco's defection may have meant for his parents. He takes a breath with an effort, feeling like he's about to vomit.

"Don't you fucking mention my mother," he snarls at Rodolphus, with less force than he'd like, and then slices off another *diffindo*. The fire in the shelves is spreading, he sees, to the small loft. Good. Weasley trades curses with Rookwood, and Draco and Rodolphus are glued to each other. He tells himself not to listen to what his uncle says; the Death Eater will say whatever he thinks will fuck with Draco's head the most, true or not. Whatever he says is just as likely to be a lie as true. He lashes another *incendio* at Rodolphus, who deflects it into another corner of the barn.

"The dear woman shouldn't be upset, in *her condition* –"

"Shut up, Lestrangle!" Draco shields against a curse from Rookwood and then dodges a wordless *crucio* from Lestrangle, who finishes –

"– it's bad for the baby." The man grins, viciously, and Draco can't see any trace of a lie. He's lying, though. He must be. He says nothing in return, trying not to rise to the bait, even as he feels nearly dizzy with the force of his rage, his fingertips tingling and his breath harsh and frantic. He flings off several curses, shielding and deflecting in between each one as Rodolphus hurls curses right back, including Unforgivables, and Rookwood sends a couple his way too. He flattens himself back against the stone wall beside the doorway, although even that doesn't feel safe – either of the two Death Eaters could explode the wall outward and kill him.

He darts a look at Weasley, who's also flattened against his side of the doorway, panting, his wand clutched tightly. Smoke is billowing out of the shed now, and both Death Eaters must have Bubblehead Charms on to not be coughing.

"Rookwood's a tough bastard," Weasley calls across almost apologetically, and Draco grimaces.

"Yeah." They both are. *Fuck*. There's a reason they're both valued servants of the Dark Lord. This is taking too long. Draco listens for a second, and can hear fighting from the yard still. At least the Order are still holding out while they're tied down with these two.

"She must be about four months along now. She'll be showing soon. I do so like it when they're all round and succulent," Rodolphus yells, and Ron makes a disgusted, sympathetic face as Draco snorts air through his nose, hands in fists and trembling, every muscle in his body whip tight. He's lying. "Of course, we can't *hurt* her. Not with our Master's seed in her belly. You'll be getting a new half-sibling soon, nephew. Won't that be nice?"

"*Avada Kedavra!*" The curse comes out quietly and filled with deadly intent as he whirls out into the doorway and whips the curse from his wand, squinting at his uncle through the smoke. Rodolphus's eyes widen as he sees the curse almost too late, and then, fast as a striking snake, he

grabs Rookwood and yanks the other Death Eater into the path of the green bolt. Rookwood drops like a stone, dead on impact, and Rodolphus lashes his wand and an inferno erupts from it. Draco shields and skitters back from the doorway. And then the fire dissipates and there's the sound of stone exploding and Rodolphus's fading laughter.

Casting a Bubblehead Charm, Draco runs into the barn with his wand raised, and peers through the flame and smoke to see that a chunk of the back wall has been blown out. He runs to the hole, vaguely aware of Weasley racing to join him, and they both look out to see Rodolphus running in a madcap flail across the field outside. They send several curses flying at him, but Draco doesn't expect them to hit; Rodolphus is already too far away. They don't. The Death Eater flings himself bodily over a fence, tumbling to the ground in an almost comedic tangle of limbs. And then he scrambles to his feet with a hop, turning and waving mockingly to Draco before he disappears with a crack.

"Fuck!"

"Well, I guess that's where the disappearance wards end," Weasley says, as though thinking aloud. Draco could fucking punch him.

"Who gives a shit, Weasley?" he snarls and stalks out of the barn, rage vibrating through him. His uncle is a liar, he tells himself. A fucking *liar*.

He pauses by the doorway, checking that no one has turned up while they were preoccupied, but the area seems clear. "Come on. We need to get to the others," he snaps as Weasley pauses to grab Rookwood's wand. The redhead looks down at Rookwood, and then up at Draco.

"We said no Unforgivables."

"What, am I in *trouble*?" Draco asks, so caustic he nearly burns himself, and Weasley gives him a careful look as he jogs over out of the smoke-filled barn, the loft and roof merrily engulfed in flame.

"No. I won't tell if you don't," Weasley says, and a knot in Draco's chest loosens slightly at that. "I get why you did. Just...don't do it again."

"Yeah. I'll do my best." He sounds indifferent, but he's thankful.

"It fucks with your *soul*, mate," Weasley says. "Every time you do it successfully." And Draco knows that legend – not exactly confirmed fact – and shrugs.

"My soul is fucked already," he says, sidestepping the issue and ruthlessly crushing down any thoughts and feelings about his mother and what Rodolphus said. They can be dealt with later. "Come on, Weasley. Hurry up."

It has to have been ten minutes since they left the others and the battle erupted, and it still seems to be going hot. They circle around to join the Order. They briefly considered coming up behind the Death Eaters in the yard in some kind of pincer manoeuvre, but given they haven't discussed it with the others beforehand, the possibility of crossfire is too high. Instead, they sprint around behind the outbuildings and come up on the Order members from behind.

Nymphadora and Creevey are there now, Draco sees, all of them pushing forward against the enemy, using the cover of the scatter of buildings and a large wagon loaded with winter squash.

Abbott lies on the ground behind the house itself with a great wound in her abdomen and Finch-Fletchley tending her, while five of the enemy lie dead – and there seems to be bloody, messy evidence of at least one other enemy death. Draco and Weasley dash in, staying low and shielding, skidding to a crouched halt next to Lupin and Nymphadora whose hair is radium green.

They're behind the wagon, which really doesn't seem like enough cover.

"What's happening?" Weasley asks, and Lupin flings off a silent curse and spares the redhead a glance before sending another curse over top of the squash.

"We need to get inside. Shacklebolt sent some sparks out the window a few moments ago, but they're defending the door heavily."

"Should've used fiendfyre on the whole house," Draco comments, eyeing it, and Lupin shoots him a *look*.

"That would've been a useful suggestion ten minutes ago, Draco," he says in a dangerously calm voice.

"Wouldn't have had confirmation Nagini was dead then, though," Nymphadora says shortly, breaking off her near-constant mutter of curses and hexes.

Draco shrugs. "Still could use it, if need be," he points out, ready to be as ruthless with Shacklebolt as the man was with him, and they all shoot him a horrified look. He grits his teeth. "Shall some of us try to peel off and go in the back?" he suggests, which is how he ends up dashing through another hail of curses before scrambling through a small, broken back window after Weasley – which seems to be where Shacklebolt and Wood made their ingress. He spills out into a small, old-fashioned kitchen, cutting his elbow on broken glass and falling on his arse, the impact jarring right up his spine.

And then Creevey tumbles in after them, a determined look on his face. "Oh shit, *Colin*," Weasley groans, but Creevey just squares his shoulders and gives them each a steady glance, his wand clutched tight in his hand.

"I can help," he says, and Weasley looks at Draco, who shrugs.

"Fine. But...be careful, yeah?" It seems Creevey has never been amazing at duelling. Useful at reconnaissance, but more backup than front-lines material, although from what Weasley's said recently, he has improved a lot lately. The younger man nods earnestly, and then Weasley leads the way as the three of them move through the crowded, maze-like house. It appears to have been magically expanded, and it's filled with boxes, ornaments, and furniture. Like the Room of Requirement when it became the room of hidden things, Draco thinks with a grimace at the memory, ducking into a room with his wand raised, and clearing it.

The house seems empty. And then, as he returns to the corridor, he realises he's lost sight of Weasley. *Fuck*. He spins and looks for Creevey, but the wizard is nowhere to be seen. He checks the nearest few rooms quickly, and doesn't find Weasley, Creevey, or Nagini – Draco's starting to think the house's defences involve wards and charms to confuse and separate. Divide and conquer. He hears noises though, after a moment, and follows them. The bangs and cracks of battle, and the sound of voices, growing louder. And then he turns a corner and finds the stairs, and Creevey just visible in the corridor above. A sense of relief washes through him, and he races up the stairs two at a time. "Creevey!"

The younger man is standing frozen in the doorway to the room the ruckus is coming from. Of course he is. He always seems to be right where the trouble is. He's short enough that Draco can see over his shoulder.

There's a *panther* in the room, in front of the snake, facing down the terrified Creevey.

Oliver Wood is half *inside* the snake. The bottom half of him. His head and torso are still out, one eye staring blankly, the other a mass of jelly filling the socket and smeared down one cheek.

Shacklebolt has his wand out but he seems dazed, and it's his wand arm that's been mauled, down to bone in some places.

"Shit," Draco says blankly, and then the panther springs, and running on automatic, he grabs Creevey by the collar and heaves him bodily out of the way, the younger man flung stumbling into the hallway and off to one side. "*Avad-*" And then the panther hits Draco like the Hogwarts Express. The breath is punched out of him as he goes flying back, thinking, *fucking Creevey*, and then his head smacks off the floor, and his wand falls from nerveless fingers. He can't get his breath. Stunned and stupid, the first thing he does as the panther removes its paws from his chest and stands over him is roll over and try to scramble for his wand. He's not sure there was a better decision he could've made, but that one doesn't work.

The panther plants its paw at the top of his spine, and he *feels* its claws unsheathe into his flesh like hot steel needles. It slams him into the floor hard enough to properly wind him again. And then it drags down, over vertebrae and nerves, shredding everything in its path. He screams. He wishes he'd pass out, but he doesn't. Draco stays fully aware of the agony that spears through every nerve in his body, and of the way he loses proper feeling in his left arm and leg as the panther drags its claws very slowly down.

"*Stupefy!*" Creevey's voice yells, and the claws retract, although the agony still burns excruciatingly through Draco's body, and something falls heavy on his back. And then there are footsteps up the stairs, and he turns his head to see a blue flash of light which lightens the weight on his back tremendously. A second later, Lupin is visible in Draco's blurred vision, rolling a stark naked woman off him and casting an *incarcerous* on her. He blinks in confusion, pain radiating through him, except where the sensations are all strangely dulled, through his left side. It's hard to breathe.

Lupin stands and then aims his wand into the room that Nagini and Shacklebolt are in. "*Avada Kedavra*," he snaps coldly, and Draco thinks through a muzzy head, *oh, so he can use it, can he?* There are more footsteps on the stairs.

"He saved me," Creevey keeps saying, in a small, shock-numbed voice. "He saved me."

"Ron," Lupin snaps over his shoulder as he crouches down beside Draco. His eyelids are feeling increasingly heavy, and he struggles to keep them open. "Go help Kingsley. I have Draco."

"Oh *shit*, Malfoy," Weasley says breathlessly as Draco's eyes slide nearly shut before he jerks them half open again. Then, with more horror dawning in his voice: "*Oliver*. Oh fuck. *Kingsley*. Creevey, get in here and help. G-get Oliver out of the snake. I'll grab Kingsley and —" He goes on, but Draco can't keep track.

Lupin is talking to him, but it doesn't make sense.

His left arm and leg feel weird. Dulled, and numb, like he's slept on them funny.

Nerve damage, he thinks. He tries to focus, but everything is sliding sideways. It's getting very hard to think, but his mind fixes on Hermione with a pang of longing.

Hermione. She's going to be so angry with him. He'd *promised* her he'd be careful. Guilt rises up, swamped in pain, as the world finally goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

► Notes

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to my incredible beta, Pidanka. She does an amazing job whipping my chapters into shape, and I couldn't be more appreciative 💖

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thirty-Seven

Hermione is sitting shut up in Lupin's office, hunched over some intercepted messages, when the back door slams open with a crash that shakes the whole house. Fear snaps down her spine as she shoves to her feet, a sudden, blind panic overwhelming her as she drops her quill to the floor, grabs for her wand, and scrambles to her feet. Her first thought is that they're under attack, and her breath whoops in and out, her heart thundering loudly in her ears. Terror makes her dizzy. She thinks of being captured, and dragged off. Her, Harry, Ginny, and Mrs Weasley. Her stomach drops sickly and the world goes funny.

Her sudden movement has knocked over the inkwell, and black fluid is seeping all over the table as her lungs constrict, every muscle in her body frozen.

But the slow realisation sinks in that the wards can't have been breached. The safe house is still secure, Hermione realises, or there would be the wailing of alarms, deafening and swooping in the air. Instead, there is just a thunder of footsteps, and a cacophony of familiar voices – Ron's, Tonks's – filled with fear and worry. And then Lupin's voice rises above the rest, muffled through the office door. "Let me get him on the table!" Oh god. *Oh no*. The mission. Something has gone wrong. Someone has been hurt. Hermione's feet feel rooted to the floor, her wand slack in her hand.

Draco. It can't be. There's no reason it has to be. It could be *anyone*. No. It could be anyone, but somehow Hermione *knows* with an irrational certainty that it's Draco that Lupin is talking about. *Get him on the table*. Her stomach drops and her pounding heart kicks it up a gear, her pulse loud in her ears. She drags in a wounded, rasping breath and *moves*, clumsy and fast, her quill crushed beneath her foot as she rounds the table, bursting into a run as she slips her wand back into the holster. Slamming a hand against the wall by the door to stop her mad rush and wrenching it open and all but hurling herself through – all in the space of a few heartbeats, her sock-clad feet skidding on the floor as she sprints down the short hall and brings herself to a stop at the dining room doorway in a flailing slide.

The breath is punched out of her. One hand goes to her mouth as the other one balls up against her stomach, pressing in hard as she gulps for air. "No. *No*." It *is*. It's Draco.

He's lying face down on the large dining room table in nothing but his trousers and his boots, and his scarred back is gored terribly, with long, raking slashes right down his spine. Deep, and awful. Blood coats him, dripping down onto the table, and Lupin is bent over Draco with his wand in hand, muttering charms in a constant flow under his breath. He looks worried, and there is an intent focus in his eyes. She sees that Draco's right side is filled with the sort of tension that makes her

think he must be conscious, his right fist clenched, but his whole left side is oddly lax, a weird, dead limpness to it. The glint of spine shows through as Draco takes a shuddering breath and his back moves; knobbles of white vertebrae, and Hermione swallows hard. *Oh god. It's so bad.*

There are others in the room, but Hermione doesn't give a shit. They don't exist. Only he matters. Someone grabs her and tries to draw her back and speak to her as she strides across the room, but she shakes them off – fighting them, lashing out with a mindless viciousness, her eyes still on Draco. Her only instinct is to get to him. She has to get to him. The hands let her go quickly. A familiar voice – Ron – says, "Hey, hey, okay, 'Mione. Okay. Just don't get in the way. And don't move him. He should be okay, but Lupin needs to –" Ron's voice keeps going, but Hermione isn't listening – while we wait for Siobhan. He can't feel his left side and –"

Paralysis? It makes horrible sense, with his spine showing that way. Whatever has clawed him – a werewolf? – has gored right down until it hit bone, and was stopped by it. It's horrendous. Far worse than the flogging, which had covered more area but wasn't half as deep. It's hard to breathe. *She* feels numb, and so weird. Maybe she's in shock. She yanks the two chairs out of the way, and they go tumbling to the ground with a clatter as she crouches down so she's level with Draco's head, his face turned toward her across the short expanse of table. He's covered in blood and filth, his hair caked in it, and his eyes are shut, but there's a deep crease between his brows and his mouth is twisted. Agony is written into every part of him, although Hermione is sure they *must've* given him a pain potion.

Hermione's eyes are dry, but her throat hurts, and her chest feels like it's trapped in a crushing vice, and she feels sick. Her hand is trembling terribly as she reaches out across the table to touch his face. She's nearly afraid to touch him. As long as he lives, she thinks desperately. They can deal with whatever damage remains, but he *has* to live. If he – if he dies, she *can't*. She just can't. Can't live without him. *Fuck.*

"Draco?" she asks, very small, as she runs her fingers feather-light along his right eyebrow, not sure if he'll register her presence through the pain and shock and the potions they must have given him. But his eyes crack open, watering, the grey glazed, the whites bloodshot. He blinks at her, only one watering eye properly visible from this angle, and a tear wells over, tracking a cleaner path over the bridge of his nose before it drips onto the table. His mouth is tight, contorted with agony as he blinks again, trying to focus on Hermione. She puts her hand on his right shoulder, her thumb rubbing over his skin, clean there where they've cut his shirt off.

"It's going to be okay," she gets out, and her voice is barely recognisable, it's so cracked and hoarse. She wants to say *I love you*, but that sounds too much like *goodbye*. And he's going to be fine. Ron said so. He's going to be fine. "You'll be okay." She chokes on a dry sob. Her pulse is still a whoosh and thunder in her ears, and she's cold and clammy, her breath a shaky, shallow wheeze. The way his left side is lying there so limply is so *wrong*, and while Lupin's murmured charms seem to be making the blood run back into Draco's body and the gashes on each side of his spine are lessening, the gaping slash directly over his spine is just as bad.

Lupin isn't skilled enough in healing magic to repair the kind of nerve damage Draco has to have suffered, Hermione knows. They need a proper Healer. Magic is incredible and could fix nearly everything, but people had to know the correct spells, and perform them properly. Her mind races and spins, turning on itself in her panic. She wished she'd spent her time learning *useful* healing magic instead of decoding stupid fucking messages that got Draco sent on the mission that did *this* to him. She hates herself right now.

"Lupin's fixing you up," she tells Draco, trying to be reassuring and probably failing.

Just then, Lupin snaps, "Where's Siobhan? We need her here *now*. We can't heal the wound down his spine until she repairs his spinal cord."

"She can't be far away," Ron says, and Hermione keeps looking at Draco, her fingers running over his face as she attempts to wobble a smile, and tells him it'll be okay as his left arm and leg lie there awkwardly, dead and numb. Siobhan *has* to be able to heal it.

"I'm sorry," he says, his gaze locked to hers, dazed and half lost in pain but still clinging to some clarity, and she can smell the aniseed of pain potion on his breath. "I'm sorry, H'mione. I –"

His apology is what makes her tears finally flow. She hitches a sob, and her eyes flood with hot tears. *Fuck*. " *Shh*, it's okay. You don't have to be sorry," she gets out past her strangled half sobs, petting her fingers very carefully over his matted hair. He hisses with pain as Lupin's voice stutters for a moment and the spell falters, and she bites the inside of her cheek hard enough that it hurts, and a hint of metal hits her tongue. "Just lie still," she tells him, wiping at her eyes.

"I said – said I'd be careful," he whispers as she leans on the table, her face close to his so she can hear him. Everything else in the room is ephemeral. Unimportant. The universe shrinks to her and him. "I'm sorry. But I couldn't just *leave* Creevey. I –" Draco's lashes flutter and he seems to lose track of what he's saying as he begins his explanation, stuttering into silence, his brow furrowed in confusion now as well as pain. Hermione lays her hand very gently along the angles of his face, her heartstrings wrenched to a snapping point.

"I'm sorry," Draco whispers again, dazed and stuck in a loop, and Hermione looks up, past Lupin – hunched over Draco's back, still muttering as he holds the wound down Draco's spine stable – her gaze falling on Colin. He's responsible for this. It's *his* fault. *Somehow*, it's his fault. She doesn't know what she looks like as she stares at Colin, rage boiling under her skin, like a physical pulse beating through her body, but he goes ashen, misery and stark fear written into every facet of him.

"He saved me," Colin wavers, hugging himself as he stands there in the kitchen doorway, meeting Hermione's gaze with difficulty. "He saved my life."

Of *course* he fucking did, Hermione thinks dully, her brief, consuming anger toward Colin leaving her in a rush. Leaving her empty of everything but fear for Draco. Her shoulders slump. Of *course*. He's sacrificed his own safety for someone else, *again*. First the girl in Kenmare, and now this. This is exactly why Hermione didn't want Draco going out in the field. He has no regard for his own life. None. Her anger seems meaningless suddenly. She dismisses Colin's presence, leaning over the table again and sinking down so her chin rests on the back of her right hand as her left hand returns to soothing through Draco's hair, tracing over his ear and running her knuckles down the line of his jaw. She takes a deep breath, trying to pull herself together. He needs her right now.

"If you keep getting hurt or nearly dying for other people, I'll stop thinking I'm special," she tries to joke pathetically through tears, and it's not funny, but he hacks out a wretched laugh.

"I don't wan' do – *that* with them, though," he manages meaningfully, and there's a wicked flash that makes his eyes molten for a second, his mouth making a curling, filthy smile. She doesn't know how he manages to even *think* of that through the pain, but he does, and it makes her want to laugh and cry at once. His voice trails off though, and she only catches the end – "...you're special," he whispers, a faltering smile on his lips and his heart in his eyes, and then pain contorts his features again, and his eyes screw shut. A wheezing groan shudders out of him. *Oh god*.

Hermione feels panic surge up in her like a torrent. A storm. Her heart feels as though it's going to beat right out of her chest, and she's clammy with cold sweat, her cheeks wet with tears still. Her fingers shake as she smooths back Draco's hair and tells him it's okay, even though it's not. Not even a little bit. She can't stand the pain he's in, and she's so scared that they won't be able to fix the nerve damage the claws have raked into him. He would *hate* that. It would kill him to be crippled like that. Hermione wouldn't care, beyond Draco's unhappiness, but he would be miserable.

And then she hears Siobhan's voice, and *oh*, she's never been so fucking happy to hear that Irish lilt in all her life.

"I love you," she says now, blinking back tears and swiping at her wet cheeks as the Healer takes over from Lupin, the woman sounding sure and calm. It feels safe to tell him now, somehow. "I love you, Draco. Siobhan's here now. You're going to be okay, very soon. You'll be fine."

He doesn't answer, his lower lip caught in his teeth, biting it hard as whatever Siobhan does hurts. Hermione swears under her breath, pausing in her small, tentative touches as she lifts her head and looks at his back again. Laid bare in front of everyone in all its scarred glory – oh, how he'll *hate* that when he's healed. He's never wanted anyone to see the wreckage of his back, and while the scar liniment has been improving it rapidly, it's still badly marred. When scars are already healed like his had been, they take more time to fade.

Siobhan is murmuring quietly, and as Hermione watches, the remaining, gaping slash down his spine begins to seal slowly – so slowly she almost doesn't see it happening at first. Healing very gradually back together, from the inside out, as – presumably – the nerve damage is slowly mending. Oh, thank Merlin. Thank *Siobhan*. Hermione suddenly loves the frustrating, close-minded Healer with a gratitude so intense it overwhelms her. "It's healing," she tells Draco, voice soft in his ear, her heart racing, trying to provide him small reassurance as he lies there helpless, his eyes shut and his teeth indenting his lower lip hard. "Hang in there. It's healing. You'll be okay."

Draco manages the barest nod but doesn't speak. But when Hermione runs her fingers over his lower lip, trying to save it from being bitten right through, he shudders and kisses them like he can't help himself.

She stands there, upper body pressed over the table so she can be close to him, her heart in her throat, whispering comfort as best she can as Siobhan continues her soft flow of incantations. Lupin had cleared the room of everyone as soon as Siobhan arrived, following after them himself, and it's just her, Siobhan, and Draco in the dining room. Her fingers brush over his face and his gore-streaked hair. His right hand creeps painfully up by inches to find a resting place on her upper arm, his fingers curling around it. He's not with it. In shock, probably. Blood loss, agony, and pain potion all combine to make him dazed and absent. He slurs when he speaks in that pained whisper, and he keeps apologising.

It's awful. She hates that. Hermione doesn't care that he broke his stupid promise. He shouldn't be sorry. He didn't do anything *wrong* except being ridiculously fucking noble, and self-sacrificing. And she can't be angry at him for that, as much as she might want to be when he's healed.

Siobhan shoots her a tight, quick smile after a couple of minutes when Hermione looks up, and she *knows* then for sure that he'll be fine, and relief washes through her, making her feel weak and shaky. She wobbles a smile at Draco. "You have to stop doing this. You're a *Slytherin*," she tells him, sniffing wetly, her chin trembling as she tries to hold back tears that now are more from relief

than fear and horror. "You're supposed to be – be ambitious and cunning, not blindly running in and saving people. You're acting like a *Gryffindor*."

He twitches his lips in a pained smile. "T-take that back," he retorts in a rasp, and it's a reassuring sign that he can even think to banter, but the pain that lingers in his voice makes her want to start crying again. And then there's a sound at the doorway, and Hermione looks up as Lupin enters the room again, holding out a vial of potion to her.

"A stronger potion for the pain," he says, with a tired smile. "It should sedate him for a while – if you can convince him to take it. He kept refusing more pain potion out in the field."

She thanks Lupin profusely as she takes the vial with shaky fingers and uncorks it. "It's just a pain potion," she tells Draco gently. "Drink up. *Please?*" It takes her several minutes – he's stubborn when he's hurt, and it seems he doesn't want to pass out, preferring the pain, *the idiot*, Hermione thinks with a frustration born of worry. But eventually, she succeeds in persuading him to drink the potion. The whole thing makes her think dizzily of the night he was flogged. Drunk and in pain, vulnerable under her hands. That night she'd only had alcohol to give him.

Moments later, Draco's eyes slide slowly shut. The crease between his brows softens slightly, and his mouth relaxes just a fraction as his fingers go slack on her arm. A drowsy sedation overcomes him, blotting out his awareness of the pain as Siobhan keeps working, frowning in concentration. Hermione stares at his face. Filthy and still etched faintly with pain. She wants to cling to him. To kiss him. To collapse into a puddle and cry. Only the last is an option right now. But instead, she struggles upright, picks up one of the chairs she'd knocked over, and sits down, heavily. Her legs feel like jelly, adrenaline still flooding her system. She stares at Draco's back as Siobhan skilfully knits nerves and flesh together again, feeling shocky and weak.

"Here." Out of the corner of her eye she sees Lupin hold out a mug, and she takes it without thinking. It's tea. "Drink," he says as he pulls up a chair and sits beside her. "It'll help." She does as she's told, her eyes never leaving Draco. "He's going to be fine," he says softly. "The nerve damage is the tricky part, but for a trained Healer it's straightforward, just time-consuming. He'll be mended before you finish your tea." He smiles at her, sympathetic and gentle, and Hermione nods stupidly, still staring at Draco's wounded back. She knows Lupin's not lying, and he'll be almost as good as new very soon, but somehow, that doesn't quash the fear still surging through her. She won't feel better until he's awake again, the pain gone from his eyes.

Everything feels achy when Draco blinks to a groggy awareness. He's lying on his face on a soft, squishy surface, and he appears to not be dead. He thinks he might only be wearing boxer shorts. "Hermione?" he murmurs, his eyes cracking open. He remembers her being there while they worked on him, overflowing with her frantic fear for him. It's all blurry in his mind, vague and broken thanks to the pain and the potion they'd tipped down his throat against his wishes in Mould-on-the-Wold, but he remembers mumbling apologies to her, and her tearful reassurances. And then her talking him into swallowing another potion, and then...nothing?

"Hermione?" He tries to move and roll over to his side, and the relief he feels when his left side responds to the command is exquisite. He's lying on his right side on a bed, and he is only in boxers. It's their bed, he thinks. It's dim, and his vision is all fuzzy. He blinks, and rubs at his eyes with his left hand, which appears to be working exactly as normal. Thank fuck. It seems the Healer fixed him.

"*Draco*. You're awake." Hermione's suddenly in view, lying down in front of him so he can look at her without moving. Her firewhisky eyes are all bloodshot and swollen around as she puts her hand on his shoulder, her voice thrumming with a tight worry. Her cheeks are streaked with shiny tear tracks that glimmer in the low lamplight. He thinks it must be early evening; he's facing the drawn curtains and he can see faint light in the gaps, like the last traces of sunset. "Be *careful*. I'm not sure you're supposed to be moving."

"Siobhan healed me?" He blinks, trying to clear his head.

"Yeah. She said –" Hermione's breath hitches suddenly and she snuffles. Her hand runs down Draco's left arm from shoulder to hand, settling over the back of it. His skin is clean. He thinks they must have *scourgified* him. Her hand is small and delicate compared to his, her nails bitten. There's a tiny mole by her index knuckle. "She said she fixed the nerve damage. Is it –?"

He twists his hand over and snaps up hers, and she starts in fright. He laughs, hoarse and quiet, as he shakes off the fog of unconsciousness and things slot together in his head. Relief surges through him. They killed Nagini, and he's alive, and not paralysed. Wood's death is a grim aspect, but it doesn't take away his happiness – Draco didn't know the man. It's sad, but it doesn't bother him. He hopes Abbott is okay. He doesn't give a shit about Shackbolt. Overall, the mission was a resounding success.

He beats a little pattern on Hermione's palm with his fingers, demonstrating they all work just as well as always. She sighs, her shoulders slumping, and snuffles again, her lower lip full and quivering as she clearly fights back tears.

"I'm fine. It seems Siobhan is as skilled at physical healing as she is shit at mental healing," he says with a wry smile as he drinks in Hermione's presence. Her hair is escaping a messy braid, and she's in that chambray shirt she loves, that he got her when they escaped Voldemort's mansion. She's lying on her side, left hand under her head, and her eyes appear to be searching over him the same way he's looking at her. And then she crushes herself against him, her face against his chest so her head is tucked beneath his chin, her hands curled up between them, her right one sneaking out to curve over his side. Delicate fingers, pressing firm over unscarred skin.

She's crying like her heart is breaking, and he slides his arm over her and tugs her snug and close. "Hey. Hey. Calm down. It's fine, I'm okay," he says and kisses her head. "Shouldn't you be comforting me?" he asks, teasing. His back hurts, but he's quickly shaking off his grogginess, and considering the afternoon he's had, he feels pretty damned good. Tired and achy, but okay. Good enough to get up and fight again if he had to.

"I-I'm suh-sorry," Hermione sobs, all muffled. His chest is getting rather damp as he rubs her back. She sniffs. "I was just so *scared*. It was like the mansion all over again, and they said there was spinal damage, and –" She clamps her mouth shut, stemming the cascade, but she's breathing unsteadily, and her fingers are very tight on his side.

"Hey. I'm *fine*, Hermione," he tells her. A bit of guilt swims up. He knows how frantic he would've been if their positions were reversed. If she'd been brought back in that state, it would have ruined him. Devastated him. And he'd told her he'd be careful. He'd joked about it with Weasley. Well, it's all fun and games until a panther animagus attacks you, he thinks, remembering it as if through a foggy window. He pats her back as she struggles to get control of herself. "Take a deep breath. Come on. Deep, slow breaths."

"I know how to breathe," she snaps as she draws back, wiping at her eyes with her sleeve, and he suppresses a smile. At least when she's indignant, she's not as distraught; distracted from her fear and stress. She sits up, settling cross-legged as he gingerly rolls onto his back. She reaches out. "Oh, *careful*," she says again, hovering nervously over him on her knees but not trying to stop him. It takes him a moment; he's stiff, and cautious, and Hermione stuffs some extra pillows behind him swiftly, but when he settles onto his back, it feels okay.

"Do I have yet another set of scars for you to try to get rid of?" he asks as he leans back against the stack of pillows, his voice cracking slightly, throat dry. Hermione reaches quickly behind her to the bedside table and passes him a mug of what smells like herbal tea.

"Drink," she says, then goes on, watching him carefully as he sips the lukewarm tea, her tears dried up now, but her eyes still puffy. "Not really, actually. Lupin and Siobhan sealed the wounds really well. They're barely noticeable compared to the other scars. Just four long, thin silver stripes." She pauses. "They told me it was an animagus."

"Yeah. A panther." He remembers again. Throwing Creevey out of the way before it hit him, slamming the air out of him. Like being slammed into a wall at fifty miles an hour. Its fangs bared above him. Its claws in his back. Fuck, that had been so close. It could have ripped his throat out. He'd nearly *died*, and a shiver of fear runs through him as he looks at Hermione, sitting tailor-fashion with her knees pressed up against his thigh. She's pale and drawn, small. Fragile, as she gnaws on her lip, watching him drink his tea, dark shadows beneath her warm amber eyes, which are filled with the kind of boundless worry for him that only comes from love.

Draco realises then, watching her watch him, that he really doesn't want to die.

Not just because Hermione needs him, but because he – selfishly – wants to live a life with her. The sort of life he took away from so many others. And it's not fair, and he doesn't deserve it, but he doesn't give a damn right now. He wants to be with her, every day, forever. He doesn't want to die, and never get to grow old with her. He swallows hard.

"I'm sorry," he says, nearly a whisper, *meaning* it. He's sorry he scared her. He's sorry he nearly died. He's sorry he's been so reckless with his life. "I mean, I'm not sorry I saved Creevey –" But in retrospect, if Draco had let Creevey take the hit, he could've killed the animagus as soon as it slammed the younger man onto the floor. He would've used the Killing Curse before it managed to gore or kill Creevey, and maybe they both would've gotten through the situation with less injury. Draco just hadn't been thinking. He'd been reacting on instinct. *Better me than someone else*, he'd thought. And he thinks he needs to stop doing that.

"I'm not sorry I saved Creevey," he repeats. "And I'm okay now, so it turned out alright in the end. But I should've been smarter about it."

"This was why I didn't want you fighting," Hermione says, a tension in her features, and he thinks she's fighting back tears. "But I can't even be mad at you because you nearly *died*, and you're hurt, and you did it all to save someone." She shoots him a helpless, frustrated look. "How can I be angry at you for that?"

"I agree wholeheartedly," he says, smiling as he sets his mug of tea aside. "You definitely can't be angry."

Hermione huffs a laugh and sniffs wetly, burying her face in her hands for a moment and sighing. She looks up at him. "God, I love you so much."

"I love you more," he says, and he's sincere behind his playful retort. Draco doesn't see how she could love him more than he loves her. She is *everything*. She's his redemption. The woman who was a light in the suffocating dark. Who brought him out of it, despite his best efforts to lose himself in the absolution of death. She gave him something to live for, and then the hope for more than just survival and endless guilt. Whatever atonement he finds through the Order now is because of her. Because she made him leave Voldemort's mansion instead of giving up and dying.

Hermione leans over him then and kisses him, her mouth soft and her tongue teasing, awakening arousal he thought injury and exhaustion would've made impossible. Her kiss is undemanding, and Draco parts his lips, pushing into it just a little, his tongue sliding lazy over hers, and shocks of pleasure jar through him. His newly healed nerve endings light up with sweet, sparking pleasure. His hands find her face as the tail of her braid brushes over his bare chest, thumbs sliding along the sharp edge of her jaw, and then one hand curls behind her head, at the nape of her neck, while the other slides down, over her shoulder. Cupping the ball of it in his palm, the bones pressing up beneath her skin.

Draco feels as though he's suspended in a bubble as they kiss. There's a fragility to the moment. He's still slightly affected by the potion she'd given him earlier, he thinks; light-headed and a little high. And flooded with relief at the fact that he's alive, and has the ability to move his left hand again, as he tugs her into his lap. She slides onto him, straddling him as the kiss deepens. He's sitting mostly upright against the pillows, and her hands are on his shoulders, then chest, and then jaw. Playing through his hair, which has the rough cleanliness of a *scourgify* to it, her fingers moving easily through the locks. She's seeking out every part of him available to her with greedy fingertips, like she's trying to memorise and map him, and she's making needy little whimpers into his mouth that are doing *things* to his dick.

He knows she must be able to feel him getting hard; it's not subtle, and she's straddling him so that the front of her pelvis presses against his rapidly hardening shaft. It has to be pushing right against her clit, he thinks distractedly as he sucks on the tip of her tongue. She makes another whimper and rocks against him as if to confirm his theory, and that makes *him* whimper as sensation lights up his dick, radiating outward. *Fuck*, that feels good. But then near-death experiences have a way of heightening sensation. He suddenly wants to lie her down and fuck her hard and deep. She curls her fingers around his ears and licks boldly into his mouth – *oh yes*, tingles shoot down his healed spine – before sucking on his lower lip, her hands sliding to his shoulders.

"Salazar's sake, I want to fuck you so badly," Draco mumbles as she pulls back, and their lips separate with a filthily wet sound that makes his stomach twist deliciously, want surging up in him. His skin feels too tight, heat radiating off him as he imagines the feel of her cunt clenching down on him. The softness of her breasts, the moans she makes as he sucks on her nipples. The way the delicious curve of her arse feels in his hands as he grips it, and squeezes. Kneads. *Needs*. Fuck, he really *does* want her, with an intensity that almost surprises him.

"Really?" she asks him disbelievingly. "Right now? God, Draco. Just a few hours ago, you were lying on the dining room table with –" Her smile vanishes as she remembers, and he tugs gently at the tail of her braid.

"Hey. I'm okay," he reminds her, although his lust is dampened slightly by the sudden realisation that he was shirtless and all but unconscious in front of everyone. He suppresses a grimace and pulls her in for another, brief kiss. Warm and firm, his lips taking possession of hers for a moment – his tongue fucking delicately into her soft, sweet mouth and making her shiver and moan. He draws away just as swiftly as he captured her mouth, and she takes a little, broken breath, her fingers

pressing over her lips. He thrusts his hips up to remind her of *that*, too, and she sways on his lap with the movement, grabbing at his shoulders and making a stifled sound as his erection nudges firmly against her through their clothes.

"But yes, really," he says in answer to her first question, and smirks lopsidedly. "Right now. You know I always want to, Hermione," he adds, and her cheeks go a lovely shade of pink as she catches her lip between her teeth. She's glowing in the lamplight. Her hair is gleaming dark and fluffing out of its braid, her tired, puffy eyes shining amber, and there are little stress lines around her kiss-damp mouth. She's beautiful. Fucking gorgeous.

"*Well*," she says, and then leans in and kisses him again, brief and somehow overflowing with happiness. Draco thinks maybe Hermione is feeling the same giddy relief as he is. He's not sure if she's feeling the same sudden, irrational onslaught of overwhelming lust; that would be a lot to expect, given the situation. But then she's scrambling down his body, on all fours, until she's kneeling between his thighs. Her eyes are bright and catch the light, and she has that sweetly determined look on her face that usually heralds something new and interesting.

"What –?" he begins, as her fingers curl beneath his waistband. A suspicion grows in his mind and he gulps. His blood feels hot in his veins, and his skin is prickling all over. His dick is achingly hard, and he wants desperately to push it into her soft, gripping slickness. He's not that much of an invalid. He's healed. He's *fine*. He can easily haul her back onto his lap, and push his dick into her, and have her bounce up and down on him until he comes.

Fuck.

Yes, that sounds good. His dick is straining his boxers as she pulls the waistband up and away from him, and he can feel the blood rushing into it. He's hypersensitive; just the whisper of fabric on his dick is a frustrating sensation. He's filled with an insistent, hot need. He could push her over the edge of the bed, standing there with her face against the covers and her arse in the air as he stands behind her and fucks her sweet pussy.

He wants her. And she's teasing him; her eyes contemplative on the shape of his dick inside his boxers, her pupils blown – dark, glazed pools, which make it clear she wants him.

"You shouldn't exert yourself," she says with a wicked faux innocence, dragging him out of his thoughts as she lets his waistband snap back down, barely avoiding his dick and making him inhale sharply with a second of terror. Hermione grins at his stuttering breath and then licks her lips as she kneels there, unbuttoning her shirt and shrugging it off. Underneath the shirt, she's wearing one of her thin white vest, and he can just barely see the shadows of her nipples. His dick twitches involuntarily, and she makes a wanting, pleased sound. She grips the shaft through his boxers and squeezes carefully but firmly. He moans.

"Oh fuck," he breathes, and then, his brain working slowly, "what're you doing?"

She looks at him, so determined. "I want to suck it until you come, again," she says, voice full of bravado, licking her lips again, but he can see the nerves shivering in her. Fear is sharp under her skin, and bright behind the lust in her eyes. Draco tries to hold in another groan of sheer want and anticipation, not wanting his desperation for her to do exactly what she's saying, to put pressure on her to perform. Yes, she sucked it during the sixty-nine – which had been amazing – but that didn't mean he expected her to do it again. He knows full well that he can't have any expectations. That isn't how things work between them. Draco takes what he's given, and he's so fucking grateful for it because she gives him so much, considering.

"You don't have to," he tells Hermione, but she's already yanking his boxers down with quick, sure movements, and he's not stopping her. In fact, he lifts his hips to make it easier for her, his heart in his throat and his dick desperate for her hand, and her mouth. Merlin, her mouth. Hot and wet, her tongue slicking and swirling around the head of his dick. Oh fuck. Just imagining it is making his breathing tight and shallow, the urge to come a quickening drumbeat, his whole body thrumming with it. Draco wants to do things that he can't, and it's driving him insane. He accepts it, but it's killing him at the same time. "You really don't."

"I want to." She shoots him a nervous glance. "Just be still," she says, and he is.

He keeps his hands to himself. A small part of his brain just wants to shove her head down on his dick and fuck her throat, except that would trigger the fuck out of her, and he doesn't want that. So instead, he grabs a fistful of the bedcovers and breathes as Hermione curls her hand around his dick and squeezes, moving it up and down as she folds forward on her knees. And now her open mouth is just a few inches from his dick as she leans down, and she looks obscene and beautiful at once, her eyes heavy-lidded and her cheeks flushed, and then her lips close over it.

"*Fuuuuck*," he whimpers on an exhalation, embarrassingly involuntary and hoarse, his fist clenching in the covers. She swirls her tongue and *sucks*, so hot and wet. His hips bump up immediately in an involuntary reaction, and she pulls her mouth off with a pop of suction and shoots him a look.

"Be still," she tells him, and he drags in a sharp breath and nods fast and obediently.

"Y-you're in control," he remembers to say, belatedly and breathlessly, not that she usually seems to need that reminder just lately. "You're in control." And Merlin, she is. She has *all* the control. Her fingers trail over his inner thighs and then up over his balls, and he gulps. It tickles, and feels fantastic and infuriating, and he wants her mouth back.

"I know I am," she says, and a wicked little smile that makes Draco's stomach flip flickers over her lips as she wraps her hand around his dick again, sliding up and down for a moment before letting go. She glances up at him, still smiling. She's *teasing* him. And he loves it. The fact that she's comfortable enough to do it is amazing. She leans in, and the tip of her tongue laps light and wet up the shaft, and he huffs a breath that isn't quite a moan. He feels dizzy with lust. His balls have drawn tight, and his dick is so hard he thinks he has no blood left in his brain. He wants her so badly.

"Say please," she says, and actually kisses his dick before pulling back and looking at him expectantly.

"*Please*," he says, immediate and emphatic. "Fucking *please*."

Hermione smiles, dips her head again, and answers his pleas. It's incredible. Heat and desire wash through him, and *oh*, her mouth is like heaven. It's an effort to hold still as she envelops the head of his dick in a soft, sucking heat, her tongue constantly swirling and flicking, her hand moving on him easy and fast. He is not going to last long. This is going to be embarrassingly quick, Draco thinks, as his breath drags in and out fast, and his hand flexes in the bedcovers instead of her hair.

It is. He doesn't know exactly how long it takes, but as soon as Hermione pushes her mouth down further, taking most of his dick into her mouth, the building pressure snaps. "I'm gonna —" he starts and doesn't finish, a gripping pleasure lancing through him as she keeps sucking, trying desperately

to hold off on coming until she pulls her mouth safely away. But she doesn't, still sucking hard and deeper than before. He suddenly doesn't think she's going to stop. *Oh Merlin.*

"You don't have to –" he tries, expecting her to finally pull her mouth away and replace it with her hand, but instead, she does the opposite. She pushes down until the head of his dick hits the back of her throat, and he moans, and comes in her mouth. "*Oh fuck,*" he gets out, strangled and low, his climax pulsing through him in rippling waves as he watches her swallow down his cum.

He thinks it might be the best thing he's ever seen in his life. "*Oh fuck,*" he says again as Hermione pulls her mouth off his dick and kneels back, licking her damp, flushed lips and then wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She looks a little stunned, as if she can't believe she just did that, kneeling there and staring at him with wide, pupil-swamped eyes.

"Shit," he mutters and yanks his boxers up, the warm, stupid glow of orgasm draining away fast. "Hermione?" He touches her hand, where it rests limply on her knee and thank Merlin, she blinks and refocuses, life coming back to her eyes along with a rueful smile. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. I just – I didn't expect to do that." She swallows and grimaces faintly, and Draco remembers his cold tea and grabs for the mug, passing it to her. She smiles, small and wobbly, before she takes a drink. "Thanks," she says ruefully, passing the mug back to him and then clambering out from between his legs, curling up next to him. She leans into his side, cheek to his chest, and sighs as he slides his arm around her. It sounds contented rather than traumatised, and Draco relaxes slightly.

"If I'd known I'd get this kind of treatment for hurting myself, I would've gotten injured ages ago," he says with a blissful sigh, trying to lighten the fragile moment, and then winces as she smacks him on the stomach.

"That's not funny." But she kisses him over his ribs, and he can feel her smile against his skin.

"Careful. I'm injured," he protests, and she thumps him again, but lighter this time, huffing a laugh. And then they lie there in silence, and he listens to her breathe, steady and even, as he luxuriates in the sleepy relaxation of orgasm. Her head is on his chest, and her arm over his stomach, her right leg half flung over him. Both of them are alive, and safe. It's perfect.

"You killed Nagini," she says a while later, rousing him from a near doze. He may be healed, but he feels exhausted and achy now, as if the last of the pain potions have worn off. They probably have. He yawns.

"Well, *Lupin* did. I was busy gasping uselessly on the floor at the time."

"Don't," she scolds, and clutches him a little tighter. "My point is, the snake is dead. And she was the last horcrux. They're all gone now," she says, and he hums an assent. And then they both fall silent again. They both know what that means. Voldemort is as vulnerable as he will ever be. If there's ever a time to strike, it will likely be soon. Draco doesn't know how he feels about that. He wants it to be over, but at the same time, the thought is oddly unsettling. Both the idea of the Order facing down Voldemort, and the idea of them either winning or losing.

He wants to win, of course. But the thought of the war being over is something that Draco can't wrap his head around. He doesn't know how to be a normal person. He doesn't know how to live without war. Hermione sighs, somehow a complicated sound, and he looks down at her and love wells up in him, knotted and aching in his chest. He'll figure it out. For her. He'll have to.

Chapter End Notes

- ▶ Housekeeping!

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Thank you as always to Pidanka, who is *literally* the best beta in the entire world 🥺❤️ I could gush about her awesomeness for *at least* several thousand words (and being me, you can double that.)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thirty-Eight

Hermione finds herself slowly relaxing throughout the evening. The shocked, shaky terror that had seized her earlier while he was laid out on the dining room table slowly melts away.

Draco is safe, and well, and sleeps through most of the evening, as she stays close. For all that he'd said he was fine, he was clearly exhausted – his newly healed body needing rest, and to replenish its resources. She wakes him and forces him to eat and drink something at 9 pm – insisting he takes a pain potion just in case – before crawling into bed herself and nestling up close to him. He's already slipping back into sleep, but he draws her to him anyway, arm sliding over her, face buried against her hair so that his breath is hot on her scalp.

She has nightmares; a veritable plague of them. Some are clearly her fear for Draco written into warped dreams. Being stalked by panthers in a humid jungle, or his slow, hideous death at Voldemort's hands, or him being struck down in battle. And some seem to be because she got carried away sucking his cock, earlier. She'd been so glad he was alive and healed that she had done something that had, in retrospect, been too much, too fast. She'd been impulsive and gone too far. And she pays the price.

Nightmares of the dinner, twisted and terrible, turning what had already been a horrific ordeal into endless torture to the brink of death, half of it with Draco's assistance. Hermione wakes at least every hour or so, like clockwork, every sleep cycle bringing fresh nightmares. Sometimes she has one and resurfaces just enough to shake it off, before sinking straight back into another. She tries not to wake Draco; he needs his sleep, Siobhan had said when Hermione had been downstairs earlier, the Healer having stayed for dinner. His body has been through a great deal of strain. So she wakes alone, plastered in sweat and keeping her sobs back behind pressed-tight lips, telling herself they're only nightmares. They're not real.

He does wake, at points. Groggy – perhaps in part from the potion – and worried, smoothing her sweat-damp hair off her face and murmuring reassurances. His arms are cool around her overheated skin as he draws her against him, and she melts into him with relief. She tells him she's okay, and it was just the mission. Lying, or at least omitting, but she doesn't want him to know what the blowjob triggered. He'd never let her do it again, and she *wants* to. This is a price worth paying for the experience of having him in her mouth and watching him fall apart with pleasure beneath it. Vulnerable and laid bare, all taut muscles and moans, and that pleading, molten look he gives her.

So she tells him it's the mission and his near-death, and he believes her, in the moment at least. Half asleep, she doesn't think he's questioning anything. Maybe tomorrow he'll at least suspect the blowjob she gave him contributed. She hopes not. Either way, the times that he wakes and soothes her, Hermione goes to sleep faster, sleeps heavier, and it staves off the nightmares a little longer. She's grateful.

What must be the ninth or tenth time she wakes, it's thanks to an external source, not her own nightmares. Draco has already jerked bolt upright and flicked on the lamp at the wall with a wave of his wand by the time Hermione has registered the knock at the door. A pause, and the knock repeats, and Lupin's voice calls, "Hermione?" She struggles out from beneath the covers, feeling like death warmed up, looking over to the small clock they have and seeing it's nearly 4 am. But Lupin doesn't sound panicked. And if it were really important, he'd just barge in.

"Hang on," she calls, sitting up, and leans over to kiss Draco's naked shoulder. God, he's beautiful. Hair dishevelled, most of it sticking up in tufts from sleeping, his skin catching the light, his body all lean, wiry muscle, and his expression somehow both sharp and sleepy as he looks at her. She hides a smile. "Relax. It's just Remus." She pulls on a pair of joggers and one of Draco's t-shirts once she climbs out of bed and scrapes her hair back as she crosses the room, Draco watching her, alert. Her hair refuses to be defeated, a wave of it wanting to flop right back over her face, and she drags it back into a messy bun, snagging a hair band off the dresser to tie it as she goes past.

Lupin is standing in the doorway when she opens the door, looking as tired as she feels. Like a limp rag that's been wrung out and then left to dry in a crumpled heap. "Hermione. I'm so sorry to disturb you –" His eyes glance over her, and she's fairly certain he can see how exhausted she feels – but since Nagini's death, there has been a flurry of owls sent by you-know-who's people, and we've finally managed to intercept some." He pauses as Hermione rubs at her eyes and stifles a yawn. "You don't have to, but you'd be useful in deciphering them. And I thought you might like to be involved."

"I would, Remus. Thank you," she says, suppressing another yawn. Quite aside from the fact that she likes doing her job and being useful, she had been involved in locating Nagini, and it would be nice to continue her involvement. To see it through, to the end. Besides, tired or not, Hermione is curious to know what the Death Eater chatter is right now. Nagini's death would've had massive consequences – she imagines they'll be panicking, and potentially in chaos. Voldemort would have felt it as soon as it happened, but he's in America, and while he could apparate back, he undoubtedly has business there that needs to be completed. Besides, what can he do about Nagini's death now? Nothing, Hermione thinks viciously. Her mind races.

"I'll be downstairs in a minute," she tells Lupin and hurries back across the room to kiss Draco. His face is upturned and his hand is large and warm, cradling her neck as she presses her mouth to his, her lips parting. His tongue is a slick whisper and she shivers with sensation.

"Do you want me to come down?" he asks, his voice gravelly with sleep as he rubs at his eyes.

"No. Go back to sleep. You need your rest."

"So do you," he says, eyes moon-grey and sleepily worried as he takes in the state of her. "You look like hell."

"Oh. *Thanks*," Hermione retorts flippantly, smiling at him as she pushes her fingers through his rumpled hair.

"You know what I mean." He frowns, displeased by her glibness. She grimaces.

"I know. I had a restless sleep. But I'm fine. And you being tired as well won't help. Go back to sleep. Bring me some coffee in the morning," she says, feeling a moment of pleasure at their almost normal exchange, before she kisses him one last, fleeting time and hurries out. She hears him flop back down onto the pillows with a groan as she shuts the door, and she can't erase the small smile from her lips as she hurries quietly down the stairs. The ordinary moments they find in the madness are so precious. They give her a glimpse into a possible future, after the war. All the little things.

When he passes her a book he's just finished because he knows she'll like it from the way she kept trying to read it over his shoulder – they both like murder mysteries, wizarding or Muggle. The way he knows how she likes to take her hot drinks and is always bringing her one, until she thinks she'll spend all day peeing tea and coffee. How she turns the application of scar liniment into a massage that unwinds all the muscles he carries his tension in, until he's a puddle under her hands. The conversations they have about silly little things, like what they'd take on a desert island, or what they'd do first if they had the powers of a god. Sitting and enjoying the sunset on the porch together.

Despite everything, they could have a good future, Hermione knows it. If they can just both survive to see it.

When she gets into Lupin's office with a freshly made cup of strong tea in hand, all thoughts of sweet and peaceful moments fly from Hermione's mind. She focuses on the task at hand, and the office table is strewn with parchment again. Tonks and Harry are both in there already, Harry sitting in a chair and hunching over a piece of parchment as he clutches a mug in both hands, his hair more of a disaster than Hermione's, and his eyes owl-like behind his glasses. "Morning 'Mione," he mumbles, lifting one hand to flap it limply in her direction as she takes her usual seat and sets her tea down.

"Morning, Harry. Tonks." She smiles at the metamorphmagus, who looks like her usual self this morning, although her hair seems slightly darker.

Tonks yawns. "Wotcha, 'Mione." She turns away from the wall map and shoots Hermione a piercing glance. "You look awful."

"So I've been told," Hermione says drily and then turns her attention to the bits of scroll and flattened parchment that half cover what she thinks of as her table now, more than Lupin's. Since she's taken over a lot of the admin here, he's begun working more and more at the Order's estate, which makes sense. While this office is handy, being under the same roof as him, the estate is where all mission briefings and debriefs take place. It also holds many of the Order's prisoners, their potions laboratory, and their tiny permanent hospital, which is usually understaffed and over-filled. It also houses many of the useful non-combatants, particularly those who work in potions and healing. It's understandable that Lupin's base of operations has shifted nearly entirely there, and Hermione doesn't mind. She likes having her own space.

"So, what's happening here?" she asks, hoping there's some order to the chaos. Lupin steps in and begins explaining, pointing out which notes came from which owls, in which areas – marked with chicken-scratch messy abbreviations on the backs – as Harry leans over his bit of parchment. He appears to be reading reports from those out in the field observing Death Eater movements while Tonks is marking major changes on the map. Hermione half listens to Lupin as she notes that it appears many outposts and encampments that were staffed by Voldemort's lesser minions and

Snatchers appear to be emptying out. The enemy are on the move. But where? It makes Hermione nervous.

"Thanks, Remus," she says as she gains some idea of what he wants to look at first, and he nods and murmurs his own thanks before taking his leave.

"I'm heading off to the estate," he says. "There are a few missions coming back shortly, and I want to be at the debriefs. Just apparate over if you need me. Otherwise, I should be back in a few hours." And then he's gone with an enthusiastic kiss to his wife, whose hair flares bright pink at the affection, grinning away to herself as she turns back to the map. Hermione settles in to work on the coded messages, sipping her scalding tea carefully as she does.

There's a lot to work through, and deciphering the codes takes time, often. Especially when she's tired. Luckily, many of Voldemort's lower minions are lazy, or not too bright, and they often re-use old ciphers, as though they think the Order will have forgotten how to decode them. Hermione's careful records come in handy as she pulls out her thick file of old, broken codes and ciphers – many of them from long before her capture and kept mostly up to date by Order members while she was gone – and manages to find several matches very quickly, transcribing them neatly into plain English.

Some of them are useless and boring – notes that seem unrelated to Nagini or anything valuable, like requests for resupply or complaints about their assignments. Even if they're a code within a code, using substitute terms or double-meanings, Hermione can't figure out what they could be. So those she sets aside, in her aptly named 'Probably Nothing' file drawer, in a folder with the date. There are several she manages to decode that *are* something, however. Not always *useful*, however.

I had a tete-a-tete with my dear nephew today. Tell his mother he's looking well, but still as rude as ever. R Lestrangle.

Hermione bites her lip when she comes across this one. No one told her that Draco had encountered Rodolphus. Although to be fair, no one had told her anything at all, other than that the mission had been a success, and Nagini was dead, and that they'd lost Oliver Wood. She'd been too preoccupied with Draco to care about anything else. And he hadn't told her anything either – he'd been sleeping. She wonders how awful it was to confront his mad uncle. It can't have been pleasant, and she grimaces in sympathy as she sets the paper aside to go into the 'Personal Comms.' drawer.

And then she keeps decoding, and reading.

I'm running. I'm not going to be at the mansion when the Dark Lord returns. He'll kill me for not protecting that damned snake. Come with me, V. I'll be at the place until midnight. I love you. K.

We cannot retrieve Nagini's body. They have either taken it, or destroyed it. My deepest apologies.

Eventually, on her second cup of tea, Hermione *finally* deciphers a particularly difficult missive that reads:

The Dark Lord will be returning as soon as his business is concluded.

It's not exactly a surprise, but it's more relevant to the Order than the other messages so far. With a pleased expression, Hermione flags it up with Tonks and Harry. And then she moves straight on to the next one with a sigh. There's no time to pause – most of these owls will be time-sensitive, and Hermione has no doubt that Lupin has sent copies of the missives to other Order members who are

decent at code-breaking. She hopes so, at least. The idea of it all resting on her shoulders alone is too daunting. She tucks a loose lock of hair behind her ear and frowns down at the parchment in front of her, sucking absent-mindedly on the end of her quill as she works.

Draco brings her in a coffee at 8 am, kissing her temple with a tenderness that makes her melt before sitting down with his own mug in hand, idly looking at the field reports. He doesn't talk to her aside from a murmured 'good morning' because he knows she's in the zone, lost in her work, although she does notice he seems to be moving easily enough, a fact that fills her with relief. His quiet presence – occasionally talking with Harry about the contents of the reports – is lovely, and when he gets up stiffly with a little grunt of discomfort, Hermione is disappointed.

"I'll bring you in another coffee, and then I'm going to go work out," he says quietly as he stoops to kiss the top of her head. She looks up abruptly at that, checking how he looks. Tired, but not injured or unwell – more like someone who's just recovered from an illness, with shadows bruised under his eyes and his skin lacking colour.

"Don't strain yourself," she tells him, worry curdling in her stomach, and he hooks his lips into a faint, brief smile.

"I won't," he tells her, and then kisses her cheek, sweeps up her coffee cup, and disappears.

She spends the rest of the morning in a continued frenzy of work, resorting to a Pepper Up potion to stay alert. More and more messages are brought in to be decoded, copies of already-deciphered messages come in from other people working on them – as she'd suspected – delivered by a breathless Ginny, and more field reports come in. And eventually, they build up a picture. Voldemort has returned to the UK. Potentially, he may have gone to Mould-on-the-Wold. Either way, he is in Britain. And he appears to have brought his American allies back with him.

Hermione's skin crawls at that thought. When she decodes the message that mentions the Americans, she feels it all come rushing back, *again*, and she runs to the small downstairs toilet, hanging onto the cistern with one hand as she leans over the toilet bowl, quietly gagging and wondering if she's going to vomit. She doesn't, in the end. But she still feels sick. Adrenaline, Pepper Up, and an iron will shall drive her on though. This is too important to let herself spiral. She has to hold it together. And for now, she does.

They think he's back at the mansion. Voldemort and the American wizards. They send word to Lupin, Tonks apparating over and coming back bright-eyed and nervy. There's a meeting with everyone at the estate at 1 pm, she tells them. She thinks they may be making a move, as early as tonight. The final confrontation. Harry is energised. Ecstatic. He heads off to tell Ron, filled with a vibrating, nervous excitement.

Hermione buries her face in her hands as she sits at the desk, processing that momentous news. She doesn't know what to feel, but a strange shock rockets through her. It could all be over, so soon. And then she thinks: Draco will want to fight, and fear rises up in her, thick and choking. Oh god.

There's a knock at the door and Draco looks up from his book, confused. No one comes up to the bedroom when Hermione's in Lupin's office; they never want to see him, only her. And he's fine with that. He doesn't want to be friends with Order members. Civil coexistence is plenty for him. He sets his book aside – another Nilus Nilsson murder mystery – and runs his hand through his hair before he opens the door. It's Weasley, with Potter lurking behind him. Draco raises a brow, surprise and worry running through him. They look more excited than anything, and Draco knows

Hermione's just downstairs in Lupin's office, and yet the words that come out first, inevitably, are – "Is Hermione alright?"

It's instinct. He can't help himself. His first thought is always her. He's helpless in the wake of his constant concern. Especially after last night. Everything is unsettled, and she doesn't deal well with that. Neither does he. Hermione had nightmares, he knows, and when he'd woken at their usual time this morning, it had been to an empty bed, her side cold. It had taken him a moment to remember her going downstairs in the early hours, and the irrational fear he'd felt at her absence in the second between waking and realisation had been suffocating.

His hand is tight on the door handle as he looks at the two in front of him, both of them jittery and filled with what he thinks is nervous energy. Weasley smirks at Draco's question. "She's fine."

"Well, then what –"

"We all need to head over to the Order estate for a meeting," Potter interrupts. "We got new intel. You-know-who is at his mansion, with the American wizards. We're probably going in tonight."

Draco's breath stutters in his chest. His lungs feel tight. He feels as though he doesn't understand for a moment as he stares at Potter's bespectacled face, trying to comprehend. "What?"

"We're going in," Potter repeats, a vicious eagerness in the set of his features as he fidgets with his wand. His voice is tight with emotion. He looks like a dog straining against a leash, desperate to be let off. "To face you-know-who." The *finally* is not said aloud, but Draco hears it all the same.

"There's a meeting at the estate in twenty minutes. Lupin's briefing us all. I thought Hermione would've popped up and told you, until you didn't turn up downstairs," Weasley says, scratching at his stupid attempt at a beard. "I figured we better let you know."

"I haven't seen her in hours." Draco's worry spikes again. "When did you last see her?"

"She's just down in Lupin's office," Potter says dismissively, "with her nose in some owls." He smiles, as if to say, *typical Hermione*. Some of the tension immediately drains from Draco's shoulders. Some. She's obviously safe, but the fact that she hasn't told him this rather massive fucking development that could end the war one way or another is a sign she's definitely not coping well. He'll need to see her before the meeting. But first, he'll have to get rid of Potter and Weasley. He eyes them.

"Thanks," he says stiffly. Cautiously. He's oddly comfortable with Weasley when they're out in the field now, but that doesn't cross over to their off time at the safe house. Here is an entirely different context, where he avoids speaking to Weasley – or anyone in fact – except about missions. He doesn't make polite conversation with anyone, ever. He knows his place. His role. Draco is the ex-Death Eater – the spy. The necessary monster. But he's not part of the Order, and he never will be. He has done things they can't imagine, things that even Lupin never pried out of him. Things he has buried down so deep that even to him, they are just vague, ominous shapes, moving in the dark – except in nightmares. And those things have ruined him in a way he can never fully come back from.

But he has his atonement in fighting, and he has Hermione, and he thinks that these days, he can live with the guilt. Not easily, but he can.

"I appreciate the heads up," he says. "I'd better go see her." He's about to take his leave when Weasley clears his throat.

"If we're all going in tonight, Malfoy," the redhead begins, "and any one of us could die, Harry and I thought you should know – if you don't die – that we don't think you're an entirely terrible person."

"How magnanimous of you," Draco says automatically, bristling slightly. Recoiling from their tentative acceptance.

"Christ, Malfoy, you don't have to be a git about it," Potter mutters, and Draco shrugs.

"I don't need *your* approval. I need hers," he says, stark and simple. Hermione is all he needs. All he values. The rest of the world can – will – damn him just as he himself does, but as long as she loves him, it'll be enough to get by on. He'll always feel guilty; there's no getting past that, ever, but it's her opinion he values. Except...there's a part of him that feels something at their words. They're like a small, sharp shard of absolution, held out for him to take if only he will. If only he'll let himself be vulnerable enough to take it. So he does, with gritted teeth. He swallows and looks the pair of them in the eye, one after the other.

"But, thanks, anyway. You two aren't so bad either, I suppose." They're loyal friends to Hermione. And Potter wants to fight just as badly as Draco had, and Weasley's good fun out in the field and dependable too, so yeah. They aren't so bad.

"I'll take it," Weasley says with another easy grin. "Now we're BFFs."

"Fuck off," he says mildly, although the hint of a smile tugs at his lips despite himself. "Really, though," he adds, features schooled to a cool neutrality again. "I have to see Hermione before we go."

"Good luck," Weasley says with a wince of understanding as they step back out of the way, and then he's hurrying down the stairs, taking them two at a time. A strange tension fills him as he descends the stairs. He feels nearly dizzy. He thinks of Voldemort, and of the mansion, and of it all coming to an end, and he feels like crying. So, instead, he shuts down. He compartmentalises. He pauses in the tiny corridor and stands very still for a moment, unobserved by anyone, just breathing, slow and deep. This is it. This is the endgame. And Draco needs to be at his best for this. He needs to be focused, and undistracted, and hard.

He's not sure he can manage it anymore. She has blunted him. Hopefully not fatally.

The office door is half open and Hermione is alone, head resting on one hand as she stares down at a piece of parchment blankly with her quill lax in her fingers, her hair in a loose braid. She looks up when he pushes the door open, and her eyes are reddened and puffy. She's been crying. And there's a smudge of ink just below her lip, Draco sees, and somehow, the sight of it makes tenderness rise up in him. His compartmentalisation sucks. She sighs and lets her quill drop, rubbing her hand over her face and leaving another smudge of ink on her cheekbone. Clearly, she knows why he's here.

"You didn't tell me," he says as he crosses the room. Not an accusation – more a question. He leans against the table beside her, right hand braced on the table.

"I meant to," she says, and her eyes are dark and bottomless. And for all that she opens her heart to him, and has fallen to pieces in his arms, there are so many things he doesn't know. So many things

she hasn't told him. She is still an enigma. An unknown quantity. There are things in her eyes that he doesn't think she has the words for. "I did." Her voice is small. "I just couldn't get up." A tear wells over and slides, very slowly, down the curve of her cheek. "I don't want you to fight, but I know you have to." It's a whisper from lungs that aren't getting enough breath, choked by fear, and Draco wishes he could stay with her.

"I'm sorry." And as always, he means it. It just doesn't mean he won't go out there. He doesn't feel that he has a choice. If he was the Draco Malfoy of a few years ago and yet somehow loved Hermione, he'd be suggesting they run right now. That they leave everyone to their fates and flee across the world, and come back when it's safe, or never. But he's not that person anymore. That Draco Malfoy died in the war, on some nameless battlefield, or in some torture chamber. An unacknowledged victim of Voldemort's madness.

"I wish I could fight," she says miserably, looking down at the parchment in front of her, rubbing away her few tears and sniffing. Sighing again. "If I wasn't so utterly useless. I should *be* with you."

"Don't be stupid. You're not useless. You've been down here all day being very useful," he says, sweeping away a tear she missed with the side of his thumb as she looks up at him. "Not everyone has to fight."

"I should be with you," she says again, stubbornly. "The last time you went out there, you nearly *died*. And you're still recovering from your injury, and – I should be there. To watch your back. What if you need me?"

"You'll freeze up," he tells her, not unkindly. "You'll be a distraction. I know you want to help, but you won't."

"You don't know that. Maybe I'll be fine." She looks a little wild-eyed. "And – and what if it all goes wrong?"

"It won't."

"That's what you said yesterday! And look what happened *then*."

"Hermione." His voice is sharp and hard. "You're not fucking going, alright?"

She glares at him. "I can't sit here, just *waiting*, not knowing if you're d-dead or alive. Only to find out that we lost. Or that we won, but *I* lost, because you're *dead*." The last word comes out in a near sob, her eyes wet and her fists clenched on the desk as she stares up at him, chin set, determined. But her nostrils flare, and he can see the shift of her shoulders as her breaths become uneven and the press of her lips as she holds back tears.

"Don't. Don't spiral, Hermione," he tells her calmly, an order, as he struggles to focus. It's shades of how he treated her at the mansion, when he was cool and controlled, and unmistakably the author of her fate no matter how much he told her she was in control. It was him who set the boundaries for her when she lost sight of them in her misery. Him who protected her from herself. From her hunger strikes, and her despair, and her confused attempts to seduce him at a time when it would've only hurt her. Draco eyes her steadily.

"I have to be at the estate for the briefing in about ten minutes. And I'm not missing it." He pauses, and then offers her a compromise. "We'll talk about this later, alright? You going, I mean," he says. And he means that – they can. But his answer will still be no. He understands her wanting to be

there after what happened to him yesterday. He understands she wants to be there at the end. But he won't have it. This is one situation where she does not have all the control. He will break her heart if he has to, to keep her safe. He smiles faintly, rubbing at the smudge of ink beneath her lip. "But right now, you need to keep it together."

She takes a deep, shuddering breath and nods. "I know. I know. I'm fine, honestly. I just..."

"Am not fine?" he fills in, and she laughs and nods, burying her face in her hands.

"Yeah. But I know you have to go." Hermione's resigned and miserable, but it seems like her wobble toward a meltdown has been averted.

"Do you want to come?" he offers cautiously and isn't surprised when she shakes her head quickly.

"Tonks already told me most of it," she says, which does surprise him a little. "And you can tell me about it when you get back."

"Okay," he says without fuss, and stoops to kiss her. Her lips are dry and cool and soft beneath his, passive at first. And then she lifts a hand, pressing her fingers small and thin against his face, and her lips part. She kisses him hard and fierce, and then lets him go just as abruptly, with a gasp. She looks up at him, flushed, ink-smudged, her amber eyes wet with tears that she blinks back. He will die to keep her safe, Draco thinks. But for her sake, he hopes he doesn't have to. "I'll be back soon."

Chapter End Notes

► Notes

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

This chapter, we have the refrain: *Say your goodbyes* 😭

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thirty-Nine

The briefing is short, considering the magnitude of the offensive they've planned, and Lupin keeps it to the point. Voldemort and his American allies are currently in residence at the mansion, as confirmed by careful reconnaissance, and given the circumstances, MACUSA are willing to launch a joint attack. They'll be committing twenty skilled Aurors to the fight. It's not really enough to satisfy the Order, but they have to take what they can get. They're not in a position to negotiate. The attack will take place at 10 pm. Non-combatants will relocate to the Order's estate, to help the Healers.

It will probably be raining, according to both Muggle meteorologists and weather wizards; a front is moving down across Britain, and much of the country will be exposed to deluges, and potentially thunderstorms. It is a tumultuous spring, apparently. So that will be fun. Draco hates fighting in the rain.

Lupin goes over the floor plans of the mansion that Draco has provided, and the patrol movements observed, and maps out a hopeful plan of attack. Although they all know how quickly the situation can change once you're on the ground and in the thick of it. Things change fast, and they need to be able to adapt to those shifts and work with them, not be locked into any expectations. Draco is fairly used to working like that; Death Eaters rarely planned things out. They played fast and loose; the strong survived, and the weak died.

Say your goodbyes, Lupin says finally, *and rest up*.

Draco stays behind a few minutes longer than the others, talking to Lupin about his father, in case he's still alive, and fighting on the other side. It's not a comforting conversation. Unless Lucius surrenders, Lupin can't guarantee his safety. If he surrenders, then Order members will take his wand and bind him, as they would anyone who surrenders – if it's safe to do so. But it's not always safe to do so. And sometimes, people die in war who shouldn't. Draco knows that all too well. So if his father *is* there tonight, he'll probably be killed. It's a thought that makes him feel sick and sad, but it's no less than what he was expecting. His father is probably already dead anyway. Because of Draco.

It's coming up on 2.30 pm when he walks out into the spring afternoon, and the wind is chill and brisk, the horizon lined with towering blue-grey thunderheads, swollen with rain. The gravel of the estate's long drive crunches under his boots and he shoves his hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched against the wind, thinking of tonight. Turning it over and over in his mind like a sickle. Knowing Hermione will be here at the estate helps a little. If they fail and fall, and Voldemort wins, whoever survives will be able to warn everyone by coming here. On the other hand, it makes the

estate a target. One person being captured could give it away, and then everyone here would be in danger. Draco frowns and looks back at the impressive old manor house as he reaches the disappearance point.

He'll tell Hermione to be ready to run. And he's not a coward, but if the Order falls and he's still alive, he'll run with her. They need to arrange a meeting place, he thinks, jaw tight as he runs through worst-case scenarios in his head. Somewhere they can meet if it all goes sideways. He slides his wand down into his hand, thinks of the safe house, and lands in the garden shed, feeling slightly sick. Thunder rumbles and booms in the distance as he arrives, like an ill omen. When he steps out into the cloud-darkened garden, Hermione is sitting there. At the top of the porch stairs, in an old knitted jersey and leggings, striped socks on, her chin cradled in her hands. She watches him as he walks down the path toward her, her eyes big and dark in her face, colour whipped into her cheeks by the wind.

She manages a faint smile as he stops in front of her, memorising her features. They are in the calm before the storm. "You're late."

"I stayed to speak to Lupin about my father," he says. No *hellos*. No fuss. No social norms. Just them. They never got to play the game of flirtation and banter. They have never had the opportunity to be anything other than stripped-back bones and brutal honesty, papered occasionally by silence that hides omissions, or the kind of despair that rips the guts out of a person. Sometimes they talk frivolously or tease – in blissful moments of sweetness – but usually they speak in the language of touches, and looks, and half-said phrases, unless it's something important. And then all bets are off.

"Oh," Hermione says as he sits to the left of her, and she leans against him by degrees as the silence stretches out. It's a slow slide, until her cheek is pillowed on his upper arm, and then he pulls it out from between them and curls it around her. Pulling her into the sparse warmth he can provide, in his dark canvas work trousers and his light jacket, the wind cutting through him. His feet are warm at least, in thick woollen socks and heavy steel-capped boots. "What did Lupin say?" she asks at last, and Draco thinks about what he said, and sighs.

"Oh," she says again, small and understanding, as though he's already answered her. Her left hand has crept over his right knee, her forearm lying along his thigh, her thumb rubbing in little soothing moments.

"If he's alive and still in Voldemort's service, instead of locked in a dungeon, he'll probably die tonight," Draco says, and to his disgust, his throat is tight, his chest constricted with the effort to keep down the tears that prick at his eyes. Stupid. Weak. He needs to focus and worrying about his father – *and mother, at least she won't be there tonight, but oh Merlin, what Rodolphus said* – He takes a deep breath, cutting off his thoughts. They're both already dead, he tells himself because that's easier to bear right now than the alternative. The uncertainty of not knowing, and the sick fear it aroused. "They're probably both already dead," he says, harsh and forceful, more even than he had meant it to be. He feels her stiffen slightly and rubs his hand up and down her side reassuringly.

"I'm sorry," she says after a long pause, her fingers splayed warm over his knee. He's glad she doesn't argue – doesn't try to tell him they might still survive. She just offers her empathy, undemanding and quiet. He doesn't respond yet. Just sits, as he presses his feelings for his parents into a small, tight ball and shoves it down. Perhaps he should be sleeping, or they should be talking and making plans, but he knows sleep won't come for him before the mission, so they have plenty of time to make plans later.

Right now, he will live in this moment. With electricity in the air, and the indescribable smell of ozone, the promise of rain in the chill dampness of the wind. Hermione nestles closer as that wind picks up and gusts, whistling through the eaves and making the trees shiver and rustle. She's so warm and so alive, and Draco wonders if he'll come home to her tomorrow. He wants to. He wants to live.

"There will be time to grieve later," he says at last, numbly. She glances up at the darkened sky as vague thunder grumbles very far off – it's closer to twilight than what must be near on 3 pm. He looks up, too, his arm tightening around her.

They see the first lightning strike split across the storm-ridden sky together. It's forked, not sheet, and it cuts jagged and beautiful across the sky, lighting everything up for one split second. Hermione starts inexplicably counting hippopotamuses. "One hippopotamus, two hippopotamus, three –"

Thunder crashes overhead and then growls, a long, drawn-out rumble, and she stops counting. It must be like counting hippogriffs to measure the distance of the strikes, Draco realises belatedly.

"It's five times hotter than the surface of the sun, you know," Hermione says conversationally but quietly, and Draco looks down at her. She's still looking up, leaning against his chest a little now, and he leans back on one hand to make it more comfortable for her. From this angle she's all askew, but just as pretty. Her fingers draw idle patterns on his thigh, and her breathing is slow and even.

"What, the lightning?" he asks, simultaneously not particularly interested and astounded.

"Mhm." Hermione nods. "Air doesn't conduct electricity well, so it superheats."

"I'll make sure not to get hit by lightning then," he says, bewildered by the idea that it could be that hot. Wizards are struck by lightning during Quidditch matches infrequently but not rarely, and they almost always survive.

"Good idea." This time when the lightning strikes, he is looking at her and not the sky. She is lit up in the glow of a force more powerful than the sun, and she looks beautiful. It suits her.

She notices him looking and smiles, bemused, perhaps by the intensity of his gaze. And then, face upturned, Hermione presents her mouth – unmistakably for a kiss – and Draco complies obediently. Thunder comes again as his tongue searches the inner swell of her lower lip, and her small moan is lost to the noise of the sky. Her mouth is hot and sweet, her tongue fleetingly teasing. And then she pulls away and looks at the sky as the lightning slashes across the backdrop of rain-heavy clouds that the wind has swept atop them, followed by more thunder. And the heavens open up.

Rain falls in fat droplets – a scatter splatting on the stairs, and they both scoot back together, the porch roof protecting them from the worst of it. Neither of them moves to go in yet, or cast an Impervius Charm. And then it turns into a downpour of the sort that would leave them soaked to the skin within the minute if they were caught out in it without a wand. Hermione tucks her sock-clad feet back out of reach as the rain washes the dust off the toes of Draco's boots, the noise of the torrential rainfall loud on the corrugated plastic of the porch roof, beating a pattering rhythm.

She watches the lightning with something like wonder on her face as the thunder booms and rumbles again, close enough now that it's nearly deafening and growling on and on even after the main thunderclap ends, and he watches her.

If he dies tonight, he wants it to be with her clear in his mind. Just like this.

The unburdened expression she has right now, absorbed in the wonder of the moment, nothing else existing except the lightning, and the rain, and the warmth of their bodies. Her head is pressed against the juncture of his shoulder and chest, her hand attempting to span his thigh, and when she looks up at him, just as a bolt of lightning cuts jagged through the sky, her lips are parted, eyes reflecting the light.

And then the wind shifts, the rain blowing in, and she gasps and scrambles up with a breathless, startled laugh. He twists away from the rain, shoving to his feet with slightly less speed and more grace, feeling it falling fat and heavy on his jacket and trousers, and damp in his hair, sliding cold down his neck and making him shiver. She's standing there, clothes wet-blotched and face damp with rain instead of tears, a scatter of tiny droplets suspended in the fans of her lashes, and glimmering caught in her hair. He bends his head and kisses her again, catching her full lower lip between his two, and sucking it into his mouth as his hands slide to cradle her jaw. She makes a soft, melting sound and sways into him.

The kiss is heady and needy, and Draco finds he wants her with a sudden intensity that rocks him. He thinks of what Lupin had said. *Say your goodbyes.*

"Upstairs?" he asks when he pulls away, and Hermione nods, her lips flushed and her pupils blown wide, making her look dazed. She doesn't smile, her expression solemn, but he can see the want in her eyes.

"Yes," she whispers, and he wonders if she's thinking the same things he is as she takes his hand. The rattle of the door banging shut behind them is covered by a boom of thunder.

Hermione feels poised on the edge. Toes curled over the cliff. If she tilts forward just another half inch, she'll fall. The grief is so close. So heavy. And she hates it. There's no reason to feel this *grieving*. Fear she could understand, but this is something else entirely. It makes her feel like Draco's doomed. Like he's dead already and just hasn't lain down yet. It's irrational, and it's awful. And she feels the fear too, underneath, a river running through her. She pushes the door closed with one foot, and pushes forward and kisses him, her hands conforming to the sides of his neck. Pushes down the fear, and the grief. Rejects them.

Draco's hands slide to her waist, and his fingers are warm and gentle, and so, so careful as they curl around her, his fringe tickling against her forehead as they kiss. His mouth is filled with desperation and need, and he's hard, his cock brushing against her abdomen even as he holds her as though she's made of glass. Fragile. And she hates that too. He's going out to fight, and he might not come back.

Hermione wants him bruised into her flesh.

She wants Draco to let go. For once. For what might be the only, last time. To stop holding back. She can feel it now – the tension in his muscles, and the tremble in his fingers. The way he pushes into the kiss, and the way his breath comes in little panting gasps. He is a drawn bow, a taut rubber band, and she wants to cut him loose.

They stand on the floor at the end of the bed, and she is on tiptoes with her arms over his shoulders and her fingers clutching at the short hair at the back of his head. Pulling him down to her. He is still here for now. Still safe. Grief is a stone in her chest, creating dissonance as arousal streaks

through her like lightning. So hot, her skin is burning with it, electricity in the air. The broken almost-groan that catches in his throat as she tips her pelvis out and traps his cock firmly between them makes her whimper in return, a burgeoning need thrumming between her legs. Her vulva feels so sensitive. So needy. His hands shift, one moving to find its way under the back of her waistband, fingers sliding down to caress the soft flesh there.

"So perfect," he murmurs against her lips and licks into her mouth, pleasure rolling through her, striking straight to her core and lighting her up. There's a leaden, cold lump of fear and grief behind her sternum, and yet her vulva is slick, flesh wanton and liquid hot. Her breath is a shallow gasp now too as she curls her tongue over his, and tingles ricochet down her spine and through her belly. Her clit is aching for his mouth, and her cunt is greedy for the hard, consuming press of his cock – she wants him inside her *so badly* it feels like she'll die if he doesn't just *fuck* her soon. Immediately. And yet she feels like weeping.

The rain beats down on the roof, and the thunder is rolling, swelling and quieting and sometimes breaking in a crash, but nearly constant. Spring storms.

"Please." Her chest is heaving as she pulls back and looks him in the eyes. True grey rings around pupils that have eaten his irises, shining as lightning flashes outside. The love in his face hurts. Awe. Adoration. The willingness to die for her. Everything. His expression holds multitudes. Universes, as he drags his thumb across her lower lip, his own mouth reddened and damp, his hair falling over his forehead. She can't untangle everything in his face – fear, determination. A grief of his own. A sadness that is driven through the core of him. That is entwined with the very soul of what he is now, who he is. And then there is the love that underpins everything. And the desire that makes his eyes into inkblot pools, and lends a predatory edge to him as he sways forward half an inch toward her.

"You're in control," he says very softly, his hand cradling her jaw, strong and warm. Their mantra. He licks his lips, and his own breath is coming hard, his shoulders rising and falling sharply.

Hermione's eyes drop to his crotch, his cock straining against the heavy canvas trousers he wears, and she doesn't want control. And she doesn't want him to have it either – not if it's the self-control that makes him keep himself in check. She wants the very concept of control to be suspended, for a time. Banished from this room. She swallows hard. "No," she says very softly. "No, I don't want to be." She puts her hands to his belt and begins undoing it. "I want you to do whatever you want. However you want." She meets his eyes again as his buckle clanks free. "Please."

"But –" His brow furrows, and she can read all his poised arguments. His unspoken protests. What about flashbacks? What about triggering her? Hurting her? They stay unspoken. He breaks off, and his eyes search her face, his expression set in an attempt at careful neutrality. She waits, blindly fumbling with his trouser button. He should know she wouldn't ask for this if she wasn't sure.

"I want you," she says, in a small voice, as his button pops free, zipper sliding open of its own accord as she pushes her hand inside his trousers and grips his cock through his boxers. "So badly. I'm not afraid, Draco. I know it's you. *Please.*" His expression comes apart entirely then. The neutrality crumples into a nearly frantic want, so consuming that it sends a jolt through her. Like closing your hand around an electric fence. The sharp, shocking *crack* followed by the oddly dull *thud* that pulses through every muscle from hand outward. Except instead of pain, it's pleasure, and her stomach flips and twists.

His control is broken. She has *shredded* it. It lies in pieces on the floor as he kisses her again, hard and fierce, and the sheer force of need in the press of their mouths makes her moan unbidden. And then he pulls back as he yanks her jersey clumsily up over her head, flinging it down without thought. Kissing her again, brief and open-mouthed, before her shirt comes off too, with the same clumsy urgency, and she's in her vest and leggings as he shrugs off his jacket.

"Should I?" she asks, pulling at the hem of her vest, meaning should she undress. Words seem wrong right now. And Draco shakes his head as he looks up from peeling his socks off, his boots kicked aside already, his wand holster and wand tossed on the dresser.

"No," he says, breathless and urgent, an order. "No, *don't*. I will." There's a sweet possessiveness to both the words and his tone that makes Hermione shiver as she stands there in the stormy gloom, and the thunder crashes, the rain beating in against the window pane. And then he's shucked his trousers, and ripped his shirt off over his head, and his hands are on her waist, pushing her back. She hits the bed and falls, and catches sight of his grin, his tongue curling behind his teeth. And then, his head bowed, he drags her leggings and knickers down at once, sliding them down her legs, which, once freed, dangle over the side of the bed.

She tries to sit up, and he plants a hand on her stomach and pushes her back down. "Shh. Stay," he says, and his eyes are very focused and dizzy at the same time.

Her breath is a messy cascade, her breasts heaving under her vest, the air cold on her vulva. He peels her socks off her feet one at a time, lifting them up to do so. He kisses her right ankle. He bites the arch of her left foot. And then, he kneels before her, between her spread legs at the end of the bed. Like he's paying supplication. Like he's praying for absolution. And his hands go to her hips and he pulls her closer to the bed edge, and for a heartbeat, he stares at her with wide, glazed eyes – as though he really is worshipping her – before he leans in abruptly and his tongue sweeps hot over her clit.

She moans and shudders as pleasure blazes hot and consuming from her clit right through her. Her vulva thrumming with awakened sensation and her cunt twitching, her limbs melting with the heat as he keeps licking. Licking and swirling. An onslaught. Every nerve is alight. Radiating. Beautiful. Her mouth makes a breathy, wailing moan that she barely even recognises as coming from her, and her hands dig into the bed covers. And then his mouth fixes hot over her clit and sucks, and the *hnnngh* that warbles out of her is so loud she blushes beneath the hot flush that is already breaking out all over her.

"*Oh fuck*," she exhales as he slides his mouth down. Kissing her vulva. Licking and sucking, his tongue dipping into her, and *oh god*, her nerves are a series of fireworks popping off into showers of sparks. Everything about this moment has primed her. Everything feels *more*. Because this could be the last time. They could all be dead tomorrow. Or worse, he could be dead, and she still alive, walking around emptied out and broken. Adrift. Tears prick her eyes, but then his hands tighten on her hips nearly hard enough to hurt, his fingers indenting deep as he holds her, his tongue plying her with bliss, a humming, satisfied growl escaping him, and for a while, she forgets again.

He becomes the universe. The pleasure he gives her is life, and she squirms under his hands, gasping and moaning, loving the way he holds her still this time. No gentleness. No careful handling. Draco holds her hard and firm, and when she opens her eyes, she sees white-blond hair and the glint of his eyes as he looks up. The slick, flushed curve of his lips as he lifts his head and smiles, wicked and dazed, his shoulders flexing as he slides one hand to lie splayed flat over her abdomen, holding her like a butterfly pinned to a card as he licks her while holding her gaze.

Hermione whimpers and lets her eyes slide shut again, one hand pressing to her mouth and the other burying in his hair. Soft and silky, her fingers curl in the short locks hard. The pleasure is a building storm in the core of her as he swirls his tongue around her swollen clit and then slides it down between her labia. Buries it inside her, a delicious obscenity, feeling his tongue lick her from the inside before sliding back up to her clit. A multitude of repetitions that tease and edge and tease again, pushing her higher and higher toward a teetering peak. Time becomes meaningless. Her muscles wind to a shivering tension as the climax approaches with the inevitability of the tide coming in. Except it's a tsunami. A perfect devastation.

"*Nngh...*" His fingers sliding easily into her slick cunt is the last straw. The breaking point. The unexpected, unwarned invasion, filling her, her body twitching and clenching as he pumps his fingers in and out and twists them. *Curls* them, as he keeps licking her clit quickly and lightly.

Hermione comes with a groan and feels herself clamp down around his suddenly motionless fingers in a rippling series of perfect, blissful spasms, and he makes a choked little groan. The sound of him like that, raw and wrenched apart, is so arousing. Her whole body shudders and clenches, and he makes another little huffing groan as he works her through the aftershocks. When she opens her eyes, he's watching her. His eyes are so pupil-swamped they're dark as he slowly pulls his fingers out of her. She whimpers. His two fingers are slickly wet, shining in the storm-dark light. And then he puts them in his mouth and sucks them clean as their eyes lock, and she whimpers again.

She feels drunk on orgasm. On him. Drunk, and stupid, and melting in a sea of bliss, every muscle liquid.

"Up," he says, one word. Sharp and sweet at once. An order that's all run through with a plea. And then, still on his knees, he takes her waist and gently draws her upright so she sits, swaying and wobbly on the edge of the bed. One arm slides around her waist to steady her as he drags her vest off over her head with the other hand. He kisses her jaw as she sways against him and she looks at him, her lips parted as she gasps for air, feeling glassy-eyed and breathless. His mouth presses to hers as if it's a beacon, a magnet dragging him in. His tongue slicks into her mouth, and his lips are wet with her juices and she can taste herself. Arousal shivers over her skin like St. Elmo's fire, buzzing and humming, the air feeling tight.

She's lax in his arms, dazed, and he holds her close and safe, her bare breasts brushing against his skin, her nipples tightening. Naked, with wetness streaking the insides of her thighs; his saliva and her own slickness. She feels mindless – deliciously ravished as he kisses her. He's urgent, and needy, a single-minded focus to him as he says, "back down now," and yet there's an exquisite gentleness to his touch that makes her heart feel too full. He pushes her gently back down onto the bed, and she goes with her heart in her throat, her blood thrumming hot, her skin alight. Lying back looking up at him feeling dizzy and glazed, her breath dragging in and out, hard and short, her legs dangling over the edge still.

He looks at her as he kneels there between her thighs, and his lips part like he's about to speak. There's awe in his expression as the mood shifts. "I don't deserve this," he says very softly, after a pause. "I don't deserve you."

"That's not –" She pushes up on her elbows, frowning. "Draco, that's not *true*. Not even a little." He inclines his head in a non-committal gesture – *maybe so, maybe no* – just as lightning illuminates the room. She licks her lips, counting automatically in her head, and gets to two hippopotamuses. The thunder booms, and it seems as though the window panes rattle, although that could just be the

rain. She doesn't know how to impress upon him the gravity of what she feels for him. It's love, but it's more, too. So much more.

Draco's the only reason she's still here – the only reason she's capable of laughter. He's the reason she's a *person* – with desires, hopes, and dreams of a future – instead of being dead in a dungeon or worse; a hollowed out, catatonic ruin. For her, he has sacrificed the last few things that he had left to him. His *parents*. His own body. Being forced to brutalise her while she wept and pleaded, and struggled to escape. He has been through hell and back with her, holding her hand the entire way and guiding her when she couldn't see the path.

"You deserve so much more than I can give you," she says, her heart in her throat, meaning it. She is a paltry prize to receive, for everything that he's gone through.

But he looks at her as though she is the answer, to *everything*. As though she is the lightning rod and he is the bolt; bright and beautiful, and lethal. Dangerous, and inexorably focused entirely on *her*. She flushes under that look. His pupils blown wide and his lips parted, expression vulnerable. "All I want is you," he tells her.

"You *have* me," she says, a whisper, meeting his eyes even though the intensity of that quicksilver gaze makes goosebumps shiver over her flesh. "Always."

Draco's hands settle at her hips then – tentative at first, smoothing a path sweet and gentle up her sides. Swooping up gently, brushing the outsides of her breasts up and over to her shoulders, palming over the balls of her shoulders and then tracing them over her upper arms, his fingertips light and tingling. He leans forward and presses his mouth against the inside of her upper thigh. Murmuring something into her skin. She thinks it might be love. His hands tremble slightly as they curve over her breasts and then glide down over her ribs and stomach, finally sweeping out to grip her hips for a moment. It's like he's imprinting the feel of her into his mind. His hands memorising her, his lips placing kisses on every part of her bare skin he can reach.

These are their last moments together during the war. After this, they will either never be together again, or the war will be over. This is a moment in time they will never be able to get back. Hermione treasures it. The fleeting peace of his hands. The heat of his mouth. The throb of desire that persists between her legs.

She wants him.

"Please," she murmurs and reaches out, grabbing at his hair, dragging him up to meet her.

They end up on the bed together, he above her, his eyes gleaming darkly as he fits his body against hers. They've done it like this before, but somehow this time feels different. Like an exorcism. An echo of the past as he settles over her, his body hard and warm as he slots between her legs. Like the revel, part of her mind registers. His mouth is at her breasts – licking and sucking instead of biting and bruising, igniting pleasure instead of pain. There is no space for the darkness of old memories between them. There's only them, and now. This fragile, almost broken moment. Ephemeral and fleeting and gone all too soon.

The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there, Hermione thinks, fragmented, a memory stirring as she pulls his head up and kisses him. Hot and slick, a shivering, taut need strung through her body. The past is dead and gone, and now she needs to bury it, before the end. "Please," she says again kissing him sweetly as she meets his eyes, and he takes a short little breath. He is tender and urgent at once. Hermione doesn't know how much he's really let go because she can feel

the careful worry that threads beneath his every needy, almost desperate touch, but maybe this is as much as he can let go right now.

Then his right hand reaches down between them, fingers sliding over her vulva and dipping between wet folds, checking that she's ready. He's breathing hard and ragged, his eyes filled with wonder. Desire. Need. He does something, and there's the strangely wonderful feeling of the head of his cock, pressing up against her cunt. He bites his lower lip and his eyes flutter halfway shut. And then his cock pushes into her suddenly, without a spoken warning. Sliding all the way to the hilt in one smooth, hard push of his hips and he groans, the sound nearly lost beneath her own discordant moan.

"Oh fuck," he gasps on an inhale after the groan, and he sounds broken. Shattered.

"Oh – oh –" His cock fills her, her tender, orgasm-sensitised flesh stretching, pleasure flooding her in bright, hot waves. A heartbeat's pause and he slides halfway out, and she gulps for air, drowning, before he drives in again and her breath caves out of her on a juddering, "hnngh."

Her mind is a blur, her eyes have fallen shut now, and all she can feel is him. His mouth at the hinge of her jaw, his breath on her skin. His body pressed to hers. His cock, plunging into her so deep and so hard that it hurts inside, just a little. A sweet, blooming pain, honey dark and deliciously tender, just driving the pleasure higher. As if he's reshaping her body to fit him. He strokes ecstasy into her, his thrusts hard and fast, and just a little bit ragged, and his breath is hot at her throat, her temple, her ear; little gusts of air as he huffs a breath, or hisses at a shift of angle, or moans at the feel of her around him.

"Oh, fuck," he breathes, as his hips slam against her, and a moan is driven from her lungs as her fingers slide through his hair. "*Hermione*." Her name is a prayer, and she wishes in the haze of pleasure that she *was* a goddess who could assure his safety tonight. And with that stray thought, their moment shivers, the bubble nearly broken, a knot of grief and fear entangling with the bliss that arcs through every muscle. And then his pace quickens, and he makes a stifled whimper that sounds like it came through bitten lips and gritted teeth, his fingers flexing against her.

Everything hurts. Everything is perfect. He is *everything*.

She won't let him go alone, she thinks as she looks at him when they lie together afterwards, sprawled across the bed beside each other as he catches his breath, and she puts her brain back together. Hermione rolls onto her side, facing him. And he's flushed and wrecked, his love written in every line of him as she traces the scar cutting across his face with trembling fingertips. He's raw and uninhibited as he rolls to face her and his hand slides over the contours of her body.

"I love you," he tells her as though he's saying goodbye.

She's going on the mission tonight, she thinks, fear an electric current running through her veins. One way or another, she'll be there. If this is the end, then they'll face it together. They'll live or die together. If Draco falls on the field, then she probably will too, and that might be for the best.

"I love you too," she tells him, and then she kisses him, shifting her naked body closer to his. She wants more before it has to end.

When they finally disentangle from each other at 9 pm, the storm has long since eased to a gentle, steady rain. Hermione watches as Draco carefully puts away his emotions as best he can while he dresses for the battle. As he pulls his t-shirt and dark canvas trousers on, his self-control returns, and that raw vulnerability fades from his features, his eyes becoming steel; sharp, and hard. His mouth firms as he straps on his wand holster and checks his wand's fit before yanking on his dull khaki jacket. His jaw ticks as he buckles his belt.

Hermione can see he's thinking of saying something as she drags herself off the bed, sweaty and sticky, feeling his cum trickle down the insides of her thighs, but he doesn't speak at first. His eyes are both unfocused and tight, and it seems as though he's shoving his emotions down before he risks speaking. She's finished *scourgifying* herself and cast a contraceptive charm, and he's tugging his socks on when he finally does speak.

"You're to go to the estate tonight. Non-combatants are standing by with the Healers," he says, and his words are short and clipped. Hermione wriggles on knickers and socks, and – unusual for her – a sports bra with a vest over top. She hopes he doesn't notice. "It means it'll be easier to get word to everyone, whether we win or lose." Hermione presses her lips together hard. She hates hearing him say it.

"If we fail, the word might not get to you before the enemy does. In fact, at any point, a captured Order member could be tortured into giving away the estate's location, or side-along apparating one of the enemy. It's unlikely, but it's a possibility," he says, voice hard and sure now, a dangerous gleam in his eyes as he shoves his feet into his boots. "So you need to be prepared. If more than one or two Death Eaters turn up, then you *run*." He jerks the double-knotted bow on his right boot tight as he emphasises the last word. His eyes flick to her, sharp as knives. "Do you understand?" The question cuts through her, harsh and demanding.

She nods, flinching from his tone. "Yes," she says as she pulls on a long-sleeved t-shirt and then grabs for jeans. Hopefully, he'll think her sturdier clothing choices are in case she needs to run. "But I'm not leaving people behind."

"*Fuck*," he mutters, the other boot already laced, and buries his face in his hands for a second. "Of course you won't," he says, muffled. And then he looks up, and his eyes are stricken again. "Please. Hermione. If something happens, get out safely. You can't save everyone. If they have any sense, they'll run too."

Hermione frowns as she sits and pulls on her trainers. It's all moot anyway; she won't be there at the estate. She'll be at the mansion, in the battle. But he can't know that. And if she agrees to his terms too easily, he won't believe she's telling the truth. She sighs. This is a hard balance to strike. Lying to Draco Malfoy isn't easy. At least he'll think her current vocally unhappy indecision is related to whether she'll run or not – it'll add sincerity when she caves. "Fine," she says at last. "Once I know Teddy and Ginny are safe, I'll leave."

"*Fuck*," he mutters again, and their eyes meet. She stares back, thinking about the battle and the decision she's made – *I will be there. I will be with him* – and a strange, steady calm comes with the thoughts. It feels so *right*. Hermione hopes her calm seems like an honest determination to him. He frowns, corners of his mouth dragging down. "Fine. Teddy and Ginevra. And then you fucking run."

"Agreed." It's like a negotiation, except it's all a falsehood. "Where am I going if I have to run, then?" She yanks up her sleeve to strap on her wand holster.

"Have you been to Hull?" he asks.

"*Hull?* You want me to go to fucking *Hull?*" Hermione stares at him in disbelief. A more unexpected choice she couldn't have imagined.

"Have you been?"

"Well, yes, actually, I –"

"Do you know where the Minster is?" he asks abruptly.

"I guess, yes. I mean, I couldn't disapparate directly to it, but I know it."

"Good. If anything happens, go there. If I'm not there by midday tomorrow, then leave."

She blinks at him, bewildered. It's not going to play out the way Draco wants, but she's curious anyway. And he'd expect her to ask. To protest. "*Leave?*"

"Yes. Leave. The country, if you can, using disapparition. Otherwise, go undercover. Lay low. And then get out, somehow."

"But –"

"If you go somewhere like...like Vietnam, or South Africa, or Australia, he might never find you." Draco's eyes sharpen. He stands as Hermione yanks her jacket out of the dresser. "In fact, yes. Your parents are in Australia, right? Go there." He obviously thinks he's struck on a persuasive idea. Hermione bites her lip, recoiling from even thinking about it. She pauses for a long moment. "Then I'll know where to find you if I'm alive," he says, urgently, crossing the two steps to her, his hands going to her jacket, adjusting it, his knuckles running along her jaw. She hates the thought, and she lets that show clear on her face.

"Fine," she allows, her fingers hooking through his belt loops. "Fine. But it won't come to that anyway. That's not going to happen." She clenches her jaw, trying not to let herself tear up as she thinks about it. "You're going to be *fine*. Whatever else happens."

"That's the plan." His tone is light, his mouth curving up at one corner. "I'm good at surviving." And that's true, even if only barely. He's had too many close calls lately. But Hermione nods, blinking back prickling tears and biting the inside of her cheek. She doesn't want to cry. Not right now. Not with everything looming so close. And she's about to go alone into a terrifying, chaotic situation, against Draco's wishes. She needs to be at her best tonight, not distressed and edging into panic, or she'll get herself killed before she can find him. But her chest feels tight, and her heartbeat a stampede, and she's so afraid, really. She tries not to think about how angry he'll be when she turns up.

The idea is to wait ten minutes – long enough for them to get into the mansion, so when he does see her, he can't just drag her straight back out. Then she'll apparate into the woods to the exact spot they escaped from, and run the short distance to the estate. And then she'll find him in the chaos. And she'll pull herself together and fight. She was never a fighter at heart, but she was a decent duellist. Precise and fast, favouring the clean deadliness of *diffindo*. As long as she hadn't overthought things and had kept her panic in check – her problem had always been getting caught up in her head and not existing in the moment. She'll have to do better tonight. She'll have to be at her very best.

She hopes she's doing the right thing – a shiver of uncertainty suddenly runs through her. Doubt lurches up. What if she *is* just a liability? What if *she's* what gets him killed? What if she can't find him? What if she just freezes? But she *can't* let him go in without her. He's still stiff from his injury, not moving with his usual fluid grace, and no one will watch his back the way she will. Hermione tells herself she's doing the right thing. She has to believe that. They should be together, now, at the end.

She can do this.

"We might as well go down together," she says, nodding to the door as his eyes search over her. Worry flickers in the depths. "Wait in Lupin's office. I have things to organise."

"Hermione." He shoots her a fond, exasperated look out of his worry. "Organising the office hardly matters now."

"It makes me feel better," she says, not lying, and he sighs.

"Fine. But first – I need you to promise me you'll stay at the estate," he says, those grey eyes still glued to hers, his lashes catching the lamplight, gilded and shining, his irises burnished. "That you'll stay safe and won't try anything. I *need* to know that you're safe. Please."

"I'll stay at the estate," she says, her eyes on him without guile. Clear and blameless, or so she hopes. She feels nervous and shaky, and her adrenaline is pumping. Fear sweat has broken out under her arms, and she wants to keep chewing the inside of her cheek. He'll probably just think that's nerves. She keeps her gaze steady on him, and thinks, *I love you*.

"Promise me," Draco says, and she nods.

"I promise," she tells him, lying through her teeth and hoping she doesn't live to regret it.

He kisses her chastely when he leaves her at the estate, abandoning her at the disappearance point like some sailor's bride, to pace the widow's walk and wait for word. His lips are soft, and there are people around but no one is watching them, and that press of lips lingers. It's as sweet and perfect a goodbye kiss as she could want, even if it is breaking her heart.

And then he can't just tell her he loves her, and that he'll see her soon, the bastard. No, he has to be realistic. Coldly pragmatic.

"If I don't come back," he says, his eyes grave on hers, "then I'm sorry."

"But you *will* be back," she says viciously, suddenly crying and furious as he backs up a handful of paces, because why couldn't he just say *I love you* and go, like everyone else? But that wasn't him. He had never shied away from the ugly truth. He'd had that softness burnt out of him. She chokes on a miserable sob as he smiles faintly.

"I'll try," he promises. "Here or Hull." It's not reassuring. And then he disappears, and Hermione balls her fists up and bites down on a snarling scream before it can properly escape. She kicks at the gravel, uncaring of anyone else, and storms back to the mansion – furious and terrified, her heart ripping in two.

Chapter End Notes

► Notes

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

► Housekeeping!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Forty

Draco enjoys it when they suffer – something he can barely admit to himself, let alone anyone else. It's an ugly truth. This is his vengeance, writ bloody. This is payback for every innocent he was forced to kill, for all the torture he could do nothing to halt, for all the evil he was made complicit in. For what they did to Hermione.

He takes no prisoners.

Coming up on the mansion, the weather front has clearly swept in over the region. Maybe the same storm that had laid over the Order safe house hours before. It's raining steadily but not heavily, and the skies look ready to open up any minute, far-off thunder growling ominously. In the haze of rain and mist that lays over the estate, they lay waste to dozens of Inferi that Voldemort has set loose. Destroying them with fire that fizzles in the rain, and beheadings, and Draco hears Creevey retching behind him at one point. Even Weasley, who fights at Draco's side, looks slightly sickened at having to take the head off a little boy who stumbles at him.

It might be sickening work for some, but Draco takes a strange pleasure in it. He's laying these poor people to rest. Whoever they are, they don't deserve the indignity of their animated corpses stumbling around trying to tear people to pieces. They deserve an end. And he gives them that end.

The American Aurors are damned good fighters at least, he notes – disciplined and skilled, working well with the Order as they fight their way into the mansion. There's no spare concentration for an Impervius Charm, so the rain falls on them all, and Draco's waterproof jacket proves to be not so waterproofed. It gets saturated with rain, but there's no convenient lull in the fighting where he can whip it off. It fucking sucks. It's cold outside, and while his blood is hot and adrenaline floods his veins, being wet through doesn't help – his jacket is chilled, and chafing him.

Using shields and curses, the mass of combined Order members and MACUSA Aurors – about eighty people altogether – fight through the pathetic minions sent out as grist to the mill. Voldemort sends out his poorest fighters first, pouring out of the mansion like lambs to the slaughter, and Draco does slaughter them, his heart pounding like a drum, the blood whooshing in his ears. His pulse is racing frantically.

By the time they get to the mansion's imposing doors, he's killed over half a dozen wizards at least, not counting the Inferi, and wounded more. They break through the doors and the wards with a series of *bombardas*, the wood finally exploding into splinters that hurtle inward, puncturing the enemies waiting inside who hadn't the sense to put up shields. Some of them scream, bloodied and wounded with shards of wood sticking through their groins, or eyes; those ones are easy to kill. Draco's focus sharpens; his heartbeat is still fast, but he feels *right*.

The mansion's doors open onto a T-junction, and Order members and American Aurors split off into groups, the bulk heading straight ahead, to the ballroom. Weasley sticks close to his side, and he falls into a rhythm as they make their way down the hallway, leading the way ahead of everyone else, Potter somewhere in the centre of the cluster, flanked by Lupin and Shacklebolt. There's no cover, so everything is shields, and dodging, and the enemy are coming at them. He shields, and then ducks the Killing Curse, and then cuts a charging man's abdomen wide open. The wizard tries to grab at his organs as they slide out of his body, intestines slithering onto the floor in slick ropes, and then the man joins them. Dropping like a stone.

Draco steps over the dying wizard. "Shield," Weasley snaps, and Draco throws up a shield to cover both him and Weasley – who flings a barrage of silent *confringos* down the hallway, his face a mask of concentration as he flies through the wandwork over and over as fast as possible. Draco's impressed. One moment there are three dark wizards running toward him and Weasley, and then there are just clouds of atomised flesh that he and Weasley jog through, holding their breath.

"Messy," Draco shouts offhandedly over the noise of fighting as he and Weasley come out the other side.

"Effective!" Weasley shouts back, defending himself. Draco laughs.

"I didn't say it was bad, Weasley!"

The other man grins, and then they both have to skid to a halt and focus as enemies spill out of side doors, flanking the large group of Order members.

"*Shit.*"

The mansion is the kind of hell that Draco can revel in.

Revel. The word rips through his mind like closing his hand on broken glass as they put down the wizards moving in on them, and begin to draw near the great ballroom where Voldemort had held his revels. Where Draco has seen so much torture and death. Where he has committed so many atrocities. He thinks of Hermione sobbing and begging, and fury rages in his chest until he wants to explode with it. Ribs blown out, heart burst – he's so fucking *angry*. At Voldemort, but also at himself, and at Shacklebolt and the rest of the Order.

Rage is a beast that he sets free at the enemy, for a while forgetting Weasley, and tactics, and the rest of the Order. He kills indiscriminately and bloodily, no mercy or kindness slashing from his wand. Just flames and destruction; the burst of organs from men's bodies, the parting of limbs from torsos, gouts of blood spurting from severed arteries. And all he can hear are explosions, screams, and shouted curses. Footsteps, crashes, and the crack of spells splitting the air. It's a cacophony of noise, but it's invigorating as he finally sinks into that state of total focus where everything melts away except the moment.

He lives in the battle. His entire existence is the *battle*.

Rage, and a terrible lust for death, and an absence of any kind of real fear. It's glorious. He laughs as he flicks off a silent curse that drops someone, literally boneless, and Weasley shoots him a concerned look that he sees from the corner of his eye. The redhead is lit up multicoloured by flying spells, his eyes dark in the light. Draco turns his gaze forward again, dismissing Weasley; he shields and slashes, a torrent of curses spilling with deadly accuracy from his wand.

They tumble into the ballroom, again having to explode their way through warded doors, and find themselves faced by Voldemort and a large group of minions, and what Draco can only assume are his most trusted allies. He thinks he sees Aunt Bella there, at Voldemort's right hand, but before Draco can get a good look at them all, the bunched-up group of Order members immediately has to scatter as the enemy rains curses down on them. Several people fall, dead or grievously wounded. Draco ends up with his back flattened against one of the columns that line each end of the room, next to Weasley. Voldemort and his people have slipped behind the columns at the opposite end.

They exchange fire from cover for a while, thinning the herd of disposable minions and losing a few people themselves, and then Voldemort calls out to Potter. Draco risks a look out from behind the column. He sees Voldemort step forward in his black robes, feet bare and bloodied, a snarl on his face. Bellatrix stands to his right, and to Draco's disgust, she's visibly pregnant, her belly sticking out under her gown, distended and sickening. Salazar's sake. Draco doesn't want to imagine what spawn she carries – he's fairly certain it's not her husband's child inside her. Behind her is Crabbe Sr., large and looming, his dull face shaped by a malicious glee. To Voldemort's left is Rodolphus, Nott Sr. standing just behind him. The former looks as insane as ever, and the latter grimly determined.

"Will you dare to fight me, Harry Potter?" The Dark Lord cries in his eerie, high voice. That clarion call. "Or will you cower like a rat in a hole? *Face me!* Face me and *die*, just as your parents did!"

"Oh fuck," Weasley mutters full of tired exasperation, barely audible over the spellwork whizzing through the room, as if he knows exactly what Potter will do. Well, to be fair, it's obvious. Potter was champing at the bit to face his nemesis, and when Draco glances in the Boy-Who-Lived's direction, he's hardly surprised to see him breaking from behind the column to charge at Voldemort, flanked by Lupin and Shacklebolt. Draco shrugs off his wet jacket quickly, leaving him in a white t-shirt he's sure won't stay white for long.

"Merlin fucking dammit," Weasley curses at Potter. "Come on, Malfoy." And then they're both running out from behind the column too, charging like idiots.

It's exhilarating.

Nothing exists but now as Draco pounds across the hall in his heavy boots, shielding and ducking, and nearly dying as curses streak past him. He never relies on his shields; they don't stop everything. Particularly not the Killing Curse. They lose two more people – no one that Draco has the chance to recognise in his hyper-focused dash toward Rodolphus. Potter and his bodyguard squad have reached Voldemort already and are engaging in pitched battle, the Dark Lord doing well against the two seasoned fighters and Potter, who's no slouch himself. Draco swears, heart thundering as he spins and flings up a shield to avoid a red bolt of light, and then skids to a stop facing Rodolphus. They're about four metres away from each other, and Rodolphus grins.

"Nephew! How nice to see you again so soon," he calls, and Draco clenches his jaw and lashes off a silent *bombarda*. A quick shield as his uncle sends a sickly yellow-green bolt at him. A *confringo* followed by two *diffindos*. And then, just in case, an *expelliarmus*, which Rodolphus flicks away with a laugh. "Try harder, nephew! Make your poor mother proud!"

He grits his teeth, trying to shove down his anger and take his uncle's advice. Beside him, he sees a dead Auror on the ground at his left – for a moment he thinks it's Weasley and feels sick, but then he sees Weasley fighting to his right, red hair catching the lights as he duels Nott Sr. A spark of relief flares. But there's no time to think, just blocking and deflecting, shielding and lashing out,

trying to break through his uncle's damned defences. So far, he's avoided the Killing Curse; he knows how the Order feels about it. To cast it in front of everyone wouldn't be ideal, so he refrains, frustration surging in him.

Draco's wrist flicks and rolls in constant movements, his arm sweeping and slashing, and he finds he longs to just barrel forward, slam his uncle into the ground, and smash his head into the hard floor until he stops moving.

The bastard is too good at duelling.

And then Draco catches sight of a wizard slipping around the corner of the room, hugging the wall as he makes for the exit, and if he thought he felt rage before, he was wrong. Sheer hatred lurches up in him like venom. Poison is overflowing him, his stomach spasming, bile acrid in his throat as his hand clenches on his wand. It's one of the wizards from the dinner. It's Harry Hill. Stocky and dirty blond, dressed in a grey suit. Edging his way around the room like a coward, escaping.

No.

He sidesteps Rodolphus's curse and then runs at him, boots slamming against the ground. Wizards don't usually do that, not skilled duellists. They don't stoop to physical attacks – physical attacks are for squibs and Muggle filth, or dumb lugs like Crabbe and Goyle Sr. And so Rodolphus is not expecting it from his nephew, his eyes widening. He lashes off the Killing Curse, but Draco ducks it and hits his uncle shoulder-first in the gut, hard.

Rodolphus makes an *oof* and then they're flying back, hitting the floor with a jolting smack, and Draco jams his wand into his uncle's throat and snarls, "*Avada Kedavra*." He means it. There's a small green glow where his wand is pressed into his uncle's flesh, and before it's even faded, Draco is shoving off his inert body and sprinting for the door Harry Hill has just disappeared through, hatred surging through his body, his heartbeat a stampede, his hands clammy with sweat.

Screw Potter, and Weasley, and all the fucking rest of them; they can take care of themselves. Draco is going to kill the bastard who hurt Hermione like that. And he's going to make it hurt so much fucking worse.

Then a rage-filled shriek rises to a crescendo behind him, piercing the distance between them, and Draco knows it's Bellatrix. The mad bitch has clearly seen her husband's body. She screams Draco's name, the noise cutting across the ballroom, and he glances over his shoulder as he approaches the doorway. She's poised, one arm outstretched as though she's – he swears and flails as a flash of silver goes streaking past his shoulder, just slicing shallowly over the top of it and opening a stinging wound, hot blood welling up. The dagger thuds into the door frame, quivering, and Draco turns and laughs, relief making him feel wobbly and crowding out his rage for a few seconds.

"Thanks, Aunt Bella," he calls in a taunt, knowing she can probably read his lips if she can't hear him, and then yanks the dagger free with a grunt, and takes off through the door. He saw Hill go right, so he heads that way, shoving the dagger in his belt as he runs, sharp hatred swelling again as he remembers that night unwillingly. Remembers what Hill did, nausea rising, boots slamming into the floor and breath coming fast from adrenaline and emotion both. He will make the man suffer, and he will enjoy it. And then Draco turns a corner and sees him up ahead, and he feels renewed energy flood him. He lashes off a *stupefy*, and Hill tumbles and rolls but then scrambles back to his feet, shaking off the spell as he turns to face Draco.

"*Hill.*" The man's name spits from his lips as though it's a curse in itself. Draco parries a bolt of light and flings up a shield, his heart thundering, his hands clammy with sweat. He adjusts his grip on his wand, approaching the stocky, bookish-looking Hill, who snarls and flings off several more sloppy curses and a sputtering Killing Curse that Draco dodges with a neat slide to the left, holding his breath as the green bolt streaks past his abdomen, centre mass. His shield wavers.

"Do you remember me?" he asks Hill, a snarl that's strangled by the force of his fury, not fighting back yet. The man pauses and furrows his brow as he processes the question, his bespectacled eyes sliding over Draco as he stands there, breathing ragged with emotion rather than exhaustion, the left shoulder of his t-shirt sliced and stained with blood, his shield a shimmer in the air as he holds his wand up. It has been months, and probably many revels and dinners since then, but Hill will remember. If he doesn't, Draco will *make* him remember.

Hill's thoughtful frown clears. "Draco Malfoy, isn't it?" he asks, as though dredging the name out of the passages of memory. "Voldemort's failed protege, weren't you?" And then he grins; a shark-like expression, his eyes black and shining with malice. "*That's* right. You were the one who ran off with the little mudblood bitch who was at that first dinner."

"*Don't,*" he grates through gritted teeth, wanting to kill the man just for calling Hermione that. His hand shakes on his wand. From his inept spellwork, it's clear that Hill isn't a skilled duellist – it would be so easy to just kill him fast, now. But that's not what Draco wants. He wants justice. He wants revenge. Mere death is not enough for what Hill did to Hermione.

"I remember her. She was a gem. A treasure –"

"*Shut up,*" Draco snarls, his chest heaving as he takes another step closer to the man. Only a few metres separate them now. He wants Hill to remember so that he knows why he's dying, not so that he can gloat over the things he's done. A sickened horror rushes up in him. He doesn't want to hear any of this. Venom dripping from a vile mouth. His grip shifts on his wand, and part of him wants to just lash off the Killing Curse.

"– mouth was so soft and sweet on me. She did such a good job. I've never –"

"You fucking *cunt,*" he gasps past his rage as he remembers, his pulse whooshing so loud in his ears that he can hardly hear the man. Nausea curls in his gut. He wants to vomit. He remembers sitting there and smiling faintly, making pleasant conversation with a wizard named Dougherty while Hill had taken his turn with Hermione. He hates himself with a sudden intensity that rocks him. He hates himself more than he hates Hill. And he can kill every one of the wizards who hurt Hermione, but *he'll* still be here. "Shut your damned mouth."

But Hill has no reason to be quiet. He's obviously correctly guessed that Draco isn't going to let him live out of the goodness of his heart, so he's driving the knife in and twisting. Maybe hoping he wins – he won't, Draco thinks – but not playing for mercy. He can tell that Draco has none spare. "*Mmph.* And the way the little slut *wept* –"

"*Stop!*"

"– was exquisite –"

Draco huffs a breath, fists clenched, trying to gather himself. Hill's words are wrecking him, and he can't afford that. He tries to drag himself back on track. To compose himself. "I'm glad you remember –" he begins.

"– painting her pretty face with my –"

"– that's why you're going to die," Draco says, raising his voice and talking over the other man. "Slowly."

Hill sneers. His dark eyes are like pits, and filled with horrors. "No wonder she kept looking at you, begging you to save her."

Draco remembers. He'd mocked her. Made fun of the pathetic mudblood clinging to her master, like she was deluded enough to think he'd give a shit about her. So long as they didn't put their dicks below the waist. He swallows down saliva, mouth watering as though he's about to vomit as he stares at Hill. It had seemed like a reasonable line to draw – that as her master, he solely owned that part of her. He'd been trying to save her from as much as he could, and that was all he could obtain. That pathetically small mercy. He'd *tried*. Tears prick his eyes, and his vision blurs.

"It will not be quick. And it will not be pleasant," he tells Hill. A strange numbness blankets him. As though he's gone well beyond rage into something else entirely. Some calm, dead place. It's hard to breathe, his chest in a vice, and he knows exactly what he's going to do to Hill. Poetic justice.

"It won't be anything, you stupid upstart. You foolish, mudblood-loving *vermin*," Hill crows, and then hot, deep pain erupts through the back of Draco's right knee. He feels something come loose in his thigh, his knee and thigh a sudden mass of pain. His leg goes out from under him as the pain sears from ankle to hip, and he staggers and falls against the wall. Panic claws at the back of his mind as he scrambles to think clearly.

"*Incarcerous*," he snarls, flinging the spell off at Hill. It hits and the man falls with a cry, wand spilling from his hands as Draco raises another shield, feeling pain radiate hot through his leg, blood soaking his trousers and running down over his calf, wet and sticky. *Fuck*. He looks down the hall at – Crabbe Sr. The large man is glaring at him, an older version of the long-dead Vince, his eyes filled with hatred and a wild kind of gleeful malice. The man points his wand at Draco, but as far as he can see, he hasn't raised a shield.

"Malfoy, you nasty little shit! I can finally get my vengeance on you, instead of taking it out on your mother," Crabbe shouts, and Draco's rage blooms again. His mother. Crabbe isn't the sort to lie over things like that – he's too thick, and not tactical enough. And what lies he does tell are clumsy and easy to see through. If he says he's been hurting Draco's mother, then that means she's alive. Mistreated – he doesn't let himself think about what she must be suffering, or whether Rodolphus had been telling the truth – but alive. He twists around to face Crabbe. His leg won't work right. He'll figure that out in a minute, he thinks dizzily. He needs to stop the bleeding, too.

He concentrates. It takes effort, and it helps to say the incantations aloud. "*Confringo*," he snarls, and Crabbe blocks. "*Diffindo* –" he thinks that might be what Crabbe used on him – "*sectumsempra, expelliarmus, stupefy*." He lashes spells one after the other, harsh and desperate, running out of time as the blood runs down his leg. Of all things, it's the *stupefy* that gets through. Crabbe drops his wand and sways on his feet, and Draco flourishes his own wand, hissing: "*Bombarda!*" Crabbe, and a good portion of the wall behind him, explode violently. There's no time to celebrate.

Draco shoves his wand between his teeth and pulls a vial of essence of dittany off his belt, twisting to try to see the wound. There's a clean, deep slice across the left side of his right knee that gapes and trickles a steady stream of blood, the surrounding area already swelling and beginning to bruise darkly. He thinks it may have slashed through a tendon; his hamstring, maybe. It's in too awkward a

place to use an *episkey* on himself, but he manages to drip some dittany on, which stems the bleeding at least, although it won't repair the tendon. He tucks the dittany away after smearing some on his shoulder, and then turns to focus on Hill.

The man is making a furious shrieking, struggling against bonds that only tighten as he fights them. Hill's face is red, his spectacles half off, his expression contorted as he shouts slurs and pleas by turns, and Draco remembers the expression on his face as he'd violated Hermione right in front of him. He limps over, his knee not wanting to straighten or bend properly, forcing him into a stiff-legged gait as pain rips through him. He ignores it. He's remembering. What Hill did. What they all did, while Draco sat by and let it happen.

"You violated her," he says as he whips the man's trousers and underpants down with a spell, not caring if Hill hears what he's saying or not. But he stops raging briefly as Draco yanks his clothes off, a bewildered horror entering his eyes. As if he's afraid he's about to become the victim.

He is.

Draco leans over him. His voice shakes as he goes on.

"You took her, and you hurt her more than she ever *imagined* she could be hurt. You ruined her. You *broke* her." He doesn't know if he's talking to Hill or himself. His heart is thudding against his ribs. He can feel the blood thrumming in his fingertips. The whole world narrows down to Hill, and him. He will make the man pay. Appropriately. "But she's going to get better," he says, hard, steel in his tone. "And you *won't*."

"Please," Hill begs. His eyes widen, terror shining on the surface, and Draco feels a smile twitch at his lips. He schools his face to coldness. "Don't – don't –"

"Yeah. She said that too," Draco says, and his wand slashes down in retribution, parting flesh from the man's body. Hill begins to scream, and scream; a high, shrill, awful sound, and his mouth is stretched wide, features contorted in agony. Draco imagines he is unaware of anything except the pain, and the horror. Mindless with suffering. Good.

He can't bend down to do it manually, so he does it by magic; he levitates the man's severed genitals to his wide open mouth and jams them inside, stifling his screams. Another flick of his wand conjures a gag that wraps around Hill's mouth, preventing him from shoving his own flesh out from between his lips with his tongue. He's making agonised, stifled screaming noises, and his eyes are so wide that Draco can see the whites all around. The blood vessels in Hill's left eye have haemorrhaged from the force of his screams, and the white is spidered with red.

"Not so fun sucking your dick, is it?" Draco asks him bitterly, his breathing ragged, swaying on his feet above the man, but he gets no response. Just more pain-filled moans and muted shrieks. He stands above the wizard, and a hollow sickness rises up from beneath his consuming rage, and triumphant, vicious vengeance. There's a raw, disgustingly open wound at the man's crotch, and he writhes and wails in a muffled voice, his mouth stuffed with his own flesh, and Draco feels sickened at himself and what he's done. What he's capable of. He's a monster.

Hermione deserves better. But she wants him.

And he's standing over a mutilated man, who is wailing behind his gag, and sobbing, tears streaming from his eyes and snot running from his nose. And Draco doesn't feel terribly bad about it. Just sickened by what they all are, himself included. All except her. He stands there a moment

longer, watching, and then he slashes his wand and cuts Hill's throat, casting a wordless *incendio* as the blood gouts out, and the wizard's eyes start to glaze.

Draco limps away as the body burns – destroying the evidence of what he's done – finding an awkward, stiff-legged jog that makes him lurch to the left with every step, but doesn't make his knee feel like it's exploding. He can hear fighting off in the distance, and he's been gone too long already, pursuing some kind of twisted justice. He stumbles into Creevey and Weasley in the hallway that leads out toward the gardens, lurching around the corner right into the thick of a skirmish, and nearly catching a curse from Creevey. The only reason he doesn't is because of the way he tips to the left with every step – the curse zips straight past his head, and he bites out a "*fuck*," stuttering to a stop.

Creevey stares at him wide-eyed, ashen pale, and spilling apologies. "I'm sorry, Malfoy! I'm so sorry!"

"Shit." Draco whips out a curse, sending it flying across the hallway to hit a dark wizard who'd been aiming at the distracted younger man. "Creevey! *Focus!*" Creevey spins and watches the wizard fall, dead, and then turns to face the action, focusing, thank Merlin. Draco limps into place beside Weasley, who's fighting like a machine as he pushes forward down the hallway, blood streaking half his face, his arm in constant motion. Abbott, Finch-Fletchley, and a few American Aurors are with them too, covering the rear and their flanks. "What're we doing?"

"Where the fuck were *you*?" Weasley asks, without sparing him a glance.

Draco swallows, and then he's honest. "Getting Hermione justice she probably wouldn't approve of," he says, shielding, thinking of Hermione with an ache in his chest. Longing for her wrenches through him for one brief, consuming moment. Weasley shoots off a *sectumsempra*.

"Huh." Weasley sounds about as thoughtful as is possible in a combat zone. He throws up a shield and holds it as Draco flicks off a volley of silent *diffindos*. "Good then." Another pause as they fight, and several dark wizards die to their wands, and then he answers Draco's first question in short, breathless sentences, in between spells. "We're pushing out into the gardens. *Protego!* Voldemort, your aunt, and a few others retreated out there while duelling Harry, Remus, and Kingsley." He lashes off a silent *confringo*. "Then his damned minions blocked us from following. *Incendio!* We're trying to break through."

"Got it," Draco snaps and then notices movement out of the corner of his eye. Creevey. Shit. He's going to get himself killed. "Get in cover, Creevey!" he yells, and the younger man flinches, and does as he's told, ducking into a nearby doorway. "*Confringo*," Draco hisses and flourishes his wand, and the wizard explodes. He smiles, grim and tight-lipped, beginning to settle into his rhythm again, the only thing setting him off balance the pain throbbing through his leg, and the way it won't work properly. He pushes through it, focusing.

He wants to go home to Hermione.

Chapter End Notes

► Notes

Chapter 41

Forty-One

It's been ten minutes. Hermione's been standing in the entrance corridor of the Order's mansion estate, where she can see the grandfather clock in the formal parlour. Teddy Lupin is currently playing on the floor despite it being well past his bedtime, stacking wooden blocks – his grandmother trying to hide her strain and worry as she helps him. Hermione slips away, her trainers silent on the rug as she approaches the front doors. She pulls one large, heavy door open very carefully and silently, and then stifles a shriek, clamping her hand over her mouth as Ginny appears beside her, a determined expression on her freckled face.

"You're going to the battle, aren't you?" she asks as Hermione's heart attempts to beat out of her chest. She drops her hand, glaring at Ginny as she keeps a hold on the door so it doesn't slam and give them both away.

"What are you –"

"I'm coming with you. Side-along. If you don't let me, I'll scream," she whispers.

"Ginny!" Hermione whisper-yells.

"I'm an adult, and I can fight. I *want* to fight. But instead, I'm locked away here because Harry, Ron, and Mum and Dad want to keep me safe," she says bitterly, her voice quiet, her chin high and wand clutched in her hand.

"You haven't fought in a battle since Hogwarts," Hermione begins weakly, and Ginny gives her a scathing look as if taking in the way *she's* trembling slightly with sheer terror, the very image of inept panic.

"Don't start. If I shouldn't be fighting, you *definitely* shouldn't." The redhead's expression shifts. "Please. I have to be there. Harry –" Her voice breaks, and she clamps her lips shut. She's ashen, and Hermione knows exactly what Ginny was about to say because it's what she was thinking herself about Draco. It's why she's going despite being so scared she feels dizzy.

"Come on then," she says in a whisper and slips out the door. Ginny's shoulders slump momentarily as she exhales in relief, and then she's following Hermione out, pulling the mansion's door very quietly shut behind her. They hurry toward the disapparition point at a swift trot – it's impossible to be quiet on the damp gravel, and their trainers crunch. It sounds ridiculously loud. "Quickly," she says, her heart racing, glad that at least it's not raining. Fear is sharp in her veins; it's icy hot, and sweat breaks out all over her body under her warm clothes as she runs through scenarios in her mind.

What if she sees the wizards from the dinner? What if she runs into a Snatcher and freezes up? She won't, Hermione tells herself determinedly. She can't afford to. When she went on missions, she held her own. She was an efficient, effective fighter. And that's what she'll be now. She has to be. For Draco. Uncertainty curdles sour in her belly.

She and Ginny hold hands, both of their palms clammy, and Hermione pictures the thick woods. The large, flat, half-buried stone they'd stood on, where she'd crushed the portkey under her boot.

Her hat had fallen off, abandoned and forgotten. He'd told her he loved her like it was a confession of sin, and then he'd kissed her as though he was going to his death. Because he'd been planning on it. She pictures that moment – forcing herself to focus on the woods and the stone instead of him, so they don't try to apparate to the mansion and get splinched – and then they snap away.

They land with a thud on solid ground, the sound of rain beating down against the trees loud – an assault on her ears. The canopy seems to be stopping a lot of the rain, which then rolls down the leaves in trickles and runnels. Hermione backs up a sharp step as a water-laden leaf somewhere above collapses and water splashes over her cheek, cold and shocking. Ginny turns away and retches, nauseated from the apparition, and Hermione feels sick too, but she's busy staring at the ground as she swipes her sleeve over her wet cheek. Her hat. Dirty and sodden, the knitted cap is somehow still there. She shuts her eyes for a handful of racing heartbeats and remembers that evening. The desperation and love in his voice.

She opens her eyes in time to see sheet lightning blaze across the sky, everything shining stark white and black for a moment, dappled and sliced by the shadows of the trees. The after-image of the woods is seared into Hermione's retinas, and white and black dots sparkle in her vision as she turns her eyes to Ginny. In this light, the other witch is ghostly pale, her eyes dark pits, her mouth a thin line. The thunder crashes and booms, close enough that Hermione ducks down a little on instinct, terror spiking. It feels and sounds overwhelming, and both witches are frozen, looking up, as it rumbles into quiescence again.

"Shit," Ginny says, her hair already halfway to wet from the splashes of collected rainwater plopping down on them both. "Now *that's* a storm."

"Come on." Hermione looks around herself, getting her bearings, wiping her arm across her eyes. In the distance, through the trees and the rain, she can see the occasional faint spark of spellwork. That has to be the mansion. "Let's go. This way."

They run at a fast jog, side by side, with their trainers squelching on the wet ground, occasionally sliding and slipping on patches of slick moss. More than once they have to steady each other or grab onto trees for stability, and at one point, Hermione nearly runs into a rogue tree branch. The smaller twiggy branches coming off it to scrape her forehead as she ducks, and she pats at the stinging scrapes. No blood. She's fine. Her adrenaline is rising as she runs. Her blood pumping, her heart galloping, her breath coming in controlled, deep drags, in through her nose and out through her mouth. She feels dizzy anyway. And her hands feel shaky.

The storm is in full force, lightning flaring or forking across the sky, the thunder like artillery fire – ground-shaking booms that nearly hurt her ears. There's no counting in between the two; the storm is directly overhead. Hermione remembers what she said to Draco about being hit by lightning and hopes she avoids that fate as the two witches stumble to a stop at the edge of the woods, panting and halfway to soaking wet. Hermione braces herself against a tree with one hand, the bark rough under her palm. There's an expanse of manicured lawn – Hermione remembers crossing it with her heart in her throat – and then the forbidding manor house, looming up into the night. And behind it, the walled gardens, a sprawling collection of different areas, laid out neatly and joined by gravel paths.

She remembers looking at them all from the window of Draco's room. *Their* room. A herb garden all laid out beautifully in geometric shapes, another garden centred around a memorial statue of some sort with benches all around, one secluded area with a small pond, and then another larger section that was a small orchard with trees in rows. There are so many gardens. But it's the hedge

maze that sits at the centre that Hermione had always been drawn to. The most interesting feature of the gardens. Her eyes are drawn back to the house as lightning emblazons everything with stark contrast, lighting it up, and she swallows hard as memories clamour.

Humiliation, and pain, and the kind of violation that will always haunt her dreams. Part of her will never leave that house. The thunder crashes.

"Hermione?" Ginny touches her arm lightly, and Hermione startles and flinches away, gasping for air as fright and horror tear through her. "Are you sure you can do this?" Ginny asks her gently, and Hermione swipes away hot tears that mingle with the rain splatting down on her and nods.

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine. It's just the first time I've seen it since –" She breaks off, but she doesn't have to say any more. Ginny understands. The redhead scrapes her wet hair back off her face and twists it in a makeshift braid, tucking the tail down the back of her jacket. Hermione straightens and tries to pull herself together consciously. She tries to compartmentalise the way she knows Draco does. Feelings all crushed down, her focus at the forefront. She needs to go in there, she needs to kill every one of the enemies she comes across, and she needs to find Draco. And fight beside him, until Voldemort is defeated. She firms her jaw, takes a deep breath, and nods.

"Follow me," she tells Ginny, and sets off at a run through the pouring rain, toward a spot in the wall that looks different. It's hard to see in the dark and the rain, but Hermione thinks that's the wrought iron gate they escaped through, that Draco unlocked. She isn't sure if he used *alohomora* or knew a password, but if it doesn't unlock, they'll figure it out. The rain is like needles, stinging her face, and her jeans are getting sodden with it. And although her jacket seems to be mostly repelling it for now, it's running down the back of her neck and slowly soaking her shirt. She should've cast an Impervius Charm, but she hadn't been thinking. Clearly, Ginny hadn't either. They both need to get their heads in the game.

There's no point now though, Hermione thinks as her trainers sink muddy footprints into a once-manicured lawn, and they near the stone wall. Once they start fighting, they'll have no concentration spare for superfluous charms. She flinches as lightning flares, and there's a *crack*. She spins, heart in her throat. A tree that stands just out from its fellows at the tree line is aflame, fire leaping up fiercely enough that even the heavy rain doesn't extinguish it. "Oh my god," she says to herself, and then turns and keeps running, seeing the gate now and angling for it. Beyond, above the internal walls and hedges, she can see the occasional bolt of light and hear the faint *crack* of spells. *Alohomora* doesn't work.

"Shit," she mutters, shooting Ginny a squinting glance through the rain, wiping her face again. "We could climb the wall?" Except it's lined with iron spikes jutting up. She supposes they could levitate each other over.

"Or..." Ginny says. "Back up, Hermione?" The witch backs up herself, moving away from the gate.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Ginny. That'll just –" Hermione begins even as she backpedals, because she can see the redhead isn't listening – alert everyone," she finishes, the protest lost beneath Ginny's spell.

"*Bombarda!*" The gate blows inward, along with a section of wall on either side, in an explosion that outcompetes the thunder for a moment. Dust billows up and stones go flying, along with pieces of iron, and Hermione flings up a *protego*. A piece of iron goes bouncing off the top of the shield. It would've gone over Hermione's head, but that was too close.

"Jesus, Ginny!" she shouts over the noise of rain and thunder, and settling debris. "You nearly killed us!"

"We're *fine*!" Ginny says as she trots through the opening into the smallish garden with the large statue of a wizard in the centre, standing on an impressive plinth, the stone walls all topped with tall iron spikes. "Better than messing about. We don't have time to waste – we have to find the others."

"And you've alerted everyone in the area that we're here!" Hermione yells, frustrated, regretting bringing Ginny. And then, as if on cue, what seems to be a group of Snatchers comes jogging around the corner. Four of them. They pull up short when they see Hermione and Ginny, and one of them grins, a nasty, leering expression. Hermione feels a bolt of cold horror slam straight through her. She is catapulted back to the moment the Snatchers first grabbed her, her broken wand clutched uselessly in her hand. The way she'd fought and struggled uselessly as they'd beaten her into insensibility and taken her to the dungeons.

She's vaguely aware of Ginny grabbing her by the sleeve and dragging her behind the statue's plinth as she gasps for air, locked in her own head. She remembers the moment the Snatchers came into the cell and found her lying there, trying fruitlessly to hide. Ginny hurls off *confringos*. The way they'd hit her. The pain slamming through her. Her face swollen and tight. She'd fought, and she'd failed. She remembers, acutely, as Ginny shakes her, hissing her name, the sick helplessness she'd felt as they'd stripped her trousers and underwear down. The Snatcher's erection prodding against her.

And then Draco had been there, panting and dishevelled from his desperate sprint down to the dungeons, the charm having alerted him she was in danger. He'd saved her. He'd always saved her, from everything that he *could*. And she was failing him now.

"I'm okay," she gasps out, blinking and shaking herself, and adjusting her grip on her wand. She's crouching behind the plinth, her back to the cold, wet marble, her wand in her hand and Ginny crouched in front of her, facing her as she shoots off spells, holding the Snatchers at bay. Bolts of coloured magic fly past. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm okay now." Ginny spares her a quick glance.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." Hermione nods and then pushes off the plinth, shuffling over to the other side of it, and peeking around the corner, just one eye and the top of her head visible. A Snatcher approaches, having figured out that only one side of the plinth is being defended, his guard down as he looks around at his eye level, and Hermione grits her teeth. She can do this. She has a wand now. She's not helpless anymore. She slashes off a *diffindo*, the spell she'd always favoured when she used to go on missions, if she was fighting to kill rather than capture. The movement is easy for her to repeat swiftly, and it's precise, efficient, and not overly messy – so long as one stands clear of the blood.

She catches the Snatcher across the throat right as he finally spots her crouched there, his eyes widening, lifting his wand as his mouth opens – whether to spit a spell or warn the others she'll never know, because her diffindo opens a great, gaping slash across his throat. He gurgles and clutches at his throat, panic in his eyes as the blood gouts out in pulsing spurts, going a surprising distance. She swallows down on nausea. Hermione has never liked death, and causing it herself has always sickened her. But she doesn't look away as the wizard stumbles forward a step – sways, the

pulsing flow of blood weakening – and then drops to the wet ground. Collapsing like a puppet with his strings cut.

"Geoff?" one of the remaining three Snatchers calls, barely audible over a crash of thunder and then Ginny hisses "*Confringo!*" again. There's a yelp of disgust and *hoiking* noises, followed by spitting, as though a Snatcher has just caught a faceful of his friend.

"You bitch!" one of the Snatchers yells, distorted by rage.

"*Confringo!*" Ginny yells again – she clearly favours that spell – and a Snatcher laughs.

"Missed me!"

A Snatcher comes into view on Hermione's side, a shield up and shimmering, and she bites her tongue hard enough to hurt, concentrating. She refuses to let herself focus on her fear. "*Bombarda!*" she hisses, and aims it at the ground just in front of the Snatcher. He flails backward, hardly visible through the explosion of dirt and mud, but Hermione thinks his shield drops, which was the plan. She flings off three *diffindos* in a row, and he screams and then comes stumbling at her, wounds opened across his abdomen spilling blood. He's like some Halloween monster. "*Depulso!*" she yells in panic, followed by a *sectumsempra*. He goes flying across the small garden, hitting the stone wall, more wounds opening up across his face and body from the *sectumsempra* before he falls to the ground, face first in a growing pool of blood and water.

"Merlin," Ginny breathes from over Hermione's shoulder, "that's brutal." Hermione squeaks with fear, clutching at her chest.

"Stop scaring me!" she gasps as she twists to look at the other witch.

"Sorry. My two are dead," Ginny says brightly, mimicking an explosion with her two hands, cheeks puffing out as she makes the noise. "I love a good *confringo*. I can see yours are well dead, too. Bastards." Ginny seems like she's running on adrenaline, the reality not yet having sunk in. She'll crash later, Hermione thinks, when she processes the fact that she's actually killed people. As far as Hermione knows, Ginny didn't use lethal spells at the Battle of Hogwarts.

"Good work," she says as she pushes herself to her feet, feeling wobbly and shaky now, in the wake of that brief rush of terror and adrenaline. She's still tense and scared, but the immediate danger has passed now, and it leaves her feeling weak and limp. They won. She can hardly believe it. She may have frozen, but then she was okay, and she killed them both, quickly and efficiently, without letting her panic overwhelm her. A feeling of pride blooms in her chest, beneath the fear and relief. Hermione breathes heavily, rain trickling over her face as another flash of lightning illuminates everything white, and both witches look up, waiting for the boom of thunder that comes just one hippopotamus later.

"Shit," Ginny says when the rumble is done. She looks around herself, a grim, somehow exhilarated look on her face. Chin up and eyes gleaming, muscles tight. She looks poised. Alert. Triumphant. Hermione shares the feeling of triumph, but she feels shaky to Ginny's coiled tension. The redhead turns in a circle, her wet braid somewhat worse for wear. Aside from the gate to the outside of the estate, there are doors in all three walls. "Where do we go now?"

"Where they came from, I suppose," Hermione says, gesturing to her two dead Snatchers. They both move around the statue toward the open garden gate, moving at a quick walk, tension rising again. Her wand is slippery in her hand thanks to the rain, and Hermione tightens her grip. They

pass through the gate into a narrow walled and tree-lined walk, and look around again. "There!" Hermione says at the same moment as Ginny, both pointing toward the stray spells they can see flying above the walls, toward the left. They both start jogging in that direction down the avenue, wands up and ready, and then just as they turn right at an intersection, her hair stands on end, there's the smell of ozone in the air, and an explosion hits.

A wall of heated air and pieces of tree hit Hermione like a giant fist as a sound rattles through her head as if it has been thunderclapped, and she goes tumbling back – clinging desperately to her wand, pressing that hand against her chest in an attempt to protect it. She hits the ground hard, shielding her wand still. She can't break another wand, she thinks with a rational corner of her mind, even as the rest of her thoughts splinter.

Hot, *hurts*, that was lightning, lightning hit that tree, she thinks, bewildered and aching, her ears ringing as though her head is a struck gong, unable to hear anything as she scrambles aching to her feet.

The tree is on fire and ripped nearly in two, and as Hermione stumbles, looking for Ginny, there's *another* explosion – dull to her deafened ears this time, and the wall to her right blows out in a hail of stone debris, and a cloud of dust. She scrambles back, the wand ready and a shield up, looking around wildly for Ginny, screaming for her, but she can't even hear her own voice. No one comes through the hole in the wall, but the debris blocks access to that branch of the gardens – unless Hermione tries to scramble over the stones, which doesn't seem safe. She yells for Ginny again but hears nothing.

Fuck. For a moment, she doesn't know what to do, frozen by indecision and rising fear. And then she sees a bolt of red flying above the walls to her left, and turns in that direction. She can't do anything for Ginny now, but she can still find Draco. Ginny will be okay, she tells herself. She takes off down the avenue on wobbly legs, shaking herself mentally – she's alive, and she has her wand, and Ginny is *fine*, she tells herself. And then a figure skids out into the walk up ahead, and Hermione squints through the rain, raising her shield. She can't see who it is this far away. But they lash a curse at her, and it's the sickly green of the Killing Curse. An enemy.

Hermione stumbles sideways, dodging the curse and then flattening herself against the trunk of a tree, taking whooping breaths, her head and ears aching viciously and her limbs feeling weak and shaky. She takes a second to calm herself and then she readies her wand, fear and panic still thrilling through her veins even as she tries to focus. And then she peeks out from behind the tree and sees the figure striding in her direction. Shit. She slashes off a *diffindo*, followed by an *incendio*, and then a *depulso*, all three of which are blocked or deflected, and then raises a shield, still in the shelter of the tree. Hermione hopes rather fervently that it doesn't get struck by lightning as she settles in, ready to duel, her heart racing and her fingertips tingling. She'll be okay, she tells herself. She'll *win*.

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Forty-Two

The thunder rumbles nearly constantly, a sleeping dragon, and Draco can feel it shivering in the air. Occasionally, it rises to a crescendo, crashing and booming, the old manor house shaking. The storm is moving closer, sweeping in directly overhead as they reach the open doors to the garden after a short, bloody fight down the long corridor. One of the American Aurors is down – not killed but wounded too badly to fight on – and Draco's taken a shallow slash to his side that stings, some of the others taking their own minor wounds. But they killed the enemy. All of them have fallen, except the handful that fled into the dark night, retreating.

A certain primal triumph flows through him as he steps up to the doorway, pausing as Weasley falls in at his side. It's pouring down, and he thinks that at least it might wash the blood and filth off him – his once-white t-shirt is now torn in two places and marked with blood splatter and the pink stain of atomised flesh. The fluids are drying tacky onto his arms, and undoubtedly in his hair too. It's disgusting. He limps forward out into the downpour, and it immediately plasters his hair to his head. It's the kind of rain that slashes down in biting needles, and it's falling thick and fast, already washing his arms clean.

He rakes his hair back and whips a *sectumsempra* at an injured dark wizard scrambling clumsily down the stairs away from them, with no one else nearby. The man's body jerks and he falls, tumbling down several stairs, which Draco eyes cautiously as he stands at the edge. They're stone and slippery with rain, and he's still limping and lurching like a sailor who hasn't got his land legs back yet, pain throbbing in his badly swollen knee and thigh. Traversing the steps will not be fun. If he's not careful, he'll fall straight down them and break his neck. *Hermione would be so furious*, he thinks disconnectedly, as trickles of water run down his face, shirt already halfway to soaked.

He takes stock of the area. Further out in the darkened gardens, he can see the fighting – little skirmishes lighting up patches of the estate as spells fly. There's a long strip of lawn that stretches from the stairs to the maze, with a walk cutting through the middle. It's lined with urns on plinths, and he can see people fighting near there, the duelling creeping back toward the stairs and spreading out over the lawn. The mansion has mostly emptied itself out into the gardens, it seems. So, down the steps it is. About a dozen people peel off and race down the stairs past him and Weasley, most heading left and right into the labyrinth of walkways, with a few heading straight out into the battle on the lawn. One falls halfway toward the skirmish on the lawn, and another two explode into human shrapnel at the entrance to a walkway at the right, and he grimaces.

Time to go and join the fight. He moves forward to descend the stairs, his jaw clenching as he lurches.

Then suddenly, Creevey is there and grabs his arm. "I'll help," he says eagerly, and Draco frowns at him, puzzled, as lightning flashes overhead. He'd think the younger man is just looking for an excuse to pitch him down the stairs, except he seemed more eager to please than to get revenge during the fight toward the doors, taking orders well. Abbot and Finch-Fletchley appear behind Creevey, fear bright in their eyes, and Draco looks at the three of them. None of them are brilliant

duellists. He doesn't want to see them suffer the same fate as the three Order members or Aurors who he just saw struck down. He's going soft.

"Weasley. Should we send these three to check the dungeons?" he yells at Weasley over the thunder. "There are prisoners down there who need help!" And there won't be any Death Eaters either, and probably only a few Snatchers. It's one of the safest places they could be right now. And it would be a good idea to clear the manor of non-combatants – parts of it appear to be on fire.

Weasley glances over at the three and then shoots a fleeting grin at Draco. "Yeah!" he yells back. "Good idea! You three. Go clear the dungeons! Get the prisoners out!" Creevey looks disappointed, and Abbott and Finch-Fletchley relieved, but all three move to do as Weasley ordered. He grabs Draco's arm then. "Come on. 'Mione'd kill me if I let you fall down the stairs," he says, water streaming over his pale, freckled face, his beard gleaming wetly and his hair plastered flat.

"You look like a half-drowned ginger demiguise," Draco retorts, and then they lurch down the stairs together as Weasley talks shit, both of them running on adrenaline and a simmering blood-lust. He nearly tips himself down the stairs twice, but once he's on solid ground, he's fine. The smell of petrichor rises from the soil, and there's a sudden static charge in the air before a fork of lightning comes down and strikes a tree in the garden only a few hundred metres away. There's an explosive sound as it bursts into flame and seems to crack in two, and then the thunder splits the air, so loud it hurts, and Weasley gives Draco a wide-eyed look.

"Let's get the fuck out of the open before we get struck," Weasley says, shouting over the thunder and rain, water running into his mouth from his hair, and it's pink from other people's blood. "We should head left-ish. I think I saw the biggest battle that way." He points to the left of the maze. "It's probably Harry and the others duelling Voldemort."

Draco nods – he saw that criss-crossing hail of curses from the top of the stairs too – and they head that way, only to be intercepted by the skirmish taking place on the expanse of lawn, which spills in their direction. They're dragged into a pitched battle, which isn't quickly settled. About a dozen on each side, and none of them are terrible fighters – Draco supposes grimly that most of the worst fighters have died at this point. He takes out one of the fighters after exchanging a hectic flurry of curses, but the others are being careful and staying in cover where they can. It's been at least ten minutes at this point, everyone pinned down and neither side doing better than the other.

Draco's pressed against an urn, taking tenuous cover two urns up from Weasley, who's doing the same thing, just like everyone else, frustration etched into his face. He's eager to get to Potter, no doubt. By some odd mutual agreement, no one targets the urns themselves with *bombardas* or any kind of destructive spells – probably because once that happens, everyone will do it, and everyone will die very quickly without any skill needed, and no one in the skirmish *wants* to die. And then, in the chaos of rain and flashing lights, Draco sees them at the back of the other side's duellists, taking cover on each side of an urn near the maze, popping out occasionally to fling curses, much like he's doing.

Jones, and Garcia.

Even in the dark and the rain, he recognises them. All of the American wizards' faces are burned into his mind, and he knows them immediately. It's not surprising, he tells himself. They'll all be here tonight. The Order knew that. It's why the MACUSA Aurors joined them in the first place – one of whom is pinned down under a hail of curses just nearby, fighting well. Draco is rather glad the wizard is busy; he wants this kill. Both of them. And he knows he should stick with Weasley,

but he doesn't think the man will blame him for going after Jones and Garcia. Hopefully, he'll be able to take them out before this unending bloody skirmish is even done.

Draco takes a deep breath and casts a shield as he leaves the cover of the plinth at a limping run that makes surprisingly good speed. He holds his shield up with an effort, shimmering and wavering as curses splash against it and ricochet away, and then he makes it to the next urn and the meagre cover it offers. And then the next. And then, Jones and Garcia are just three urns up, on the other side of the walkway. *What now?* He hasn't planned this far ahead. A thought occurs to him, and he aims.

"*Bombarda!*" He breaks the unspoken agreement between the duellers without a second thought – although he does hope Weasley gets away from his urn in time. Jones and Garcia's cover explodes, chunks of stone flying everywhere, and then chaos immediately erupts behind him, the sound of successive explosions and shattering stone ringing out.

He runs for Jones and Garcia in his hobbling lurch and swears viciously as Jones scrambles to his feet, wobbling, and runs for the hedge maze. He flings curses after the man, but he dodges and zigzags, and Draco misses.

"*Shit!*" he hisses as Jones disappears into the maze, vanishing from sight. "*Fuck!*" A helpless fury rises in him, his leg screaming in pain as he runs on an injury he probably shouldn't be running on. But Garcia is still there when Draco lurches to a halt a few metres away. The skinny wizard pushes himself upright, his face a mask of rage as he sways on his feet with blood trickling down his head and his wand still clutched in his hand, his shoulders hunched and his mouth a sneer.

Draco lashes out with an *expelliarmus*, a *stupefy*, and a *diffindo*, but Garcia has already collected himself and blocks them all, one after the other, returning fire. They stand across from each other, just hurling curses and shielding, no cover available. Who lives and dies is purely based on reflexes and focus. Draco's head throbs, the rain running down his face, droplets catching in his eyelashes as he stares Garcia down, his mouth a thin line and all his curses silent, his arm constantly sweeping and flicking. If he messes up just once – the wrong motion for *protego*, not enough focus, too slow – then he's dead. And unlike Garcia, he's not fighting to kill, but to disable, or wound. He wants to be able to tell the man why he's dying. He wants to make it painful.

Garcia attempts the Killing Curse twice, and Draco grits his teeth as he twists and side-steps to avoid the green light, his knee a swollen mass of agony that sears and stabs up into his torso and down into his calf. He's vaguely aware of the battle going on further down the long double row of urns that line the pathway dividing the stretch of lawn, but he can't afford to spare any thought for it as the duel continues, long enough that his damned arm is getting tired. Garcia is panting, his long dark hair straggling around his face, his wandwork getting sloppier, and he barely manages to deflect Draco's *incarcerous*.

And then it falls apart.

Draco sees a red bolt out of the corner of his eye. A stray spell streaking out of the thick of the battle further down. He automatically turns and brings his wand up to block it, and that opens him up to Garcia. The *crucio* takes him by surprise. Agony, searing through him, as though his blood is boiling in his veins, his muscles seizing and spasming, and he falls. Toppling to one side, his wand slipping from his nerveless fingers as he goes, and the way he falls – hard, unable to protect himself, his head bouncing off the muddy ground – would hurt badly at any other time. He doesn't feel it.

He screams. There's no reason not to, and it feels like his muscles are all tearing from his bones, flesh ripping. His head is being crushed in a vice, his teeth grinding together hard, his blood on fire. It goes on and on, and as if from far away, he's aware of laughter as the pain devours him. He can't breathe. Can't swallow. His eyes are open, but all he can see is darkness, and he doesn't know if he's gone blind. He thinks he swallows a piece of molar that breaks off. He's biting his tongue. Choking on blood. Choking, and seizing, his body not his own anymore. It's a fist of pain, and it's grinding his mind to paste. Pain. Everything is made of *pain*. He can't stand it. He can't –

Hermione, he thinks blindly, his fingers clawing at the muddy grass, his mind an ocean of agony, trying desperately to cling to thoughts of her. *Hermione. I'm sorry.* And then, as the *crucio* goes on and on, he loses the ability to think at all.

Until it stops.

The absence of pain feels like nothing else Draco has ever felt as he lies there, his contorted, spasming muscles suddenly going limp, save for aftershock spasms, his cheek pressed against the muddy grass as he lies, curled up like a comma. It's better than sex. Better than anything. He loves it. He fervently, *deeply* loves the absence of pain. He hears voices.

"I've got him, you go!" *Creevey*?

He vaguely recognises Weasley's voice next. "Are you sure, what about –"

"He's bound, unconscious, and wandless," says a third voice in an accented drawl. One of the American Aurors, he realises slowly. "We'll pick him up once the battle's done."

"Be careful, Colin!"

The sound of footsteps squelching away fast on the sodden ground, and then there's a thud by his head, and someone takes hold of his shoulder and rolls him onto his back. He stares at the sky blankly, rain getting in his open mouth, and he chokes and coughs. Blinks. Swallows, and shuts his mouth. It tastes like blood, and he realises belatedly his tongue is bleeding. Badly. The sky is black, thick with boiling storm clouds, and as he watches, lightning forks across the sky. "Pretty," he slurs, blood spilling out the corner of his mouth, and then Creevey's face looms into his vision.

"Malfoy? *Malfoy*, are you still... He didn't drive you mad, did he?" Creevey asks, filled with a panicked worry, and it takes Draco a moment to process what he said and then put his fragmented mind back together, somewhat.

"No?" he says, tasting the word and trying to figure out if it's right or not. Hermione – he remembers feeling terrible he'd failed her. And Garcia. And his wand, where's his wand? "N-no. Not mad," he says then, blood dribbling everywhere as he talks, putting things together fast. Bound and unconscious, that voice had said, and he must've meant Garcia. A smile tries to twitch onto Draco's face, but he feels like his muscles aren't working right. "Just – just a little shaken up. I'm fine. Just – just give me a minute." He struggles onto all fours, Creevey hovering over him and helping steady him. He doesn't refuse the help. His knee is just one of many pains now as all his abused muscles scream out.

Creevey helps haul him upright, Draco's arm slung over the shorter man's shoulders, both of them wobbling and swaying there for a moment, until he thinks he has his feet.

"Th-thanks. I've got it," he says and lets go of Creevey – only to nearly pitch straight back over as his bad knee goes out from under him. Creevey's right there, keeping him upright and then steadying him as he regains his balance, properly this time. *Fuck, that was undignified*, he thinks wryly, aftershocks of agony still jittering through him. But he's upright now, and actually standing on his own. He pats his belt and feels the dagger still wedged there, and then scans the ground for his wand, hoping it isn't broken.

Draco's brain still feels fractured, like he can't make sense of things properly. Like he knows he's not understanding everything, but he doesn't know *what* he's missing. His left eyelid keeps twitching, and he feels like throwing up. And every muscle feels like he's been put through a washing mangle. He wants to pass out.

"Here," Creevey says and holds his wand out to him, slightly muddy but unbroken, and relief soars.

"Thanks," he says simply, and Creevey smiles. "Fuck, this hurts." Draco spits blood on the ground, agony shivering through him.

"I've got –" Creevey begins, but then Draco sees one of the things his dazed mind has forgotten in the last few moments. Garcia. The thin-framed wizard is unconscious and trussed well, at the marble base of a half-destroyed plinth. Draco lurches forward, and *fuck*, that hurts.

"Did you do this?"

"Well, I helped. Hannah and Justin didn't really need my help clearing the dungeons, so I came back out, and the Order were mopping up some enemies over there –" He points in the direction of a swathe of destroyed urns – and I came running over, but then I saw you and him over here, half hidden, and I yelled for help. And Ron and one of the American Aurors helped take him down."

Draco stares at Garcia. "Thanks, Creevey. You saved my life." He flicks his eyes up – left still twitching – and the younger man beams. "And now I can kill this bastard." Creevey's face falls, his expression becoming uncertain.

"Um. I think they wanted to take him prisoner?" he wobbles, and Draco takes a deep breath, rolls his shoulders back, and centres himself, shifting his wand in his grip.

"Too bad." He points his wand at Garcia. "*Rennervate!*"

The man gasps to awareness, immediately struggling against his bonds. He's bound at the wrists, elbows, ankles, knees, and around the middle. The Auror and Weasley were thorough. Draco bends with a groan and grabs him by the rope around his middle, lifting him up and dropping him against the rubble of the plinth, propped so he's reclining back. "Garcia. Do you recognise me?" The man glares.

"*Vete a la chingada*," he snarls, obviously an insult of some sort, and Draco grins and spits a goblet of blood on the man's face. Garcia tries to flinch away but it gets in his eyes, and Draco grins wider, lips trembling and twitching. More poetic justice, considering he's not about to get out his dick in the middle of a battle and piss on the man. He's aware that Creevey is watching, wringing his hands together and looking worried and miserable.

"The first dinner you had here, at this estate, with Voldemort. Do you remember?" he asks very calmly. Dangerously. The words still slur a little, his tongue swollen, and when more blood fills his mouth, he spits it on Garcia. "Do you remember the girl?"

"Oh nah. Nah, that's what this is about?" Garcia asks, all disbelief and bravado, laughing, harsh and forced. "That *puta de mierda*? The one I –"

"*Silencio!*" He doesn't want Creevey hearing what Garcia did to Hermione. The humiliations he'd wreaked on her. Garcia keeps mouthing words pointlessly, his whole face a snarl as he struggles. "This is penance," Draco says to Garcia as he leans awkwardly over him, braced against the plinth with one hand, his wand holstered. "This is justice. And it's better than you deserve." He grabs Garcia by the face, his fingers and thumb digging into the man's cheeks, clawing in. Forcing his mouth open as he struggles and fights, eyes wild and furious. Panicked. Mimicking aspects of what the bastard had done to Hermione. And then Draco spits a thick trickle of blood into his mouth and the man chokes on it, thrashing and squirming in disgust, retching silently.

Justice, Draco thinks, as he grabs the ropes and yanks the man down further with a grunt of effort, bumping and scraping him over chunks of jagged, broken marble, and then he lifts his heavy boot and brings it down on Garcia's head as hard as he can. There's a faint crunch just as Creevey cries, "No!" as if only belatedly realising that Draco was really going to do it, and he feels a dull satisfaction and faint nausea at once. Although the nausea could be thanks to the Cruciatus. He turns away from Garcia without looking to see if he's alive or dead, to face Creevey, who is vomiting onto the grass, hands on his knees.

"If he's still alive, then the Aurors can have their prisoner," he says blankly, already thinking about Jones, who'd run into the massive maze. It had been some time, but for anyone who didn't know the maze, it was easy to get lost in there. And Jones might not want to attract attention by blasting his way through it. Draco looks at Creevey. "Thanks for your help. But I have to go after another of them." He jerks his head at Garcia, who might be making a faint sound, unless it's just gasses escaping the body. "I think you should look for Potter. He'll need all the help he can get."

Creevey looks at him, ashen, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Are you sure?" he asks, in a tone that makes it clear he doesn't really want to go with Draco because he doesn't want to see that happen again. But he will, if he has to. It's weird. "Are you okay?"

Draco nods. "I'm fine."

He's not. Nowhere near it. But he'll do. He manages a fast, lurching walk as he heads for the maze with a wave of acknowledgement to Creevey, and his mind is clearing – he thinks – so it'll have to be good enough. He doesn't have much choice.

Hermione's hearing is slowly returning as she skids around a corner, so she hears the yelp as she careens into another person and they both go tumbling sideways to the ground together. The jut of her pelvis slams into the ground and a sharp stab sears through the bone into her hip even as her palm grates over the gravel path painfully, barely saving her face. Her breath is seething in and out through clenched teeth, panic frantic beneath her skin, and she shoves at the person, trying desperately to disentangle, to scramble for her wand on the gravel path, to get up.

She shoves her feet against the person who makes an *oof*, propelling herself within reach of her wand, and then her fingers wrap around the slim stick – her palm stinging – and she aims it at the person just as they say, "Hermione?"

"*Colin?*" She squints at him in the dark and the still falling rain. Yes, that's Colin alright. Wide-eyed and eager to assist as he scrambles to his feet and then helps her up like a gentleman.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were meant to be staying at the –" His expression crumples. "Oh no. They haven't taken the estate, have they?"

Hermione stares at him blankly for a second, not understanding, her heart a rolling drumbeat. As loud and as crashing as the thunder above, which makes her flinch even more now, after that lightning strike. She'd defeated the enemy fighter she'd encountered right after the explosion, but then had been pinned down by two more for a while. It had felt *good* to kill them, something which makes her feel faintly ashamed. But it also made her feel strong. Capable. She's not helpless and pathetic – she's not an impotent victim. Not when she has a working wand. She's actually doing well. She's *useful*. "Hermione?"

"What? Oh, no. No, the estate's fine. I just wanted to help."

"Malfoy's going to be furious," Colin says and then snaps his mouth shut as if he'd spoken without thinking. He blushes. "Sorry. I mean, he is, though. You shouldn't have come," he says in a jumble, "he'll be ropeable." Hermione frowns but focuses on the relevant piece of information.

"*Draco*," she says urgently, grabbing Colin by his sleeve and tugging him into the cover of a tree and the wall, so they're slightly less obvious targets. She holsters her wand for a moment to pick bits of gravel out of her abraded palm, wincing as she does. "Have you seen him?"

"I saw him just a minute ago. He was heading into the maze."

The maze. *Shit*. Well, that won't make him easy to find, she thinks with a grimace. "Why?"

"He was going after one of the enemies who ran in there after a skirmish."

"I-is he okay?" She thinks he must be okay if Colin didn't go with him. Maybe. Then again, maybe not. "When you saw him," she begins, fear crawling up her spine like icy claws and making her shiver. "Was he okay, Colin?" He shifts on his feet uncomfortably, looking away and not answering immediately, and Hermione feels her heart lurch and sink. "For fuck's sake, Colin!" she hisses, suddenly angry, her eyes leaking tears that mingle with the rain on her face.

"He *said* he was," Colin says evasively. "And he was upright."

"He was *upright*... He – *fucking hell*." Hermione stares at Colin in disbelief, her worried anger consuming every other emotion she could be feeling right now. "And you just let him go?"

"He said he was okay!" Colin whisper-yells defensively, looking entirely ill-equipped to deal with this. "He told me to go! He'd just *crushed a man's skull with his boot*, he –" Colin breaks off, looking ill, and then bends without ceremony and throws up on the ground beside them, coughing and retching. Hermione gulps, looking away as her own gorge rises. Crushed a man's skull? It makes her feel ill too, imagining him doing that, but she believes Colin. She's sure Draco's done worse. At least this time, the person probably deserved it. She gulps again, salivating as her thoughts and Colin's retching conspire to make *her* feel the urge to vomit. She pats him on the back numbly and refuses to let herself throw up, and a moment later, he straightens and takes a deep breath, wiping his mouth.

"It was one of the American wizards," Colin says, as if he's in shock, and Hermione feels her whole body tense, mortification washing over her, the palms of her hands going clammy. Her pulse skitters and races, and she feels like throwing up. She wonders how much Colin knows as she swallows down on the urge to be sick and pulls her wand, clutching it like a safety blanket. "He just

– it was awful," Colin says. Hermione finds herself hoping it was. A certain vicious pleasure seethes up in her, and for a second she hopes Draco made him suffer. But then Colin goes on, and she forces herself to focus.

"He's hurt his leg badly, and the wizard he killed used the Cruciatus on him, for quite a while I think. He's not in great shape. But he told me to find Harry. But I don't know where in Merlin's name they *are*!" Colin's voice goes up, nearly a wail. "I don't even know where *I* am right now!"

"Okay." The maze, Hermione thinks. He's in the maze. He's in the maze, and he's badly hurt and alone – *the idiot* – and he needs her. Colin might be lost, but she knows where they are, and she thinks there's an entrance to the maze up ahead, on the right. She remembers it from the plans they were poring over before the attack, and from looking out the window of their room in the mansion, trying to memorise the maze. "Thanks, Colin," she says, and then she's off without another word, abandoning him there as he calls after her helplessly, running at a near sprint toward the maze entrance.

Toward Draco, her braid bouncing wet against her back, the gravel crunching under her feet, her breath whooshing in and out loudly, her wand closed tightly in her hand.

The maze is terrifying. It's hard to hear anything over the rain and the thunder, and the panicked, rasping sound of her own breathing. Twice now Hermione's turned a corner to face an enemy – and thank Merlin it was an enemy and not an ally, because both times she'd instinctively slashed off a *diffindo*, and nearly cut their heads off, she was so vicious with the spell. She doesn't want to shout for Draco – she's afraid it'll just alert everyone to her location. So instead, she races the pathways with fear fizzing in her blood, just hoping she'll run into him before he does something stupid, like d– She cuts off that thought.

He'll be fine, Hermione tells herself instead, her legs tired as she runs, her lungs burning. Her jeans are wet and heavy, her trainers and socks saturated and rubbing blisters into her feet, the back of her t-shirt all wet from rain trickling down her neck. She's tired, and getting sloppy and clumsy. Rounding a corner, Hermione sees no one, so she takes a second to swipe rain and tears from her eyes. When she drops her arm, she sees a red bolt of light streaking for her. Oh *fuck*. She stumbles to the side at the last second, able to feel the *zing* as the stunner nearly brushes her shoulder.

She looks up. It's Goyle Sr., and horror bubbles up in her as she remembers in an unwelcome rush. The way he and Crabbe had threatened her in that room, before the first revel. The way he'd *watched*, at both revels, with relish in his eyes. The way he and Crabbe had told Draco he wanted a turn at her, when they'd cornered Draco and beaten him. He leers at her. "If it isn't Draco Malfoy's pet mudblood," he greets her, and her flesh crawls. She wishes very badly that he hadn't recognised her. Lead sheaths her bones, and she feels heavy and dull, her fear a weight that drags her under, drowning her. Making her useless.

"Don't worry," he says, as he takes a step closer, only metres away, and she backs up, her wand a slim stick forgotten in her hand, her heartbeat rabbit-quick, her mind stupid as the fear swallows her whole. "I'm not going to kill you," Goyle says, and a tiny whimper escapes her. She knows what that means. Her breath is ragged and frantic, on the verge of hyperventilating, dizziness swirling and vision darkening. He takes a step forward, and she backs up until she hits the hedge with a rustle. He grins, enjoying her terror. "You might wish I did, though. Once I start –"

No. *No*. Hermione unfreezes in a rush, anger boiling through her. No one is *ever* doing that to her again. All her hatred and rage pours through her in a torrent. "*Sectumsempra!*" she snarls, her wand coming up and slicing the air. "*Diffindo!*"

Goyle Sr. tries to bring his wand up to cast a protego, but he's too slow. He had thought she was helpless, and so had she for a moment, catapulted back into memory. But she clawed her way out in time. Just barely. Merlin, she can't take much more of this. Her hands are trembling still, and it's a miracle she got those spells off successfully. She's beginning to creak under the strain of old horrors. She takes a shuddering breath as Goyle falls, blood pouring from his wounds. His blood stains her trainers as she edges around past him, his eyes glazing over, fear pumping in her veins. Leaving him to die in the rain, his throat slit wide open and torso slashed across with wounds.

Hermione forces herself into a jog, feeling wobbly and weak with adrenaline and fear, and reaches another intersection. She pauses and pictures the maze in her head before she heads left – Draco had entered the maze from the manor, so she figures if she heads toward that end, she has a slightly better chance of finding him. And then she hears the crashing and breaking of branches, and her head snaps in that direction. She sees a gout of flame leap up for a moment, and her heart constricts. It seems like it came from about six rows over, and down a little. It might not be Draco though, and perhaps she shouldn't just go crashing in. Fear makes Hermione uncertain and indecisive, and then she shakes herself. If it's Draco, he might need her now, not in two minutes. She backs up.

"*Bombarda!*" she snaps, and the hedge in front of her explodes into tiny bits of shrapnel as she flings an arm up to cover her eyes, shards of wood peppering her skin. Fuck the maze, and fuck being quiet and careful. She doesn't have time for this. If she blows through this hedge, and runs down the next path, taking the turn to the right, and then explodes that dead-end, and then... Hermione runs through a path that takes her in that rough direction in her head as she scrambles through the hole she made in the hedge, hair and clothes snagging on broken branches. She just hopes she's remembering it at least somewhat accurately.

Chapter End Notes

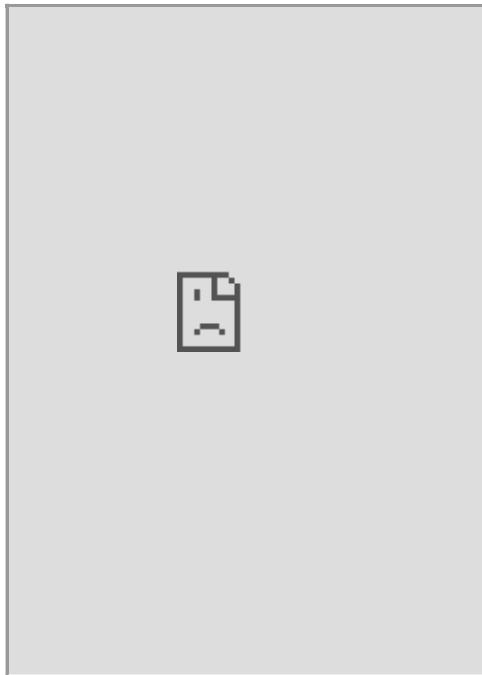
► Notes

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

► Housekeeping!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)



Forty-Three

Draco feels like a fucking Inferius as he lurches along through the maze at a half-run, right leg stuck out stiffly, every muscle burning with pain, occasional spasms causing him to stumble. He stays close to the hedge so he can use it for support; if he falls, he's not sure he'll be able to get up again. He's a wreck, anger and purpose about all that's keeping him upright and moving forward. Jones is in here somewhere, probably. And if he is, Draco is going to find him, and kill him. And then it'll be three down and nine to go – unless some of the others are already dead, which he knows they might well be. He bites back a groan of pain with every step, raking his wet hair back as the rain keeps pouring down, and the lightning and thunder won't let up.

And then he turns a corner to see Jones there, standing in an intersection, clearly trying to figure out which way to go. Tall and solid, his dark blonde hair turned dull brown by the dark and the rain. Draco silently lashes off an *incarcerous*, but Jones must see it out of the corner of his eye and raises a shield with a fluid flick of his wand, the spell bouncing off harmlessly. "Jones!" Draco roars, lurching closer, anger a physical force ripping out of his chest. He sends off a volley of incapacitating spells, but Jones blocks them all, and instead of running, he turns to face Draco this time and hurls his own curses. Draco deflects them all as he limps forward, his breath coming hard through gritted teeth, his jaw tight and his eyes locked to the other man.

"Do you –"

"Recognise you? Yes," Jones says, an almost Canadian slant to his accent. "You were Voldemort's protegee. Malfoy. With the little mudblood pet that you ran off with."

Draco spits coagulated blood on the path; his tongue seems to have stopped its sluggish bleeding. He refuses to let Jones get a rise out of him – the other wizard is grinning, confident and uninjured, and it's clear he thinks he has the upper hand and wants to take the time to taunt Draco. And he probably does have the advantage. In fact, he almost definitely does. But Draco will win. He always has. Like a cat with nine lives, he survives where he shouldn't. He shields as Jones flings a curse at him and returns two of his own, which are also blocked.

"You're going to die for what you did to her," he tells Jones, trying for a conversational tone, although his voice is a little too tight as he calls the words over the rain.

"What *I* did? *You're* the one who allowed it, Malfoy," Jones calls back, and Draco feels his rage churn. His chest hurts, an actual ache, throbbing behind his sternum. His lungs feel as though they can't draw enough air. He'd tried so hard to protect Hermione. He'd tried to ban them from pushing their disgusting fingers into her or having their filthy genitals anywhere near her, but Voldemort had over-ridden him with a sharp word and a meaningful look. Her mouth was a free-for-all, and – and only fingers elsewhere. *Fuck*. He wants to tear the memories raw and bloody out of his head. He hates himself so much. So much.

He still doesn't understand why Hermione wants him, after that. *How*. She says it's because they didn't have a choice, and he knows that's true, but it doesn't fix anything. It doesn't mean it didn't happen.

It takes an effort to stop himself from rising to Jones's bait. He bites back the denials he wants to spew. The pathetic excuses. He deserves Jones's accusations. Draco will kill the man, slow and bloody, but what he said then was merited. What he says next isn't.

"She was sweet, though. I can see why you ran off with her. She lasted so long before she broke," he begins, and Draco twitches and lashes off a series of curses, trying to cling on to some sense of calm. Some kind of control. But Jones was the one who'd caused the...the damage *there* that Draco had had to heal later on in his room, stumbling inadequate apologies while she sat there dead and numb, like a pliable doll. Draco is suddenly not sure he'll be able to hold it together. He's breathing hard and shallow, the rain sheeting over him and blurring his vision as he lurches another step toward Jones. Only a few metres separate them now. He thinks he's crying.

Jones returns his own handful of curses, and Draco holds a shield, shimmering in the spell-broken dark. Colours flying and fading. It takes an effort. He's slipping. He can't stop thinking about what they did, and the *crucio* has made everything harder. Thinking. Moving. Duelling.

"And then when she broke, *oh*, she was magnificent," Jones goes on, teeth gleaming white as he grins. "Some of them are just animals, you know? Ugly things. They scream and wail, and then they go blank, like a light's gone out. And then there's nothing there anymore. Like damned cows. But her...she lasted so long. Screaming, and weeping, and –" Draco knows where Jones is going before he says it – begging you to help her."

He chokes on a sob and bites his tongue automatically, only for agony to sear through his mouth as he reopens the freshly coagulated wounds, blood flowing again. *Fuck*. He spits blood and slices a *diffindo* at Jones's legs, followed by a *stupefy*. He supposes bitterly that it makes sense both Hill and

Jones have brought it up; his failure to protect her. It's the thing that hurts him the most. The wound that still hasn't healed. He's not sure it ever will, and if that's the case, he'll live with it, but Merlin, having them grind it in his face like this is agony.

"– at you with those pretty golden-brown eyes, all swimming with tears, begging you to save her. '*Please, master*'," Jones mimics, mocking Hermione, and Draco has never wanted to kill anyone more in his entire life, his chest heaving as he slashes off curses. "But you served her to us on a platter. You watched while we took the little bitch apart. And she kept begging. And *begging*. And you didn't help her. You told her to be a good little mudblood and only use her mouth as she was instructed." He pauses. Thinks, remembering. "You used a *silencio* on her."

Because Voldemort had threatened to cut out her tongue if she kept screaming, Draco thinks numbly. He'd had to. He doesn't know what's rain and what's tears anymore.

"*Crucio!*" It spills from his lips in a hiss and snarl, blood spraying from his lips, and oh, he *means* it – but Jones deflects it, the bastard. But Draco follows up the Cruciatus with a *diffindo*, lightning fast, and Jones doesn't deflect *that* one. Jones makes a startled, oddly indignant sound as a gaping wound opens up the man's abdomen. He looks shocked. Draco feels like he can see the glint of organs through one end of the gash, and a hollow satisfaction burns through him. He grins and spits blood.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Jones snarls, and they're standing *too* close now – Draco barely avoids the streak of light, and then, while he's off balance, Jones hits him with a *depulso*. Well, *fuck*. The other man used Draco's own trick against him. Distract and strike.

He feels like he's fallen off his broom and struck the ground at high speed, ribs creaking and cracking as he goes flying back and crashes into the hedge, hard, his wand knocked from his hand on impact. Everything hurts even more than it already did. He thinks some branches may have impaled him, he's bleeding from scratches and scrapes, and he can't breathe at all – entirely winded, his diaphragm frozen. Panic rises in his mind as he whoops for air and gets nothing, choking on his own blood instead.

"*Incendio!*" Jones rasps as he staggers closer, and sheer desperation gives Draco the strength to hurl himself out of the hedge at Jones, tackling him hard. The *incendio* hits his left arm and shoulder, and the agony is immediate and consuming, competing with the pain of his ribs and his knee. And then they hit the wet gravel together in a tangle, and in the ugly, sloppy struggle, the flames are extinguished.

Jones seems to have lost his wand too, and they're wrestling for the upper hand on the ground. Jones claws at Draco's eyes and then at his burned shoulder, dragging deep runnels in the blistering flesh. He still hasn't been able to get a proper breath, dizzy, the world spinning, and he groans soundlessly with the agony of Jones's fingers shredding his charred flesh. And then Draco gets his hand between their two bodies, forcing it into Jones's abdominal wound, shuddering with disgust as he tries to tear his way into the man's body while he screams, dragging at soft, slippery flesh.

Jones punches him in the side of the ribs, hard and fast, desperation and agony driving him on. Pain explodes through Draco's chest, and he whips his head forward, meeting Jones's nose and breaking it thoroughly. There's a brief struggle and then Draco is on top of Jones, his burned left forearm shoved down across the man's throat, strangling him even as Draco himself drags desperately for air, pain erupting with every breath. And then Jones flips them, and *he's* on top now, Draco pinned underneath him.

Jones's nose is pouring blood onto Draco's cheek, and his stomach wound has to be agony, but he wraps both hands firmly around Draco's throat, and *oh shit*. Jones is cutting off his blood supply. He can feel it – the way his head already feels too full and thick, thoughts swimming, dizzy. He only has about fifteen seconds of consciousness left, at best. He's going to die unless he does something – now. Gasping for air, his vision darkening around the edges, he remembers the dagger and gropes for it on his belt with his free right hand.

His fingers wrap around the handle and he yanks it free clumsily, his head pounding and vision filled with dancing black spots. And Jones knocks it out of his hand. The dagger skitters away across the gravel, blade gleaming in the flare of a lightning strike, and Draco feels himself start to go, world warping and falling away, crumpling in at the edges. The last thing he sees is Jones's bloodied grin, but he thinks he hears Hermione's voice as he sinks. A strange, suffocating calm falls over him, and he thinks – impossibly – that he hears her calling out to him. *I'm sorry*, he thinks for the second time that night. *Hermione*.

Hermione hurtles around yet another corner, her wand up and ready. And then she skids to a stop as she takes in the tableau before her, her trainers slipping on the gravel and her arms flailing for balance. Oh god. "*Draco!*" He's lying beneath another man, his hand wavering in the air, his arm bare and terribly burnt. From this angle, she can only see the top of his white-blond head, but she knows it's him. And then his arm flops limply to the path and she sees the Mark, and she *really* knows. A stifled moan of horror escapes her, and she's about to hurl a *stupefy* at the man over him, when he looks up.

"You," he says as if surprised, and a slow grin spreads over his face as he recognises her, and she can't breathe. The breath slams out of her, a terrible numbness seizing her as she looks into the man's dark eyes. Filled with pain now and wild, but she remembers them. She remembers that grin. It's the same one he had when he – when he – when he *hurt* her, she thinks, filled with a gasping, mindless panic that drags her under. If she had thought seeing Goyle Sr. was difficult, then this is hell.

"We were just talking about you," he says, glancing down at Draco. His eyes flick to her wand as she points it out toward him, her hand shaking. Her mind is a seething mass of horror. A nest of scorpions, every thought stinging her, poisoning her. She feels rooted to the spot, a frozen statue.

"Get away from him," she tries to say – to shout – and it comes out in a pathetic croak. His hands are around Draco's throat. He's killing him. Her hand is shaking so hard she can barely hold her wand as she tries to hold back an avalanche of memories that threaten to crush her. She tries to cast a *stupefy* and it fizzles. The man smiles.

"I know what it feels like from the inside, when you scream," he says slowly, still smiling that vicious, intimate smile. "Who else can say that, mudblood?" And that's all it takes. A tiny wheezing gasp escapes her, and her whole body goes numb. Hermione shuts down as memories she didn't even know she *had* surge up with a vengeance, raging through her head and laying waste to every meagre fragment of herself that she's clawed back.

Hermione remembers.

She thinks she's competent? Capable? Worthwhile? She's not. It's an illusion. It's all been an illusion and that man – Jones, she remembers from the dossiers – has shattered it.

She's nothing but a creature, screaming her agony for his pleasure.

He was one of the men who stripped her down to a catatonic wreck devoid of any humanity and personhood. A nothing. Screamed hoarse and broken, just flesh for their amusement. She begged. She screamed. Until someone had silenced her. And then finally, she had been good. Pliable and accepting, a doll to be played with – to flinch, silently scream, weep, and obey, as the conscious part of her curled in a ball in the corner of her mind, screaming, and *screaming*, trying to hide from what they made her into. Trying to pretend it wasn't happening.

That will always be in her. She will always have been *that*. It's inescapable. At the end of everything, she is what they made her. A thing. Worthless and broken.

It all rips through her mind in one brutal rush.

And then she sees Draco's fingers twitch on the gravel. Pale where they aren't bloodied.

And in the space of a heartbeat, she *remembers*. She remembers it all. Every part of it.

The way he'd sobbed, *"I can't..."* hidden against the swell of her breast at the revel, broken and wrecked.

How he'd sunk to his knees for her to use the Cruciatus on him. And when he could speak again, he'd said, *"Granger? Are you – you okay?"*

What he'd told her right before the dinner. *"You don't deserve any of this, Granger,"* he'd said and kissed her forehead.

The way he'd sobbed in the bathroom afterwards when he thought she was sleeping.

She remembers the moment she'd realised she loved him. He'd stank of smoke and been bloodstained because he'd just come back from murdering innocent people so they wouldn't burn alive. And she'd clung to him, and thought, *can this be love?*

"You'll either get home, or we'll both be dead."

"It was worth it. I was glad. It – it kept you safe for a little longer."

"I'm so sorry. So fucking sorry."

"I love you, Hermione."

She looks at Jones. It doesn't matter what they did to her.

"You're not nothing, Granger. You're not. You're infinitely fucking better than anyone in this damn place, including me."

She raises her wand and it trembles, and Jones says, "Don't –"

"Diffindo!" she tries to shout, and it comes out cracked and hushed, but the intent is there, and when she slashes her arm, her wandwork is true. A lipless mouth opens in his throat, and then the blood pours out in gutters and pumps. He falls. Sideways and forward, his body slumped half over Draco's, and Hermione makes a weird, breathy whimper and runs forward, her legs feeling heavy and clumsy, her hands numb, and panic a monster that consumes her. She falls to her knees beside Draco and shoves at Jones, her breath a sobbing whine as she tries to push him off Draco's body, her skin crawling.

She can't tell if he's breathing. She can't...

Tears stream down her cheeks. Jones is so fucking heavy, and he's bled all over Draco. She hates Jones. She hates his stupid, dead body. "Get off. *Get off. Get off!*" she's panting and growling, and god, if Draco's – if he's – if he's *dead* because she had a flashback and couldn't control herself, then she doesn't know what she'll do. Oh god. Oh Merlin, please. Jones finally rolls off him, and she sobs with relief and puts her fingers to his reddened, bruising throat, feeling for his pulse under his jaw. If he doesn't have one, she'll have to start CPR and mouth-to-mouth. But he'll be okay. He has to be. Except she can't find a damned pulse with her shaking fingers, and she doesn't know if it's because of her, or because – his hand covers hers, stilling it as she probes and jabs at his throat, and a shock runs through her.

"*Draco*," she gasps, breathless and disbelieving.

"Ow-ouch, H'mione," he rasps haltingly as his eyes blink open. Bloodshot and beautiful. "That hurts."

She stares at him wildly for a split second and then dissolves into racking sobs. On her knees, pressing her face gently against his chest, her shoulders shaking, her hand still trapped in his.

"Oh hey. Hey, *shh*. It's okay," he says in a slurring, hoarse voice, letting her hand go as he tries to move, and she looks at him with her chin wobbling as he struggles to get his hands down and lever himself up. She grabs his t-shirt at the sides and tries to help even as she keeps crying wretchedly. His poor, burned arm is a ruin. It looks awful. The Healers should be able to fix it up fine, but Merlin, it must be agony.

"I almost killed you," she gasps, as he manages a sitting position with a groan, looking like he'll fall over at any second. He doesn't look like he's quite all there yet.

He hasn't even realised that she's here when she shouldn't be.

"No, you didn't. You *saved* me," he gets out dazedly, with a glance at Jones, and then winces and bites back a gasp as he tries to get up further and fails.

"*Careful*. Careful – just –" she starts. He ends up slumped back against Jones's body, which – as disgusting as it is – makes a good prop. And then he sits, gasping through his pain as Hermione unhooks the thankfully unbroken vial of essence of dittany from his belt. "Here – let me –"

And then she's stripping off her jacket and slinging it over his left shoulder, carefully sprinkling dittany over his burns, using her jacket to stop the rain from washing it away. He just sits there, stunned and clearly deep in pain, whimpering as she's forced to use her fingers to spread the dittany to conserve it, breathing short and shallow, his eyes glazed, like hazy moons. And then about halfway through, his breath judders to a halt, and she looks at him, concerned. And he's staring at her like he's only just seen her.

His eyes are suddenly cognisant again, and he's looking at her with horror and fury dawning in his eyes. She stutters to a halt in her work as he pins her with his gaze.

"What the *fuck*," he rasps dangerously, "are you doing here, Hermione?"

She looks terrified and beautiful as she kneels there beside him in the middle of a fucking war zone. Exactly where he'd told her not to be. She gulps in the face of his panicked, still half-dazed anger, and then firms her jaw and glares at him.

"Saving your life," she snaps tartly before she resumes her work on his arm – nerve endings screaming in agony. He sneaks a look at it and wishes he hadn't. It looks awful. Nothing fatal, but ugly and painful until he can see a proper Healer – *episkeys* don't work well with burns. The dittany is helping though – patches of third-degree burn are healing somewhat to scalded flesh.

"I told you to stay at the estate, " he says dumbly, staring at her, and flames lick up his throat as he speaks; it hurts a lot. Not as much as his arm. And his head. It's still hard to think straight, his thoughts shattered into fragmented pieces. "You promised me. You *promised* –"

"And if I had done as you'd told me, then you'd be dead," she says, and there's a quiver in her voice, her hands shaking a little, but he can sense the determination pouring off her. And while he's furious, anger at the way she lied and put herself in danger won't help anything right now. He tries his best to shove it down and focus. Besides, he can't exactly argue with what she said. If not for her killing Jones – whose corpse he rests against right now – then he *would* be dead. His luck strikes again. Except now Hermione's in danger. *Fuck*. She doesn't look wounded, at least, just wet and shaken.

"Get my wand, Hermione," he rasps as she keeps fussing over his arm, which is honestly fine for now. She's healed most of the charred flesh, and what's left is mostly just red and blistered. One of Voldemort's minions could stumble over them at any minute, and she seems too preoccupied and upset to react in time. He looks around blurrily and sees his wand lying on the gravel a few feet away. "Get my wand. *Hermione*." He snaps her name sharply, and she jolts and looks where he's pointing, scrambling on her knees to grab it without another word and pass it to him.

"My arm is fine," he says as she tries to fuss over it some more. "Put your jacket back on. You're getting soaked." She pauses in tucking the vial of dittany back on his belt and stares at him for a second, brows crinkling, her black t-shirt sticking to her skin, her thick braid a wet rope. She looks so beautiful, the lightning flaring behind her. Like a Greek goddess. His head spins suddenly, and he feels like throwing up.

"Who cares about the fucking rain?" she asks, even as she pulls her jacket back on, peering at his face. His eyes. She hisses with concern. "Are you concussed? Your eyes don't look right."

"I – I think that's the *crucio*," he says as he tries to push himself upright.

"Shit, careful!" She stands with a wince and tries to help him get upright again, providing a concerned, quiet commentary the entire time. With his leg the way it is, he has some difficulty and ends up shoving off Jones's corpse, staggering, and then clinging to Hermione's shoulders for a second as he nearly tips straight back over. "Colin told me about the *crucio*," she says then. "I met him on the path just outside the maze."

He looks at her, startled. "You ran into Creevey? I told him to go find Potter at least ten minutes ago. I thought he'd be in the thick of the battle by now."

"He was wandering around, lost," she says with a wheezing, teary laugh as Draco finds his balance, his leg a mass of pain. "I don't think he has the best sense of direction. But he told me where to find you."

He doesn't really believe in fate, but the sheer coincidence of that chance meeting makes him wonder, just a little. "And then you saved my life," he says aloud.

"Yeah." Hermione slides her arms around his waist, and he gives himself a moment to hold her. Arms around her tightly, never mind his ribs, and his lips pressed to the top of her head. She feels small, and cold. Everything hurts, and he is so afraid for her, but he can't deny that she's already proven she should be here. "God, it was so *close*." She hitches in a breath and shudders out a sob, sniffing hard. "You nearly *died*."

"But I didn't."

There's the sound of an explosion in the distance, and they draw apart and both look toward it, Draco stumbling a little as his boots scrape over the gravel, drawing in a breath that feels like hell. They both want to be there, and neither wants the other one to be. They look at each other. He speaks first, fear and love seething through him in a flood.

"If I shove you in a hedge to hide, you won't stay there, will you?" he asks her, mostly joking. Although the idea of *stupefying* her and stuffing her in a hedge for safety is somewhat appealing – if he could guarantee her safety, which he can't.

"Would *you*?" she asks, and he grins tiredly, dragging a hand down his face even as he shakes his head in the negative.

"No."

"Well, then." That settled, she looks down at his leg, and then at his chest, which is tight with his laboured breathing. She's in Healer mode; he remembers it vaguely from his flogging, and after she tortured him. All brusque and bossy, and it makes him want to kiss her rather a lot. He loves it when she's bossy; it means she isn't afraid. "What can I help with?"

He refrains from kissing her, his head feeling dizzy and weird, and he thinks the *crucio* is affecting him more than he initially thought. Everything feels disconnected and slippery. "Just my ribs right now. And maybe my leg." She heals his ribs, but her *episkey* doesn't help his leg. "It's fine. I've managed this long," he says, and she gives him a shrivelling look that is vintage Hermione Granger. Fuck, he loves her so much.

"You *haven't* managed!" she says shrilly. "You've nearly died at least twice! Draco, that –"

Draco can't help it. He finally kisses her. Quick and soft, and hardly more than a chaste press of lips, but it shuts her up aside from a soft whimper. And this is another reason why he wishes she wasn't here, beside the fact that she could die at any second – because he can't focus with her here. Bad enough that he's dizzy and stupid from the Cruciatus and his other injuries, but now there's no way he'll be able to compartmentalise and slide into the headspace he needs to be in. He's too busy worrying about her. And wanting to kiss her. *Shit*. Well, there's nothing he can do about it now except try to shut down as much as possible, and concentrate.

"Come on," he says, limping a step back from Hermione and looking around, figuring out which direction to take as pain thuds through him in sync with his pulse. Part of him wants to go the wrong way, away from the battle, which seems to have moved to the gardens well beyond the maze. Except she'll realise too quickly for him to bother – she'll have memorised the maze thoroughly, he's sure. "We have to go."

Draco says he's fine – he keeps insisting on it every time he stumbles, or wobbles, or makes an involuntary pained sound, all of which happen all too often as they hurry through the maze at a quick but ragged pace. They're heading for what seems to be the central battle, where Harry and Voldemort must surely be. There are a few pockets of fighting elsewhere if the occasional stray spells are any indication, but most of the fighting appears concentrated in one spot.

She hovers right beside him, ready to try to grab him, although if he properly collapses, she thinks only a quick charm will save him – because her own strength will *not* manage it.

He says he's fine after nearly falling over trying to scoop up Bellatrix's dagger, which she'd retrieved swiftly and passed to him, scolding him worriedly about not being careful. He shoves the dagger in his belt, coughs, spits blood on the ground, and grins at her. His teeth are pink with bloodied saliva. "I'm fine," he says, and she isn't so sure.

"I'm fine," he gasps, grabbing at the hedge, panting as he waves her off, and then shoves himself upright again. "I'm fine."

He's still fast; a Snatcher rounds a corner of the maze at a run, the man's eyes widening as he sees them there, and Draco slashes off a *sectumsempra* before the Snatcher even raises his wand. Hermione's *diffindo* hits a second later, as the Snatcher's wand is rising. Her hand is shaking, her heart in her throat, terror humming through her like an electric current.

"Shit," Draco says mildly in that hoarse, choked voice as he lurches dangerously around the dying man, eyeing his throat, which had taken a direct hit from Hermione's *diffindo*. "Good work. Fast."

"You were faster," Hermione says, sticking close, feeling reassured by his ability to react so quickly. He might not be able to run, but it seems he can still duel perfectly well. Better than the average person, even injured and dazed as he is.

But he won't stop saying he's fine. And that in itself worries her.

"I'm fine," he says as he wipes bloodied vomit from his lips, having just finished retching, and starts limping forward again at a pace that forces Hermione into a trot. And then, as they near one of the maze exits – she thinks – it happens again.

"I'm fine," he says as his knee buckles under him and she has to help support half of his body weight for a second, and Merlin, he's heavy. "Honestly, Hermione. Fine I'm," he says backwards, blinking and swiping trickles of rain from out of his eyes, and she stares at him, worried. He is clearly *not* fine. The Cruciatus has done something to his brain. Hermione can only hope it's temporary. She remembers when Bellatrix had tortured her at the Malfoy Manor so long ago now – for hours afterwards she'd had slightly muddled, vague moments. So swapping words around isn't unexpected. But worry churns.

If he does that during a duel, he could die. Fear is a vice, crushing her slowly as they navigate the pathways in the lessening rain, the storm finally easing. He throws himself forward single-mindedly, managing a fast, stiff-legged lurch that makes his boot drag on the gravel. She sticks close to him, her head throbbing and her breath coming loud in her ears, her bruised hip and shoulder still aching, worried he's going to collapse at any point and watching for any sign that the Cruciatus is affecting his mind.

And then they're stumbling out of the maze, and as though Hermione's thoughts summoned her, they see Bellatrix Lestrange. She had been running along the path past the maze entrance, but she

sees them there and whirls on them, her wand raised. Fear crawls under Hermione's skin as she remembers revels, and the Manor. And then she sees, and horror overwhelms the fear. The witch is drenched in blood, her dark hair falling out of its complicated arrangement into lank, bloody strings, but worst of all, her abdomen bulges out horrendously under her gown. The witch is heavily pregnant; ashen and stick thin everywhere except her massive belly, and Hermione feels sick.

The witch bares her teeth at them in a grin that holds no humour, her blood-streaked face twisted with hatred. She looks like she wants to rip their throats out with her teeth. "Draco and the *mudblood*," she snarls. "Fancy running into you two lovebirds here." Hermione stares at the witch wide-eyed, her heart a slow lub-dub as though it's struggling to beat. Her eyes keep sliding to the witch's belly – her thin gown is plastered against her by the rain, and Hermione feels like she can see the bump *move*.

"You killed Rodolphus," she shrieks, features contorted, stamping a foot like a child in a rage. "I'll make you pay for that, Draco! I'll make *her* pay for that!"

"What do you care? You're *Voldemort's* whore, you mad bitch," Draco snarls back, and Hermione looks up at him, his lips flattened and his eyes narrowed – the left one twitching – his sharp jaw clenching. "*Confri*—" he starts and Hermione makes a gurgling sound of panic and grabs his wrist.

"No!" She wrenches at his hand before he can complete the motion, and he looks at her in bewildered anger, yanking his wrist away.

"What—" he starts to demand when Bellatrix laughs, loud and shrill, and sends an unknown curse flying at them, which Hermione raises a *protego* against.

"You can't use *lethal* spells! She's *pregnant*!" she cries automatically, her heart kicking into a racing stampede, her breath coming short and fast. Draco gives Hermione a brief, gobsmacked look as if he can't believe the words coming out of her mouth. But he can't just *blow Bellatrix to pieces* when she looks like she was due to give birth *yesterday*. They – they should incapacitate her. Surely. He flings up another shield, buying time while Bellatrix screams about peeling their flesh from their bones.

"I don't give a shit about her or her spawn," he snarls back and means it, although the wordless spells he's casting now seem to be non-lethal, from the colour of the bolts. Probably.

"*Stupefy*!" Hermione hisses as she spins her attention fully back on the witch. "*Incarcerous*!" They all exchange spellfire for a few long moments, too frantic to talk, and then he looses a barrage of *depulsos* that Bellatrix blocks and defects, but is pushed back by several feet, nearly falling. And then the witch flourishes her wand, screeching at them, "*Avada Kedavra*!"

"Fuck!" Draco shoves Hermione, sending her windmilling backwards and well out of the way, while he only stumbles back a step or two, and the bolt nearly hits him. Her heart almost stops, adrenaline flooding her. That was too fucking close, and Hermione yells that at Draco, the rain still falling, but the lightning and thunder quiescent for now.

"I can't fucking *dodge*, Hermione!" he yells as soon as he can, and a rising panic is beginning to boil over in his voice as Bellatrix keeps focusing on him, lashing off nasty curses one after the other. Thank Merlin, no more Killing Curses yet. But she looks at his lack of movement, and realises he's right. They can't afford to be merciful. Hermione's not risking Draco's life for Bellatrix's baby. She doesn't care if that makes her a terrible person. She grits her teeth.

"Do it, then!" Hermione doesn't think she can do it herself, with a Killing Curse. "Just kill her! Don't risk it!" She doesn't have the required focused hate for it. *Focus* is the key – her hate is messy and shapeless, so she keeps flinging curses at Bellatrix, trying to distract her – *diffindos*, *confringos*, and even an *incendio*. Trying to get her to drop her shield, or not deflect in time. Draco flicks his gaze toward Hermione, and his features are grim and set before he looks back to Bellatrix, at her stomach, his wand flashing.

"No. No –" he says, through gritted teeth. "Wait. Give me a second first. I can –" And now *Hermione* is panicking as she shifts closer to him, her heart racing so fast it feels like it's about to burst. This is her fault, and it's going to get him killed. She regrets ever saying anything. It had just been such a *shock* to see Bellatrix pregnant that she'd reacted instinctively.

"No! Just fucking kill her! *Draco!*" Hermione begs, gaze darting to him for a split second, and then she sees the dagger glinting there at his belt as his shield shimmers with the impact of a curse.

Distraction, Hermione thinks.

She has no idea what she's doing or how to do it properly, but she snatches the dagger and throws it as hard as she can, directly at the mad witch. It hurtles end over end, flashing in the light, and Bellatrix – busy deflecting Draco's *stupefy* – flinches as it flies at her, her eyes darting to it as she tries to dodge. But she's clumsy with pregnancy, and it hits her – hilt-first in the shoulder with a smack, falling harmlessly to the ground. And Hermione's silent *stupefy* is already almost at Bellatrix, and she's off guard and unable to shield. The red bolt takes her in the chest, and she tips forward.

"*Wingardium leviosa!*" Draco snaps and catches his aunt before she hits the ground without prompting or thought, lowering her body with efficient care. Hermione shoots him a look that he doesn't see. Draco still thinks he's a monster – she knows he does. But he's not. All the moments like this provide evidence to the contrary. Where he can, Draco avoids killing and harming the innocent. Even when he doesn't know them, or care about them. Even when they're contained inside an evil person. And even when it puts his life at risk – like now, and in Kenmare, with the girl. Those aren't the actions of a monster.

He's a good man. And she loves him, immeasurably.

"*Incarcerous!*" she says and directs the ropes to avoid the witch's gravid belly. And then Bellatrix is settled, bound and unconscious on the ground, and Draco adds a conjured blindfold and gag too as Hermione retrieves the dagger. They should get moving, fast – they're out in the open here, and they need to get to Harry – but Hermione finds her hand sliding into Draco's as they stare down at the witch, and they both watch as her belly shifts. A strange undulation and momentary protrusion.

"I wonder if what's in there is even human," he says quietly. Hermione swallows thickly. She feels slightly ill – she hadn't even thought of that possibility, thanks to the breeding experiments.

"Merlin. I don't know," she says, picturing terrible things. Then, shakily, trying to make a joke of it, but sincere: "The next time I tell you not to kill someone, please feel free to ignore me. I don't want my stupid squeamishness to get you...hurt."

"We managed," he says and squeezes her hand briefly before he drops it, his smile lopsided and a little twitchy thanks to the Cruciatus. "Come on," he adds as he looks down the path and starts moving, limping fast. "It's just up ahead."

And it is. At the end of the path, where it opens into yet another garden area – the gate blown off the hinges – Hermione can see small figures moving in thick clusters, silhouetted by the multicoloured light of spellfire. And she can see one small figure standing still, his back protected by a cluster of swarming fighters as he remains rooted to the spot, hurling curse after curse. *Harry*, she thinks, staring for too long a moment. She knows it has to be him. He must be fighting Voldemort. She hurries to catch up to Draco, her grip slippery and clammy on her wand and her blood thrumming hot in her veins, leaving Bellatrix behind, forgotten.

This is it, she thinks, her braid bouncing against her back as she jogs, her heart beating heavy and full, her whole body feeling strange as the words ring in her mind. This could be the moment the war ends. The moment they all live or die. She wants to hold Draco's hand, to feel his skin against hers – but they both need their wand hands free, as they head toward the fight. The moment for one last kiss has gone.

Hermione looks up at him, his blood-streaked fringe flopping over his forehead, so pale it's almost white where it isn't bloody, his skin lit up eerily by curses, his mouth shaped by pain. She hopes desperately that she will get the chance to kiss him again.

Chapter End Notes

► Notes

Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

► Housekeeping!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)



Forty-Four

It's brutal, and it's bloody, and she's never seen him like this before. It is as though he fights on sheer force of will because there is no way he should be able to do what he does, with his leg the way it is, and his body so injured. But as soon as they pass from the pathway into the crowded stretch of the rose garden that holds the pitched battle, spells flying everywhere, his exhaustion seems to fall away.

Someone comes sprinting toward them immediately – what looks like an untransformed werewolf – and he's on top of them before Hermione can even move her wand. But Draco is moving already, his left hand flashing out, and there's a thud and a grunt, and then their attacker is sinking to the ground as Draco wrenches the dagger out from beneath the man's chin. It drips blood as he straightens, and he wipes the blade on his trouser leg before lifting his wand and flicking it, a red bolt flying outwards, and a wizard who had just turned to face them explodes.

And then there's a growling snarl, and a body hits him. One minute he's standing there, to her left and just in front of her, and then he's gone. Crashing into a bed of roses and hitting the ground with a body on top of him, and Hermione's about to cast a *diffindo* when he heaves up, and then *he's* on top, and she bites back the spell in horror. She could've *killed* him. Light catches her eyes and she hisses a *protego*, a random curse bouncing off just before it hits her, and her heart gallops, her hands sweaty. She holds the shield, not knowing what to do as Draco wrestles with the man on the ground, his wand having fallen from his hand. If she says anything, it could distract him – fatally – and if she tries to cast a spell, she'll probably hit him.

He smashes his forehead down into the other man's face twice, and then she sees the dagger in his hand. There's a quick, ugly struggle, and Hermione doesn't see what happens, but suddenly blood sprays through the air in a dark arc. Hermione's heart stops, but then Draco's snatching up his wand and pushing to his feet, and the man on the ground is blank-eyed, his throat a gaping gash, blood still pumping weakly out. Draco turns to her, the left side of his face and head blood-drenched, and she can read him well enough to know he's holding back a grin when his lips twitch. She shivers, ice trickling down her spine. He's enjoying this.

"What do we *do*?" she yells as she keeps up her shield. Harry and Voldemort are locked in combat in the middle of the garden, and neither side seems to be attacking them. Not yet, at least. Everything else, however, is chaos. Lights in the dark, silhouetted figures locked in small skirmishes and duels, which shift and change like shoals of fish, as though the battle has a life of its own, and it's all moving so fast. There are stray spells flying everywhere, and more than once, Hermione sees people hit accidentally. Friendly fire seems just as much a danger as anything else. *Fuck.*

Hermione sends curses flying at anyone who comes near that she can identify as an enemy, her adrenaline pumping, her whole body wired, on high alert. She drops two people and wounds a third, aware that Draco is also flinging curses as he covers their left and in front, although she doesn't know how many he kills.

"Move!" he yells back to her. "Go right." He pushes that way, staying in front of her. The rose garden they're in is small, and it's *filled* with people in between the beds of roses, the bushes not yet flowering. Like a garden party, except the guests are all slaughtering each other, Hermione thinks wildly. A bolt of yellow light sears toward them from the right, and she shields and then lashes a *diffindo* off at the caster, and they stagger and fall just metres away, clutching at their throat as blood gouts out and splatters the toes of her trainers as they move past. She feels ill. There's so much death. The stink of it is heavy in the air – blood, and vomit, and the smell of meat, and fecal matter. She chokes down on a retch.

Draco herds her up against the hedged wall, several metres from the entrance, half behind a row of tall, standard rose bushes. "Disillusion yourself, and *stay here*. Stay low. It's too fucking chaotic out there. If you want to be useful, watch my back because I can't," he snaps in the end as he pushes her down, and his limp is nearly gone – moving almost fluidly, a whining groan low in the back of his throat every time he moves his leg, the dagger in his left hand, his wand in his right. She wants to argue, but he looks like a dangerous stranger.

"Pick them off, one at a time. If it looks like someone suspects where your spells are coming from, then move, but try to stay near the wall. And don't fucking come for me, understand? You'll get in the way." His voice is cold and hard – frightening – and Hermione finds she obeys without argument, crouching there, hidden. Almost invisible, and low enough to the ground that stray spells fly over her head. There are figures everywhere, and Hermione has no shortage of targets. She sticks to *diffindos* whenever anyone enters her field of vision, picking off several of the enemy, but mostly, she watches Draco.

He moves into the thick of a small skirmish several metres to the right of them with a rolling, disjointed prowling, flinging curses as he goes. Shielding lightning fast before sending spells flying back, his arm in constant, quick motion. Tonks is there fighting four to one, Hermione sees now, with someone on the ground next to her. She stands over them protectively. Hermione immediately wants to help. But he'd said not to. She gnaws on her bottom lip and stays where she is – for now. She doesn't want to distract him.

Draco immediately takes one of the enemy fighters down with the Killing Curse, which rips through their shield, and Hermione feels cold as he stalks forward, more curses bursting from his wand. Someone approaches the skirmish from behind with their wand raised, and it's clear that Draco and Tonks are totally unaware of their presence. In a battle this frantic, it's impossible to track everything when already engaged in a fight, and Hermione sees now how she can be valuable; her *diffindo* drops the enemy before they become a threat.

Tonks takes down one fighter a few seconds later, and then shortly afterwards, Draco disembowels the second to last, treading over their spilling organs as he moves toward Tonks. Hermione gulps sickly as she crouches there, watching him even as she tries to scan the battlefield – the fighting is thinning, and she thinks their side is winning. She sends a *diffindo* lancing at another enemy fighter who is beginning to turn toward them, and then her eyes flick back to Draco. He's yelling something to Tonks. Hermione can only hear snatches of it, but Tonks levitates the body on the ground to waist height and begins a quick retreat, leaving Draco to face the last man.

They duel for a short time, a flurry of spells, neither one gaining the upper hand. Hermione watches from the sideline. She's like a sniper, she thinks stupidly. Taking out individual targets from relative safety. She covers Tonks's retreat, taking out an enemy fighter while still keeping half an eye on Draco. He's still fighting. Still holding his own. She worries.

And then, growing desperate, the enemy fighter lashes out with the Killing Curse, and Draco sidesteps it with a quick movement that must cause him agony. Hermione watches with her hand pressed to her mouth, terror rising. Oh god. She wills him to win. His wand sweeps, a red bolt flashing out, and the enemy's wand goes flying. Hermione sees the panicked rage come over the disarmed man's face, and he rushes at Draco. She expects him to take the man down with a spell, but he doesn't, and she doesn't understand why. And then, when he's within reach, Draco's left arm moves, quick and brutal. The dagger's blade catches the light as the fighter goes down in a spray of blood before Draco slams his boot down onto the man's throat.

Hermione flinches. He cleans the blade and looks up, off to the left, and in the strange, shifting lights of flying spells, she sees he's smiling grimly. And then he takes down an enemy that she's been too distracted to see and heads straight into another cluster of fighting, where Hermione thinks she sees a red head. Ron, not Ginny. And thinking of Ginny makes her feel sick, as she edges along the hedge so she can stay nearer Draco, sending a *diffindo* at a random enemy fighter who jogs past. She regrets bringing her now, but she'd had no choice. Hermione desperately hopes that she's okay. That she's still alive.

And then there's an explosion directly to her left. Someone has seen her. *It was bound to happen*, she thinks vaguely, even as a rose bush disintegrates into shrapnel that shreds into her, muddy dirt spraying everywhere, and she bites back a scream as she twists away from the explosion. Her Disillusionment Charm drops as her concentration is ruined. Her trainers scrabble at the ground as she scrambles away on all fours, behind several more rose bushes, cuts from the rose bush shrapnel stinging all over. Another explosion hits behind her, and then another, and Hermione is gasping and panting as she shoves to her feet and *runs*, all thoughts of hiding forgotten.

Everything hurts. A lot. It hurts to breathe, it hurts to move. It hurts just to exist; his muscles bands of pain, his leg an ocean of agony, his chest aching, and his arm burning, his head throbbing in time with his pulse. Draco grits his teeth and tries to feed on the pain. He embraces it as he lurches forward at a quick rolling stride, slashing his wand out to the left and dropping an enemy fighter fast and rough. Except the pain does make it hard to think, especially with the lingering after-effects of the Cruciatus. He feels halfway drunk and incoherent, working on sheer instinct.

The tide of the battle is turning though; he can see the shifting balance in the small clusters of fighters. The Order is winning. And he's doing his part. He doesn't know how things are going between Potter and Voldemort; as far as he can tell, they're still locked in their duel in the centre of the garden. Lost in each other's eyes, Draco thinks dizzily with a snort as he sends a *confringo* at a

fleeing fighter and hits him. The man explodes in a cloud of flesh; fertiliser for the roses. He grins as he limps forward into the next fight, a vicious satisfaction surging through him.

If it wasn't for Hermione being here, he'd almost be enjoying himself, in between the terror and pain, and the moments of disgust. *Hermione*. He hopes to Merlin he does as she's told for once in her fucking life and stays hidden and careful. He thinks now of half a dozen more things he should have told her. To make sure she moved every so often in between spells. To try to make sure no one was looking at her when she cast a spell. To stay behind the cover. He sets a man on fire and casts a *diffindo* so vicious it cuts him off at the knees, and then limps his way through a bed of roses that snag and catch at his trousers, worrying.

He should be focusing, but instead, he's worrying about Hermione. He slashes his wand, and an injured man collapses. About whether he should have stayed with her – he's more useful in the thick of it, helping end the battle faster. About whether he should have Imperiused her to run and hide – she never would've forgiven him. He deflects a curse and sends two flying back. The second hits. About whether she's okay – there's no way to know. She's disillusioned, and it's dark, and she's behind the rose bushes – even if she's okay, he won't be able to see her.

Draco looks anyway – he can't help himself – and his heart lurches to a stop. Suddenly there's a weird buzzing in his ears, and he can't fucking breathe. Where he left her is utterly destroyed. The bushes are gone, and half the hedge too, and he can't *breathe*. She has to be okay. *She has to be*. He turns so fast he nearly falls over, everything forgotten but her as he staggers a step back toward the wall, gaze sweeping the garden.

"*Draco!*" Her voice is filled with terror, a breathless shriek. And there she is, just to his left, coming out of the dark – muddy and wet, her face covered in scratches as she sprints toward him, a wizard flinging curses after her, her arms pumping, hurdling a small bed of rose bushes and landing with a skid on the slippery grass.

"Down!" he roars, to be heard over the battle, and thank Merlin, she reacts instantly, dropping to her knees and clasping her hands over her head as he aims at the wizard directly behind her. "*Avada Kedavra!*" he snarls, and the wizard tries to dodge, only to be hit by Draco's *incendio*. He doesn't put the man out of his misery as he goes up in flame as though he's drenched in oil instead of rain.

"Hermione," he calls hoarsely, very aware that there's still a battle going on around them. He hobbles toward her as he tries to scan the battle, wishing he had eyes in the back of his head, but she's up and moving, running to him.

"I'm sorry," she says, panting, her expression stricken. "I was hiding, but –" Her wand flashes, and he twists to see a man drop, throat slashed in what seems to be her signature move.

"It's fine," he cuts in before she can begin apologising again. His heart is racing and there's a pain behind his eyes now, and terror is sharp and bright in his veins. The way she'd sounded when she'd screamed his name... "Come on. Maybe you're safer with me." The way she smiles at him is like a swig of Pepper Up – her eyes bright and her teeth white against her muddy, blood-smeared skin, and happiness radiating off her so incongruously. He feels high as a kite, his pain suddenly more bearable.

"We're better together," she says, and then snaps: "*Protego!*" A curse splashes off the shield, and Draco focuses swiftly. Somehow he needs to find a balance between protecting her and not being distracted by her. He doesn't know how.

"Let's go," he says, and they head for the fight, where Weasley, Shacklebolt, and two American Aurors are fighting six of the enemy. It looks as though two of the Order and four of the enemy have already fallen, and one of the remaining enemy fighters looks unsteady on their feet. Draco wades into it, Hermione just behind him, and he shoves the dagger in his belt and grabs her with his left hand, nudging her. "Against my back," he yells, and she moves so they're back to back, the fingers of her free hand hooked through his belt. He'd wished he had eyes in the back of his head, and now he does, he thinks with adrenaline-driven amusement. He flings off a curse and then shields, exchanging a nod of acknowledgement with Weasley – who stands about three metres away – before he drops the shield.

And then he focuses on the fight, acutely aware of Hermione's hand at his belt. She is who he is fighting for. She is who he has to protect. The witch at his back, guarding his vulnerable side. She is out in the open, and a target, and there is no more time left for playing by the rules. Draco will kill Voldemort himself if he has to, but he is keeping Hermione safe. He takes out two of the enemies with the Killing Curse. Fuck what the Order thinks of it. The third one that he levels it at dodges, only to be taken out by Shacklebolt's curse. The fourth one runs before he can do more than aim, and Weasley's *bombarda* takes him in the back. The fifth sends the Killing Curse back at Draco, and *oh fuck*.

His arms slam backwards, hooking around Hermione's waist, and he tips them sideways. They fall hard, but the curse goes over their heads. He hears her breathless yelp as she hits the ground, him half on her. He shoves himself up enough to see and slashes off another Killing Curse that takes out the last standing enemy fighter. Weasley moves in closer, wand up, guarding them. Draco slumps back, head swimming and leg hurting so badly he almost feels like amputation would hurt less.

"Hermione? Are you alright?" Weasley asks as Hermione pushes at Draco, yanking her trapped legs out from under his back.

"I'm fine," she pants, and then she's on all fours, her face over his as he tries not to pass out. She looks beautiful, even sideways and covered in dirt and blood, dripping rain on his face.

"Good," Weasley says, but he sounds furious. "That means I won't feel bad when I yell at you later for *bringing my little sister here*." Hermione looks up at Weasley, colour draining from her cheeks, and Draco struggles to sit up.

"Is she okay?"

"She's fine, last I saw," Weasley assures Hermione. "I sent her to escort Tonks and Lupin past the wards. She'll probably come tearing back into the thick of it any m– *diffindo!*" He glares down at them. "Come on, you two. Get the fuck up."

Draco feels like throwing up as Hermione helps haul him to his feet, light-headed and nauseated. He doesn't. Instead, he lashes off a sloppy *confringo* at an enemy fighter. And then there's a loud *crack* that shivers through the air, and Weasley says: "Holy shit." Draco wobbles to face the battle, finding his feet, unable to put any real weight on his bad leg, gingerly using it for balance. Where they stand is now the outskirts of the battle; much of the enemy have fallen or fled, which is a good thing because Draco thinks his leg is too wrecked to fight on. But the fighting has ceased anyway.

All eyes are fixed on Potter and Voldemort, whose spells have locked, a solid beam of magic buzzing and humming dangerously between them. Green and red, and right now, the green is crawling closer to Potter. He looks exhausted – ashen and hollow-eyed, his arm trembling as he holds it up, his face twisted with concentration. He leans in, frowning, and the magic hums louder.

Hermione clings to Draco's arm with one hand, her fingers digging into the burns. "Oh my god," she murmurs, awe and fear in her voice. "What's *happening*?"

Now the red is consuming the green, suddenly flaring up it, and then there is no green left at all. The second Potter's spell reaches Voldemort, there's a *whoomph* of force that nearly knocks Draco over – Weasley grabs him and steadies him – and makes his ears pop. And both Potter and Voldemort go flying back several metres, hitting the ground hard. There's a moment of total stillness. Neither one moves. *Everyone* is frozen.

And then there's a scream, short and hard. Draco looks toward it. Ginevra Weasley, standing at the entrance to the garden, her face paper-white. Anguish and denial are printed all over her. The stillness breaks as she runs toward Potter, screaming his name. The Death Eaters and Voldemort's minions break – running away. Fleeing like the cowards they are. Over the walls and out the gates, vanishing into the rain and the dark.

And Draco finds himself suddenly standing alone.

Hermione is sprinting toward Potter, and Weasley...toward Voldemort? Draco's leg finally gives out, and he sits down abruptly and doesn't think he's capable of getting up again. He watches as Hermione falls to her knees over Potter and pushes Ginevra out of her way, doing...something. They probably don't need him right now anyway, he thinks, head spinning.

He has no pulse. Hermione looks down at her best friend's face, her fingers jammed against his throat, her other hand splayed over his chest, and there's nothing. Nothing at all. And she can tell, somehow. Harry's not there anymore. His features slack, his glasses askew, his body so still. So empty. Hermione laces her hands together, one atop the other, and places them over his sternum, beginning chest compressions. She did these for Girl Guides on the practice dummy, as an eager little eleven-year-old, before Hogwarts. Before Harry. She's read in more detail about how to do CPR since then but never practised.

"What are you –?" Ginny begins to ask through her tears as she kneels there, filled with wretched, incipient grief.

"CPR," Hermione says tersely. "Harry's heart has stopped. This might restart it." Short and blunt as Ginny stares at her, hope shuddering on a knife edge, and then Hermione thinks two of Harry's ribs crack as she uses all her body weight and momentum to drive herself down, arms locked. She blanches, feeling sick, but keeps going, singing the Bee Gees in her head. She can't remember how long to wait between breaths, so she approximates, and after about forty seconds pinches Harry's nose closed, seals her mouth over his, and exhales with all her strength. It's *hard*.

She goes back to chest compressions after three breaths, panting, her arms exhausted already, vaguely aware that Ginny is staring at her in bewilderment now. It probably looks very strange to everyone who's clustering around. All staring at her, and Harry. "Ginny," she pants, and then she tells the other witch how to do the breaths. Ginny does her best, every thirty seconds, and another of Harry's ribs cracks after Hermione begins singing "Stayin' Alive" in her head the second time.

Her arms feel like they're going to fall off. She'll have to get someone else to take over. The prospect of stopping doesn't cross her mind once. She will keep going until he's breathing. That's it. She refuses to let Harry die. Someone touches her shoulder and says her name gently, and Ginny snarls at them to leave her alone. To let her work. Tears drip on her hands, and she forces herself to keep going. And then, just as she begins a third repeat of the song, Harry makes a funny choking

sound, and his left arm jolts, and Hermione makes a strangled sound herself, of relief, dropping her leaden arms to her sides and slumping back on her knees.

Harry opens his eyes to Ginny, leaning over him. He frowns at her in confusion and, with one trembling hand, automatically straightens his glasses. "*Ginny?*" he asks in a rasp and then hisses with pain, clutching at his ribs. He grimaces, but lifts his other hand to Ginny's cheek. "What are you do—" The rest is cut off as Ginny presses her lips to his, her arms sliding over him as she sobs.

Oh god. Harry died, Hermione thinks. He died, and I brought him back. She shoves herself clumsily to her feet and moves backwards as everyone else crowds forward. There is a clamour of joy. Of relief, and victory. She melts through the group of clustered people.

She stumbles past Voldemort's beheaded, de-limbed body with barely a blink of surprise.

Exhaustion is embedded in her bones, and she can only think of *him*. He's sitting on the lawn in the rain and the dark, one leg stuck out straight in front of him, and his eyes are fixed on her. He doesn't see any of them, she knows. He doesn't care. It's just her. She knows that because she feels the same way about him.

She stumbles to her knees beside him and he drags her into his lap with hard, clumsy motions, pressing her very tightly against him, heedless of his injuries. She wraps her arms around his neck, turning her face up to his, and his head dips down, and their lips meet. Soft and sweet, and then his hand clutches against her head and her fingers curl in his hair, and it becomes hard. Nearly vicious. Their mouths sealed together, and something far more than mere arousal is rushing through her, turning her blood to fire and her bones buoyant.

They keep their foreheads pressed together when the kiss ends, hearts racing and a thrill in the air like the seconds before a lightning strike.

"It's over," he says in a wondering voice as they stare into each other's eyes, and it sounds like *I love you*. But he says it anyway, a catch in his voice, and those silver eyes are liquid and soft. "I love you, Hermione," he says, and it sounds like *damn the rest of the world*.

"I love you too," she says and swallows hard, blinking back tears. "More than anything," she says, and it just sounds like what it is, because she *does*.

The tears come then. A quiet flood, as they sit there on the lawn, in amongst the flowerless roses and the bodies in the dark, her face pressed against his chest, crying hot, wet tears against the cold wetness of his shirt, while he holds her.

The war is over, she thinks, and it is so momentous she can hardly comprehend it. It's over.

They sit there on the sodden lawn in the gently falling rain, and the dark is like a veil as he kisses her head, with his hands warm on her back, and her exhausted arms wrapped around his waist. Everyone else seems to have forgotten them. Everyone is clustered around Harry, and Ginny, and Voldemort's body, and that's fine. That suits them.

They are happy to just be alone together.

► Notes

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

► Housekeeping!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Forty-Five

Epilogue

They don't get enough time alone in the days afterwards. A lot happens in the aftermath of a war, it seems.

They spend their days apart, falling into bed late at night, too exhausted to do more than kiss and fall asleep holding each other. They still have nightmares, but that's okay.

With Voldemort's death, his chokehold over the wizarding world crumbles, but there are still loyal followers at the Ministry to put down, Hogwarts to liberate, and St. Mungo's to take control of. And so, Draco goes on more missions. He wants Hermione to stay out of combat and safe, and in the end, she agrees – she has enough to keep her busy, managing the flood of traumatised Muggle and wizarding prisoners. For some reason, the Order has put her in partial charge of that, as liaison and coordinator. She's not a Healer. She's traumatised herself, and she's not sure she's at all capable. And yet, by the end of the first week, she somehow has her part of it all in hand.

All rescued prisoners are offered obliviation and false memories that explain their long absence – and thanks to the International Statute of Secrecy, the Muggles who do not wish to be obliviated are told their memories will remain mostly intact, but be altered to remove any trace of the wizarding world. Only two of the Muggles choose to remember, and nearly half of the witches, wizards, and squibs choose to forget. It's an interesting disparity. She supposes the Muggles don't see much point in remembering if *what* they remember won't even be true.

It's horrible.

Draco asks Hermione one night as they're drifting off to sleep if she wants to forget, and she shakes her head. "I don't want to live a lie, Draco," she says, and she thinks that she doesn't want to risk what they have between them, either. Their love was born in that horror, and to erase the bad might affect the good. No. She will live with the memories.

"Would you want to forget," she asks him in return, drowsily now, as sleep begins to win, her eyelids growing heavy. "What you did, as the Order's spy?"

"I don't deserve to," he says. Then he adds, circumspectly: "And it made me who I am. And I'd rather be who I am than who I was."

She kisses him and tells him she loves who he is, and then falls asleep just minutes later.

In the immediate wake of the battle, Draco spends what free time he has looking for his mother. He believes she is alive. He *knows* it. But she won't last long if she's imprisoned and has no one to bring her food or water. He asks around amongst the Order, desperate for any leads. He interrogates the few Death Eaters and Snatchers they capture alive, with methods he knows Hermione would cringe from. He comes up empty, every time. His dear Aunt Bellatrix would know, but somehow, she escaped, gone without a trace.

He adds her to the list he has in his mind, alongside the four American wizards who fled the battle alive. He's assigned himself the task of hunting them to death or capture, once all this madness has died down.

But in the meantime, with every day that passes, Draco becomes more frantic to find his mother.

It's Hermione who finds him the lead in the end. She's been asking the freed prisoners about his mother, without telling him. She didn't want to get his hopes up. But four days after the war ends, she comes to him with a location. He wants to cry with hope and anticipatory relief, all tangled up with dread. There's no knowing what they'll find.

Hermione insists on coming.

Potter and Weasley accompany them – Potter's been on nearly every mission going, and always the most dangerous one. "I'm expendable now," he says one afternoon, beaming, ridiculously happy about it. "It doesn't matter if I die." And then Ginevra slaps him across the back of the head, and he apologises profusely.

They disapparate to a farmhouse in the Scottish Highlands, and tears sting Draco's eyes when they find his mother, bruised, battered, but alive, tended by a house elf.

Thank Merlin, she's not pregnant.

She's weak and dazed, has difficulty walking, and flinches away from everyone but Hermione when they first find her in the basement, and that makes Draco's tears well over briefly, horror churning in his stomach, because he knows what that means. But then, when they're out in the light and the spring air and she's settled on a chair in front of the farmhouse to acclimate to the sudden change, she looks at him and recognises him. *She* cries then, and she doesn't flinch from him – she reaches for him. Shame crosses her face, though, a flicker of it, and he hates it.

"It's okay, Mother," Draco says, and he sits at her feet and rests his temple against her knee, like he used to sit at her feet as a little boy, looking up at Hermione standing a few metres away, her eyes teary, hugging herself. Potter and Weasley say they're going to check the rest of the house and vanish, and his mother lays her hand on top of his head. Her touch feels frail and uncertain.

"They told me you were dead," she says, as if she thinks she's dreaming.

"I'm not," he says, his eyes on Hermione. "We're all fine. The war is over, Mother. Voldemort is dead."

"Y-your father?" she asks then, small and fragile, and he can't answer that.

At Hermione's suggestion, Draco puts an ad in the Daily Prophet's fifth edition since the war's end, stating that Narcissa Malfoy is alive, and can Lucius Malfoy please present himself at the Ministry

of Magic for surrender.

He's there only two hours after the paper's release.

The Order takes him into custody but lets him see Draco and his mother first. It's the first time Draco has ever seen his father cry.

His father is imprisoned at the Order estate, not Azkaban. Thirteen days later, he's placed under house arrest and stripped of his magic, having willingly divulged all the information he had to the Order, some of which led to the immediate capture of two more Death Eaters. Being that the Ministry, now headed by Kingsley Shacklebolt, has confiscated the Manor and half of the Malfoy wealth, house arrest takes time to arrange.

Draco's parents do what he had wished he could do with Hermione when they'd first escaped to the Order, and live together in one of the tiny cells for nearly a month before the remaining Malfoy money is freed up, and his parents purchase a small but well-appointed home. They give him half of what remains of the money; it's still a fortune. Hermione thinks they may have to start several charities to assuage her guilt over the sheer amount.

Eventually, the frantic chaos post-war settles down.

The ex-prisoners are reintegrated, and Hermione finds herself moving on to other, less urgent initiatives in the Ministry. There are war orphans to be provided for, victims to be supported, and policies to be altered. She keeps herself as busy as she wants to be, and there's only a slight bitterness to the fact that she's working for Kingsley Shacklebolt. Draco's missions are no longer as time-critical, and most days he's home by dinner; he's involved in the formation of the Special Aurors Squad, which is focused on hunting high-level targets.

She knows he particularly wants Bellatrix – who would have given birth by now – and the American wizards. The thought of them still sends a pain through her chest. It still makes her sick to her stomach. She is not *fixed*. There are still nights where sex ends halfway through, with Hermione in tears or trapped in an awful memory. And Draco still bears the guilt of what he's done; she sees it in his eyes, haunting him. An ever-present ghost.

The war may be over, but their trauma has not ended with Voldemort's death. That scar tissue will remain, forever.

They get sick of living at the safe house as soon as the pace of life settles into something measured and a routine is established. They want their own kitchen. Their own sitting room. They want to be able to be away from other people in a room other than just their small bedroom. And so, they begin looking at houses.

The house they buy is in a tiny wizarding village that has one small shop and nearly two dozen houses and farms. It's in Wales, near the Muggle village of Rhossili, and close to the sea. It's *beautiful*. The house, and the countryside. The house itself is stone, and slightly higgledy-piggledy. A tiny little two up, two down, the bathroom and toilet a later addition, accessible through what was once the kitchen's back door.

There's a tiny, low-walled front garden, with a cobbled path leading from the dirt road to the sky-blue front door, and a large back garden, half shaded by a beautiful, ancient ash tree.

The house itself is in disrepair, but they work on it in the evenings and at the weekends, with magic and elbow grease. Putting slate tiles on the roof and plastering the internal walls. Cleaning out the fireplace and chimney. Painting everything white, covering the stone floors in rugs, and hanging curtains at the windows. Waxing the upstairs wooden floors and making them glow with warmth. Sometimes Potter and Weasley help out, and Creevey stops by occasionally, but usually, it is just Draco and Hermione, and he prefers it that way. They furnish it simply, and make the extra bedroom a little library and office.

It's cosy and welcoming when they're done several weeks later; a small safe haven, waiting for just the two of them.

Draco carries Hermione over the threshold on a late-summer evening. He kisses her when he puts her down, her lips soft and smiling against his. Her eyes shine like firewhisky, lit from within, her hair curling with the humidity, her arms looped warm around his neck. The last glow of the sun shines through the open sitting room windows, the breeze sharp and cooling. Their home lies quiet and safe; there are no ghosts here.

This is their life, stretching out forever. The future, boundless with promise.

Two Years Post-War

It's a Saturday morning. They're going to her parents' house for lunch, but that isn't for hours yet, and right now, Hermione is standing naked in front of him, fresh out of the shower, as he sits on the edge of the bed still half asleep and unshaven, in nothing but boxers. Her towel has been dropped carelessly on the floor, and her expression is an invitation. And Salazar's sake, she's so beautiful, limned in the morning sun in their small bedroom. Draco is hard immediately, even though he hadn't even been thinking about sex before she walked in, but rather the small, delicate ring waiting in his bedside drawer.

"Come here," he says, his voice still raspy with sleep, and she takes a step closer, a smile on her lips. Her skin is soft under his hands as he slides them around her waist and down over her hips before gripping the curves of her arse. She's glorious. He kisses her stomach and rubs his face against it, and she squeaks at the tickling, scratching prickles. Her hands settle on his shoulders and then she bends to kiss him, hands sliding to frame his neck. Her lips are soft and her tongue is sweet, and the slide of it over his sends want slamming through him. She tastes of mint, and perfection.

But eventually, he wants to kiss her elsewhere. He pulls away from the kiss with a soft, wet sound as their mouths part, and then tips back onto the bed with a thump, shifting so that he lies back against the pillows.

"Come here," he says once more, and Hermione smiles knowingly, her mouth reddened by kissing, and then climbs up and over him, pausing to lay a kiss on his hard dick through his boxers, and then his stomach, and his chest, and then she's settling over him on her knees, and he grips her hips, and licks pleasure into her as she leans forward against the wall. She squirms and moans and her face flushes, the pink spreading down over her chest, heat radiating off her.

She's beautiful. And so sweet as Draco swirls his tongue over her clit and then down further, dipping between her folds and teasing out her wetness, making her shiver and twitch. Her moans

are small and strangled, and her breath comes fast as tension begins to thrum through her, and he can tell her pleasure is building fast as he worships her. She's slick, and precious in his hands and beneath his mouth, one slim hand clutching a fistful of his hair, the other braced against the wall, and when he looks up, he can see her face, past her breasts, which rise and fall with her ragged breaths.

Cheek pressed to the wall, her mouth open as she gasps and moans, her face flushed pink and sweat a dew over her skin, her hair sticking to her forehead, her eyes screwed shut. He wonders what Hermione is thinking as he holds her hips and swirls his tongue around her clit until she's nearly wriggling and moaning, her breath coming in little *uh, uh, uh* sounds. And then, just as he carefully begins to press two fingers into her wet pussy, she comes, her whole body seizing with a sudden, rippling tension.

Draco slides his fingers into her as she moans with the climax – an unselfconscious "*hnnngh*," – and her cunt clamps down on them, and he groans too, as he feels it. He watches her; forehead all furrowed and brows scrunched down, and mouth wide, an almost pained bliss etched into every line of her.

"Oh – *oh god*," she gasps as his tongue prolongs it and then slowly teases her back down to earth, sliding along her pussy, his fingers slipping out and replaced by the dip of his tongue.

"*Oh*," she says again, like a punctuation mark, and then she opens her eyes and looks down at him. He places a kiss on the inside of her thigh and smiles up at her. Her eyes are pupil-swamped and glassy bright, like a baby mooncalf, and her cheeks are practically glowing.

"I love you so much," she tells him as she slides off him and tips clumsily to the bed. "*You're perfect.*"

"I love y—" he gets out in return before she kisses his mouth, silencing him enthusiastically. And then she shimmies down the bed and hooks his boxers down over his dick, and he bites his lip, breath jerking in and heartbeat quickening. She doesn't often do this, and it's always something special. Something he treasures and commits to memory until the next time, in another few weeks.

She kneels astride his left leg, her wetness slick against his skin, and *fuck*, she's intoxicating. Her eyes meet his as she sinks her mouth over his dick, her hand gripping it, and then his eyes flutter shut and a strangled groan escapes him. Her mouth is hot, and wet, and so velvety soft, her tongue swirling around the head of his dick, and he feels pleasure burn hot and bright through him.

Perfection. She makes a hum of satisfaction. His fingers flex against the sheets. He's biting his lip as she slides her mouth up and down in lockstep with her hand, and it's sheer bliss.

"*Oh fuck*," he breathes. And then she takes in more, her mouth enveloping nearly all of it and swamping him in a sensation so intense it makes him want to come already. "*Nngh*." He holds off with an effort as she sucks it, firm and luscious, and the pleasure escalates exponentially until an embarrassingly short time later, he gasps, "*Stop. Hermione, stop, or I'll come.*"

She smirks at him as she pops her mouth off his dick, looking extremely pleased with herself, and he shoves himself upright and kisses the smirk off her mouth, hand cradling the back of her head, fingers buried in her hair. Leaning her over and back, until she's sprawled on the bed and he's over her, and her hands cling to his shoulders as they kiss, his body fitting between her legs. Her trust never ceases to astound him. Her desire is precious, and endlessly amazing.

"Draco, *please*," she murmurs against his lips, arching her hips up, and then he's fumbling desperately. And he pushes slowly into her, and she's slick and hot, and she makes a soft sound of pleasure that echoes in his head as he slides home fully. His world becomes her body. Her fingers twining in his hair and clutching at his back. The clamp of her legs, and the press of her breasts against his chest as he thrusts, and she moans. He loses himself in her. He always has.

Hermione sets a mug of tea down on the bench beside Draco's hand, kissing his upper arm, and he spares her a smile and kisses her left eyebrow in return. She retreats, feeling warm inside, and perches on the kitchen bench beside the sink in leggings and one of his t-shirts, watching as he cooks their breakfast in nothing but pyjama trousers. The scars on his back are just faint traces now, although he's kept the one on his face. It doesn't bother her anymore. It's just part of him now, like everything else. And she loves all of him, more deeply than she can express. He gulps his tea absently, and then slides a nearly crepe-thin pancake out of the pan and onto a slowly growing stack, ready to be eaten rolled up with lemon juice and sugar.

She smiles at him over her own mug of tea, watching as he ladles pancake batter into the pan and then yawns and scrubs at his head idly, so all his hair sticks up funny. And then he turns to her for the few moments it takes before the pancake requires flipping. His tea in one hand, the other arm sliding around her as he slots between her legs. She kisses his chin. He kisses her nose. The sun is shining, and happiness swells between them. They stand pressed together for a long moment, her cheek pressed to his chest, his arm around her still, both of them sleepy and content. And then she sniffs.

"Pancake!" she says urgently, and he says, "Oh *shit*," and they disentangle in a rush. Hermione watches him as he hurries to save it, laughing quietly to herself, the feeling of peaceful warmth lingering as the sun spills through the window behind her. They both had nightmares last night, but the dreams always fade with the dawn, and then there is a life to live. Together.

She can't imagine ever being without him, as she watches him swear quietly over the half-burnt pancake before he starts on another. She doesn't take any of this for granted. Moments like this are precious. He shoots her a rueful smile over his shoulder, his eyes and his scars catching the light, both shining silver.

She still doesn't think anyone else truly understands it, even now – how she can love him, after everything they went through. She wonders how she could *not*. But then, they weren't there. Only Hermione and Draco can understand what happened during those long months of her captivity. The irreversible changes they both underwent. He is as much a part of her as her own heart. Inextricably melded, and where she begins and he ends, Hermione sometimes doesn't know.

He risks the next pancake by coming back and kissing her, quickly and sweetly, and she thinks that she doesn't need to know.

Dreams wake her. Not nightmares exactly.

Hermione lies cocooned in their cosy bed and stares at the ring on her finger. The slim band and the dainty diamond, shining in the moonlight. She looks across at Draco and smiles, her heart feeling too full and buoyant, as though it's trying to float out of her chest. He's peaceful in sleep, his fringe white in the pale light and falling over his forehead, his lashes throwing curling shadows over his

cheeks, his mouth relaxed and sweet. Aside from the scar etched across his face, he looks untouched by war right now. Young, and nearly innocent. Happy.

She thinks of how he had looked earlier. After dinner, settling outside on a blanket under the ash tree as the sun had set, waiting to see the stars after the fire of the last light had faded. Enjoying the peacefulness of being alone together, after their long afternoon at her parents' house. They are not built to spend time with others now; they are happiest when they are two. Hermione has made her peace with that.

She had been still standing when he had knelt before her, love written starkly on his face and his expression painted in vulnerability, and asked her to marry him. *No one deserves you less than I do. But no one could want you more*, he had said with his heart in his voice, and she had cried. Cried, and climbed on his lap, and said *yes*, over and over, clinging to him, joy and a bittersweetness wrenching through her.

Because he *does* deserve her, and she wishes he could see that as clearly as she does.

Lying in bed beside him, Hermione remembers vividly the first time he'd ever gone to his knees before her – the morning after the first revel. Kneeling before her on the wooden floor of his room like a supplicant, his features unreadable as she stood there holding his wand.

What had culminated in this ring on her finger and this sweet, aching happiness in her chest had somehow, however impossibly, begun right then. When he'd broken her and saved her at once. When he'd given her control. When he'd knelt at her feet and told her it was okay to hurt him, because he had hurt her.

He'd always known what she needed. She swallows hard and blinks back tears.

Their love was birthed in blood and violence. It was formed under vast pressure – crushing them, forcing them to be what they never would have chosen to be. To do unimaginable things. To endure. They broke, but they broke together, and they were forged into something new, together. They are carbon subjected to immense forces; a raw, uncut diamond – rough and unassuming from the outside, but within, there is something so beautiful. Something so precious. Unbreakable.

She looks at him now, sleeping beside her, and she wouldn't change a thing.

– *Fin.* –

Chapter End Notes

► Farewell

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