

Suck Upon

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Suck Upon

by [GingerBaggins](#)

Summary

A string of unprecedented attacks lead Hermione Granger to the vast library of a long-deserted manor, seeking explanations.

Instead, she finds watchful eyes in the creeping shadows, crimson-coated dreams, and an appetite just as ravenous as her own.

Chapter 1: Unquenched, unquenchable, Around, within, thy heart shall dwell;

Chapter Notes

The cover art, which has served as inspiration every time my tired eyes have opened the google doc, was made by the endlessly brilliant [chaosandcodices](#)

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



Art by Chaosandcodices

Her blood roiled like a raging tempest as she craned her neck before the stone building, which was more glass than wall. It loomed; sinuous lines carved by centuries-old hands and centuries-old magic, still imposing in its abandonment, still mighty while ensnared in overgrowth. The door, which was doubled, each half a brutal iron structure that could never be manipulated—a final resistance to her invasion—was rusted at the lock.

She knew, or had at least been told, that the building was not entirely uninhabited; the elves remained in their quarters, maintaining the dying structure for as long as they drew breath, endlessly loyal and pitifully masterless. Just as she knew, with unexplainable certainty, that the first footsteps to echo through this entryway in many moons would be her own. The biting press of an ornate key in her palm, chilled by whistling winds, reminded her that she was here for a purpose, and she slowly pressed it into the crumbling lock.

The elves would hear it open, would rush to guide her through the passageways of this wretched, wilting estate, would lead her and the pouting guard at her heels to a cold, unwelcome library where they would play cold, unwelcome house until their work was done. Slowly, she turned the key, listening to the lock cry with the agony of disturbance. It gave a low groan of protest from the hinges as she leaned her full weight into it, and the wind howled as it rushed to fill the opened space.

Tauntingly, the manor beckoned her in.



Sitting at her desk, Hermione's heart beat almost as thunderously as her head. The mug sat rapidly cooling before her; tea leaves swirled as she stirred it methodically, half-hoping to find the answer to her predicament at the bottom, along with a spontaneous belief in divination.

Benedict, her lively young assistant who was overly eager to prove himself where he needn't bother, was rattling through the day's schedule at a breathless pace. She caught the odd word; a paper that she was due to sign, a meeting she was due to attend—they all joined the long queue of thoughts she was brushing aside in favour of another.

"Benedict?"

The young man sat up unnaturally straight. "Yes, Ma'am?"

"You know better than to call me that," she corrected wearily.

"Sorry, Ma—Miss."

Ma'am was reserved only for the boss, which she was not. Not here, anyway, tucked away in her office, tucked further away in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, tucked further still in the fourth level of the Ministry. She was the smallest in a stack of Russian Dolls, a turning cog amongst turning cogs, nobody worthy of *Ma'am*. Though she could be...the opportunity was fast approaching, and her hand itched to reach for it.

Thus, her quandary.

“I’m sure you’ve seen that Gregor Ivanov is retiring from the D.M.L.E. before the year is up,” she said, finally looking up from her tepid brew and into the wide, inexplicably inexhausted eyes of her assistant.

“I have not, Miss.”

“Well, he is.”

Benedict shifted in his chair, the leather creaking. “Admittedly, I thought him already retired.”

She couldn’t help but smile at that, because at Gregor’s tender age of one hundred and seven years, he probably should have been. He’d seen enough overhaul, enough war, enough of the ever-morphing political landscape, to have earned retirement three times over. Yet, in the eighty years he spent working his way through each and every branch of the Ministry, he’d hardly even taken a day off...until now.

“You’re not the only one,” she hummed, dipping her finger into the now-cold tea and collecting a single leaf. “They have asked me to fill his position.”

“Oh,” Benedict said, clearly fighting a frown. “Indefinitely?”

“It was not a temporary offer, no.”

“I see.”

She flicked the leaf away, resting her forearms on the rosewood desk, no longer interested in looking anywhere but the wizard before her, who was, in turn, no longer interested in looking anywhere but his folded hands.

“This surprises you?” she asked.

His head shot up, blue eyes like twin moons. “No, Ma’am—*Miss!* Of course not, but...”

Hermione, whose lumbar was suffering the consequences of her distraction, leaned back against the built-in support of her chair, situated in an office that had become her second home. She’d fought for it upon receiving her promotion to deputy head, then spent weekends with Molly picking out colour-coordinated and blissfully ergonomic furnishings, hung pictures of her friends on the walls, and placed the static photograph of her parents upon the desk. The room smelled like her jasmine perfume and rosemary shampoo, and maintained a perfect temperature.

Years of careful consideration had made the space uncomfortably comfortable.

She waved a hand to Benedict. “Do speak freely.”

“It is the same position you have here,” he said, overly cautious.

“In title alone,” she argued. “The D.M.L.E. is an establishment that garners significantly more respect.”

“Is that what you want? Respect?”

It was a bold question, bolder than any he’d dare ask before, and for the first time in the year since she’d hired him as a scrawny little intern fumbling with his briefcase, she actually *wanted* to hear what he had to say.

“Forgive me, Miss,” he continued, “I only mean that the work we—you do here is vital. Maybe not to everyone, but...isn’t that the point?”

“I can do a lot more good with a lot more power.”

His head, adorned with shiny, thin, chemically bleached hair, tilted ever-so-slightly to the side when he said, “There was a time when you had no power at all, yet you managed to accomplish rather a lot of good.”

It was a point worthy of honest consideration. In the years she’d spent here, there had been many successes; they were in the midst of trying to pass a bill to protect Acromantula birthing grounds, they had raised enough funds to support the inclusion of Lycanthropy studies in the education system, and they had endured countless turned heads and patronising scoffs from higher officials with no regard for any species but their own. Would a change of badge really provide fulfilment that she could not find here? Certainly, it would make her beliefs a little easier to fight for, but could she sit comfortably knowing the reason for that ease was so vapid?

“That’s some food for thought,” she acquiesced, letting her shoulders sag.

“For what it’s worth, Miss, I think you’d do well, if that’s where you decide to go.”

“Thank you, Benedict.” They shared a kind smile, one that only workplace acquaintances who had spent countless hours of overtime shuffling papers together could share. “You were saying something about the Pigmy Krakens in Windermere?”

“Oh, yes!” He almost leapt from his chair to place a file in front of her. “Several events are scheduled over the next two months to locate PK1330...”

His words blended in her ear like the fizz of her father’s old television as the hours went by. She signed away more of her life listening to Benedict diligently dedicate himself to causes she ought to have had more energy for. When, finally, she allowed herself to take a belated lunch, she opted to head away from the Ministry, leaving her cloak behind, in favour of purchasing an unimaginative but somewhat luxurious prawn sandwich and a packet of Percy Pigs from Marks and Spencer.

The atrium was bustling when she returned. A small crowd of workers gathered by the newspaper stand, all whispering and chattering in conspiratorial tones that had the back of her neck breaking into gooseflesh. Her steps echoed off the emerald-tiled walls, resounding down the curves of every floor entrance, until she reached the masses. Every head turned her way,

every set of legs shuffled to stand aside and allow her passage; a common occurrence for Hermione Granger, the woman whose girlhood was immortalised in Portland stone in the atrium's centre. With no obstruction, she plucked a paper from the stand and unfolded the afternoon's headline.

As she did, the chattering grew louder, for right there in bold ink was the confirmation of yet another attack, another turning, another trail of victims left in the wake; one Muggle and two magical this time. Concern was growing amongst the crowd, and she felt it gnawing at her own sternum. This was the second headline of its kind in the last week...the fourth in the last month. Hermione could feel eyes on her like pressing needles, all eagerly waiting to see what she would do, how she would solve this new issue that threatened the equilibrium they had so precariously reached. Shadows danced in the corners of her eyes, faces pinched in concentration, hands wringing with expectation, and she turned on her heel before anyone could ask her a single question.

Benedict was, blessedly, still on his lunch break when she stumbled back into her office. She never knew where he spent it, never thought to ask, it wasn't her business. Previously, when she'd had fewer time constraints and they'd had fewer skirmishes with dangerous arrests, she would take her lunch with Harry and Ron, but now that the three of them were established (and therefore, required) fixtures of their respective departments, they resolved to gather *outside* of work hours. Hermione fell into her chair, fighting a yawn as she peeled open the sandwich carton, trying not to let the sight of the gathering mayonnaise put her off.

A memo, made of aged parchment and folded into the beating wings of a barn owl, flew through the crack in her door and landed atop her unbitten sandwich. For a second, she closed her eyes and imagined ignoring it, brushing it into the bin and enjoying her lunch in relative peace, then her eyes fluttered open to the rhythm of paper wings, and she let her sandwich fall back into the carton.

It was a request, directly from Kingsley himself, to join a meeting that evening at a restaurant she had never heard of. It offered nothing more in the way of an explanation, no mention as to who would be attending, why it was being held outside of the Ministry, or why she, of all people, had been summoned for it. She frowned at the paper and picked up a Percy Pig, biting the ears off first.



A smaller-than-usual house elf trundled down the hallway to greet them, protected from the chill by nothing more than a moth-addled pillowcase. It was a desolate place, cold and cobwebbed and utterly miserable, *but it was not*, she reminded herself, *the drawing room*. The elf stopped at their knees and bowed, his little body bent in unwanted servitude. It took

everything in her not to physically recoil, to bend down to his level and straighten his spine herself.

“Name’s Femur,” the elf, named Femur, spoke in whispers. “You must be Miss Granger and Mr...”

“Will Prosper,” her guard offered.

“Mr Prosper. If you’ll be following me,” Femur said, and they did. Will demanded to carry her bag along with his own as they shuffled behind Femur, paced by his short legs and shorter steps.

Their shoes left imprints in the dust, which did not let up as they moved deeper into the building, passing empty walls and vacant rooms. Her eyes lingered on the pale bedsheets draped across ancient furniture in a poor preservation effort. The only light was born of flickering candles, which hardly touched half of the hall and wavered as the three of them disturbed the heavy air. It must be true, after all; nobody was here. *Then*, she wondered, *why are the elves?*

“It’s quite chilly,” she said.

“Misses can be using the fireplace in the library,” Femur replied without missing a beat.

He led them to a second set of equally impressive and, frankly, insidious doors, not hesitating before clicking his tiny fingers. The doors creaked, the sound travelling down the empty hallways as it travelled the length of her spine, dust swirling around them like a landspout. Inside, she found the most magnificent, terrifying sight she had ever beheld: a library unlike any other, in stature or sensation.

The shelves stretched endlessly before her, and with it, so stretched the length of time she expected to remain here, scouring through every leather spine and rolled scroll. The smell—mildew and decomposing binding agents—filled her nose with ferocity, the long shadows stretched and retreated from her as the candles lit one by one, the ceiling was impossibly tall and vacuous, dancing flames parodying starlight, and she felt herself a speck amongst the hovering dust, minuscule in the face of the task at hand.

“This will take an age to sort through,” Will voiced her thoughts as he let their bags drop with a resounding thud, making both her and the little elf startle.

“Possibly,” she mumbled.

Will turned to Femur and asked, “Where will we be sleeping?”

“In here’s library, sir. The chairs will be suitable, sir, to transfigure.”

“Brilliant,” Will huffed. “What about eating? Or shitting?”

The elf flinched, and Hermione shot a warning glare at her scowling guard, though she could hardly blame him for his ire; seven years of service had landed him here, in this stained estate, acting as her glorified babysitter.

“Femur and Tibbs will be bringing you food, Misses Granger and Mr Prosper,” Femur explained. “You is not to be wandering without escorting.”

Will snorted. “Is there a bell to ring, then, when my bladder starts screaming?”

Femur clicked again, holding out his palm for the small bell that appeared in an instant. Hemione couldn’t resist a subtle roll of her eyes as she turned them back to the vast stretch of bookshelves, separated by carved pillars and watchful gargoyles. Her exhalation was overdrawn, dread settling deep into her bones as she considered quite how long they would be doomed to these quarters.



The first thing she noticed about the restaurant, other than its impossible-to-read cursive name, was that it was by far the most decadent one she had ever been to. The red carpet was soft under her Oxfords, the sconces lit a dim tungsten glow, and she found herself feeling remarkably underdressed. The service station held a selection of perfectly polished silver cutlery and the wine bar had a selection of long-stemmed glasses suspended above the taps, fully stocked but notably unmanned. The serving hatch offered a clear observation of the kitchen, where she would have been able to watch the chefs prepare dishes, had there been any present.

The second, slightly more pressing thing she noticed was that there were no dining guests and no staff to wait on them. Kingsley greeted her at the door with a warm smile and a firm squeeze of her upper arm, which wasn’t out of the ordinary, before leading her to a round table in the corner of the otherwise barren restaurant, which certainly was.

The table was not as unoccupied as the others surrounding it, but instead seated the heads of every Ministry department, along with a representative from the Wizengamot and Dr Nico Carlsen. Nico was a consultant with a rich background in mythology, whom she’d worked with on previous campaigns. He did not work directly for the Ministry, acting more as a free agent, though he appeared to be rather chummy with the Minister this evening. As she looked upon the circular table—isolated in the far corner of the restaurant—and the faces of those occupying it, she couldn’t help but notice that Bertha, the head of *her* department, was missing.

“Is Bertha not coming?” she asked.

Kingsley turned to Nico. “We haven’t summoned for her, have we?”

Nico shook his head, and it was, admittedly, a little jarring to see the Minister refer to him for confirmation. “Just Miss Granger.”

“Then that’s settled,” Kingsley said, gesturing for Hermione to take the last empty chair.

Tentatively, she lowered into it, scanning the faces of her superiors with curious concern. They all looked pinched, just as confused as she felt, which told her one thing: none of them knew why they were here.

It was Robards, the head of the D.M.L.E., who spoke first. “I take it we are not here to dine, Minister?”

Kingsley chuckled, a chesty sound that rattled her ribcage. “Afraid not. Thank you for joining us with such urgency, especially you, Camilla. I hope we don’t keep you from little Johnny’s birthday party for any longer than is absolutely necessary.”

Hermione shot a confused look at Camilla, the Unspeakable, whose exact line of work remained decidedly undisclosed. Feeling eyes upon her, she met Hermione’s frown with a kind, patient smile—the sort only perfected by parents.

“To cut it short,” Kingsley continued, “I confidently assume that we’ve all been keeping up with the papers over the last month?”

Headlines rolled through her mind: the attacks targeting politicians and prominent wizarding figureheads, turning them from reasonable fellows of cognitive function into creatures of unbridled desire. Their immediate bloodlust had left bodies in their wake, seemingly unable to stop until the very moment they were apprehended.

Vampires.

“If you are discussing the recent attacks,” Robards began steadily, “our reports have been clear that the perpetrators were arrested and—”

Dixon, from the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, cut in to finish, “And placed under medical supervision in a secluded ward of St. Mungos, inaccessible to those without direct ward clearance.”

Kingsley nodded placatingly. “You have all done an excellent job with the information we’ve been granted, but would you all agree that we have not been granted much?”

A murmur spread like spilt wine across the table. Hermione didn’t join in, still unsure as to why she was here.

“This is where I hand over to Dr Carlsen.” Kingsley swept his hand towards Nico. “A few of you will already be familiar with him.”

Nico gave them all a friendly nod, including Hermione, before clearing his throat and demanding their utmost attention. He took it easily, without diffidence, just as Kingsley was able to. Cut, it seemed, from the same charismatic cloth.

“Good evening, and thank you again for coming on such short notice,” Nico spoke clearly, his voice amplified by the mostly empty restaurant. “All of you are here because you play a prominent role in the functioning of our beloved society, and because that society needs you.”

Bending forward, he placed an open file in the centre of the table, and a flick of his wand sent the pages on a slow rotation for all to see. Hermione held her breath as they passed by her, a parade of autopsy reports and crime scene photographs, close-ups of puncture wounds and ravaged skin, of grey faces and cloudy eyes. A few leaned back as the papers floated by, a few leaned closer—Hermione leaned closest of all.

“Very little is known about vampiric turnings,” Nico pressed on. “However, we do know that mass turning events such as the one we have been experiencing this past month are, to put it lightly, *unprecedented*. As you will recall, unprecedented times call for unmitigated panic, and what we don’t want is to frighten the general population with the threat of another monster arising so soon after ousting the last.”

Hermione stiffened in her seat, unable to stop her mouth from speaking despite being categorically out of turn. “Vampires are not monsters, Dr Carlsen.”

Nico held her gaze for a moment, inquiry sparking within his deep eyes, then nodded his agreement. “Right you are, Miss Granger. No creature, human or otherwise, is monstrous by nature. That being said, I need not tell you that every batch has a bad seed.”

She fell against the back of her chair, letting her eyes return to the line of papers making their rounds, realising just how sparse they really were.

“Fortunately, we have managed to catch these attacks early and can, with your combined help, get on top of the issue before it picks up any further traction. We are putting together a task force of sorts, with our primary focus being to uncover and understand the origin of these attacks.”

“Forgive me, Dr Carlsen, Minister,” Robards said, “but the D.M.L.E. already has an active investigation being spearheaded by our top Aurors—”

“And I am sure that Mr Potter and Mr Weasley will, in record time, provide you with the *who*. What we are here to focus on is the *how*, and more importantly, the *why*. ”

The following silence was almost as loud as a protest, but Hermione could hardly tear her attention from the photographs still spinning slowly; from the bite marks on their neck, from the dried final drops of blood crusted near the wound. Instinctively, she reached up to brush her fingers along her throat, pressing on the same spot. Nico tracked her movements, his brows knitting. She dropped her hand and corrected her posture immediately.

“To stop the problem is one thing,” Nico said, thankfully not drawing attention to her behaviour, “to resolve it is another, and requires a level of understanding we do not currently possess. Who amongst us has had direct experience with newly turned vampires?”

Nobody moved, nobody even flinched, then Camilla began to cautiously fill the silence, “There are experts in the field of dark creatures such as Vampires, surely it would be more prudent to consult them?”

“That is exactly what we are going to do,” Nico confirmed. “The people at this table are some of the most well-connected and valued names in wizarding Britain. I struggle to think of a

single door that would not open for at least one of you, and with access to such a wealth of informational sources, we can come to understand the events of the last month and work towards taking preventative measures.”

Iwan, from the Department of International Magical Cooperation, cleared his throat. “I do not mean this to sound as dismissive as it may, and I am aware that everyone here has an extensive list of remarkable achievements, but I cannot help noticing a discrepancy among those of us at this table.”

Kingsley narrowed his eyes. “A discrepancy?”

“We are all heads of our departments or representatives of the house, apart from...”

Just as they had earlier in the atrium, all eyes fell on Hermione. She blew out a breath of surprised laughter, raising her eyebrows to her hairline at Iwan’s apologetic grimace. He had a point, though, and it wasn’t as if she hadn’t noticed.

“Honestly, I was thinking the same thing.” She turned to Kingsley and Nico. “Why am I here?”

If it was solely because of who she was, of what she’d done in the war, of her fame and notoriety, of the trust the public seemed to have in her, surely they would have chosen Harry instead, who was already heading the investigation, or Ron, who had been his partner since the age of eleven.

Nico seemed unperturbed. “You worked as a healer after the war, correct?”

“I did,” she confirmed, clasping her hands in her lap.

“Underwent intensive emergency training, so I was told.”

“Had to, there was no time for standard medical schooling.”

Nico’s head dipped. “I can only imagine the horrors you were asked to mend.”

You cannot possibly, she thought, but stopped herself, because she hardly knew this man, certainly did not know the horrors he may or may not have seen, only her own. When she blinked, she saw visions of severed limbs, splinched skin, hex-boiled bones and organs on the outside of bodies. The silence in the room began to sound akin to a scream, like those from the patients she’d been forced to treat even after they’d run out of pain draughts. Her knuckles cracked as she curled her hands into fists, like the ribs she’d pressed her weight upon when magic failed and CPR had been her last resort.

She’d spent most of the war on the run, which had simultaneously turned out to be the *most* and *least* dangerous place to be. It was only when the battle ended and the sun cast its golden light upon the wreckage that she began to comprehend the true scale of destruction. Harry and Ron had been ushered into Auror training, and far be it from her to sit on her hands, so when St Mungos cried out for volunteers to assist with the influx of post-war casualties,

she'd penned her name down—just as she'd done for the DA—and gave herself over again, and again, until there was no more blood to mop.

When the dust settled and the dead were coated by six feet of fresh soil, she was relieved of her duties and sent home. She slept for a week, ate like a starving dog, and then began her work at the Ministry.

“I was not a senior healer, not even a healer at all by trade, Bertha is—”

“Trade is nothing compared with experience,” Nico cut her off gently. “You are a war hero, a healer, and the deputy head of a department dedicated to understanding and protecting magical creatures, such as these.” He caught one of the papers in his hands and turned it to face her; the arrest confirmation of the first victim. “Bertha, though accomplished in her own right, is not who we need. You are.”

Unsure how she could possibly respond, Hermione elected to remain silent, listening to Nico assign roles to each of the personnel at the table. Iwan was to discuss Vampire relations with officials from other European Ministries, Camilla was allocated to the archives to dig for historic mentions of similar events, Dixon and Robards were to work closely on the ongoing investigation, Elise from transportation was to monitor the floo networks for any suspicious activity, and Edward from the Wizengamot was to secure them any privileges they might otherwise not be afforded. Hermione waited for her turn, increasingly impatient, until he finally turned his head her way.

“Miss Granger, do you have time to meet me at St Mungo's tomorrow morning?”

“I do,” she replied.

“Bright and early, then, if you wouldn't mind. Let's say...seven?”

“Let's.”

As she shook hands with the others and braced for the biting winds, her thoughts drifted back to the file now tucked under Nico's arm and the photographs held inside it, the bite marks upon pale necks, the teeth marks still indented under their slack jaws. There seemed to be no signs that any of them had fought back. Perhaps they didn't have the time, perhaps the act of biting was completely incapacitating, perhaps they simply hadn't wanted to.



After making their way to the centre of the dense library, which was more like a labyrinth she could not make heads or tails of, Femur left them to set up the few belongings they'd brought in the reading area, which consisted of a large, unclothed table and several oversized

armchairs. Nothing in this library, in this entire manor, looked as though it had been born in this century. Everything was heavy and elaborate, the legs of the chairs bore artistic carvings and house signets, the upholstery was hand-sewn and worn with use and age, the candelabras too weighted to use as portable lighting.

Will, growing more displeased by the minute, threw himself down upon a wide chaise-lounge and tossed his arm over his face, releasing a guttural whine. Hermione, unwilling to keep apologising for their shared predicament, opted to pin her hair back with a bolstered claw clip and set to planning how best to attack the beast that this library presented.

As she was pulling her curls to the back of her head, the corner of her eye latched onto movement in the far shadows of the towering bookshelves. She dropped her hair, whipping around to see what had shifted, finding absolutely nothing.

“Femur?” she called.

When no response came, Will let out a brittle laugh and lifted his arm from his eyes to say, “Why don’t you try ringing the fucking bell?”



The hospital ward was unplotted, an absolute marvel of concealment magic, and required her to pass through several manned wards in order to get in. Therefore, she reasoned, it would require the same to get out. The people kept here were not just patients; they were prisoners, and would undoubtedly have to face the recoil of the innocent lives they’d taken in their bloodlust.

Nico Carlsen looked every bit as put together as he had at the restaurant the night before. His thick brown hair was neatly combed back, his beard sharp as though shaped only that morning, his soft white vest sitting perfectly upon a soft white shirt. In contrast, she hurried beside him with unbrushed hair, wearing yesterday's skirt and an obviously unironed shirt.

“They are still in a transitional state,” he explained as they walked through the overly bright hallways, which smelled of antiseptic and soap. “Which means they are...volatile.”

“Have you consulted with other Vampires on how long this state is supposed to last?”

“Of course,” he said. “But the findings are inconsistent, and the parties willing to speak with us are mostly born vampires.”

“Is there much of a difference?”

Nico threw her a half-formed smile over his padded shoulder. “*That* is the question.”

He stopped at the first room, guiding her to look through the observation window, through which she found Wilhemina Bagsworth, a long-standing representative of the Wizengamot and a sure candidate for the next election. She was not the polished, high-chinned woman Hermione had been the captive audience of, nor the bright-eyed colleague who had, on more than one occasion, held the lift while Hermione ran to it. Instead, she was curled over herself in the corner of the hospital room, her lips sealed around a bag of blood, letting it drip down her chin and onto her knees. Even through the walls, her choked gags and groans of pain were audible.

With a hand on her shoulder, Nico brought her to the next window. Genevieve Rosier, a member of the Sacred-Twenty-Eight, was lying upon the hospital bed in the fetal position, her entire body shaking like a leaf. One of her hands was buried deep in her blonde hair, tugging hard enough to rip entire chunks from her scalp, while the other clawed at the base of her throat, fingernails breaking skin.

Next was Rowan Armitage, editor-in-chief of The Daily Prophet, with whom Hermione had given many a formal interview. Unlike the others, he was standing stock-still in the centre of the room, the hospital bed pushed against the far wall, his blood bags still full on the table. His eyes were vacant, staring into an abyss Hermione could not see, and she stepped closer to the glass to get a better look.

Nico reached for her. "I wouldn't—"

Rowan's eyes flashed with recognition, his face twisting with agony and wicked, sudden violence, then he was running at the window with inconceivable speed, sharpened canines bared under his snarled lips. She leapt backwards, hand flying to her chest, and looked back at Nico's troubled face. He didn't look frightened, not at all. He just looked...lost. Slowly, she turned back to the window and stepped forward again, examining the mangled fury of the man still slamming himself against the other side of it. His teeth were glinting under the harsh lights, sharp and white and desperate.

"Is he aware of himself?" she asked quietly.

"Hard to say," Nico replied, stepping up beside her. "Even harder to ask."

Hermione recalled, with unfortunate clarity, a trip she'd taken with her parents to Paignton zoo when she was five. A beautiful Sumatran tiger had leapt at the observation glass—its glorious coat dulled by artificial habitats and the still-water pond provided—and it had scared her, as it would scare anyone, until the precise moment it hadn't. Little Hermione peered around from behind her father's legs and watched the animal, regal and capable, paw at the glass with frustrated cries of anguish, hungry and taunted with relief it could not reach, and her stomach had churned, just as it did now.

Unable to bear it, she'd never set foot in another zoo.

"Well," she whispered, staring at Rowan's dilated eyes. "I suppose that depends on who we're asking."



The work began like any other project, with preparation. She selected a shelf to start on and rid it of as much dust as magically and physically possible before pulling down books and settling them into organised piles: non-fiction, fiction, mythology and creatures, political structures and societal history, and, finally, the irrelevant rest. A roll of parchment and an inked quill hovered over her shoulder, taking note of each title and where it needed to return once she was done.

Will followed her around, scuffing his shoes on the stone-slabbed flooring, mumbling to himself about all the things he would rather be working on—she almost joined in. The air was cold, and the fire was too small to heat it in good time, so Will kept up a rigorous schedule of warming charms and requested back-to-back cups of tea from Femur. The ring of the bell set her teeth on edge every time, but she couldn't deny the relief a hot beverage offered.

As the night crawled in and the candlelight reached less and less of the library space, the eerie feeling in the air seemed to follow, growing taller and taller, swallowing them in penumbra.

"This place gives me the creeps," Will admitted, frowning at the unseen edge of the room.

"Yeah," she agreed, peering up at the blackened windows, no light emitting but the candles above and the tip of her wand, longing for Ron's deluminator. "Me too."



The two weeks that followed her visit to St Mungo's served to distract her from her usual duties. Her focus was on making inquiries with experts in the field of creature lore, staying late to make use of her office space, or slyly requesting that Benedict set up consultations with academics and professors alike. On the weekend, she ventured as far as Cambridge University to access their secluded Wizarding library, finding nothing but the same basic information she could find amongst her own collection.

She even, in a bid of what could only be described as delusion, tried to read Gildroy Lockhart's *Voyages with Vampires*, skimming it from front to back before tossing it into the fireplace and watching it burn.

Sundays were often spent with Harry and Ron—but this weekend also made room for Ginny and George. They milled about the joke shop, all chipping in to help the process of restocking. Unsure as to how much Harry and Ron knew about the task force and even more unsure as to how much she was permitted to divulge, Hermione kept quiet, though silently wishing to seek their advice. They were working the investigation, surely they knew something she did not—maybe, even, *she* would know something *they* did not? Regardless, secrecy was an unwelcome viper in the tall grass of their friendship, and she resolved to oust it at the earliest opportunity.

Several of her weekday afternoons were spent at St Mungos, trying and failing to interview the lucid vampires being kept there, none of whom seemed to be able to offer a full response. On one shameful occasion, she'd joined the nurses as they held down Genevieve by her thrashing limbs, and pulled as much memory from the night of her turning as she could get her magic on. The task force had met that night in the Department of Mysteries and crowded around the pensive, eager for any light the memories could shed.

The memories were, at first, clear and mundane; a wealthy witch on her way home from socialising with other wealthy witches. Then, suddenly, she was not. There was pain, unfelt and yet entirely known by all who witnessed the memory, severe and as piercing as the scream that tore from her lungs, comparable only to the misery of the Cruciatus. Vision dipped in red, a hunger unlike anything—nothing penetrated beyond it, no faces, no names, just the burning desire to feed.

When the memory was over, Hermione asked to watch it again.

Three days later, she received acceptance of her meeting request from Professor Lidwig, a French academic who'd authored various publications on dark creatures. He invited her to visit his eclectic home, and she didn't hesitate. His residence could be more aptly described as a hazard, with towers of books piled along the ground and rugs layered negligently over warped wooden floorboards, pictures on the walls knocked to a slant, plants rotting in forgotten clay pots, and curtains that had been feasted upon by swarms of moths. Still, she sat upon his sofa (which was printed with florals and smelled strongly of pipe smoke) and ran her hand down the back of his elderly dog, who sported glassy eyes and a jaw of missing teeth, while she watched the professor pull books from the chaos.

"Not a lot is known about vampires, try as we might to discover them," he said, voice warbling with age.

"I've met vampires before, surely they are not so elusive," she replied.

"Can you count the vampires you have met on one hand, Miss?" She rolled her lips together in lieu of answering, because...yes, but Lidwig raised a smug brow anyway. "Exactly. They are not hiding, but they are not proud creatures either. It is, to my limited understanding, commonplace for them to experience some form of self-revulsion."

"Why?"

Lidwig scoffed as he pulled another book from a precarious stack. "Wouldn't you, if your primary life source had to be taken from another?"

“But blood bags are readily available these days, there is no need to—”

“*Need* does not dictate *desire*.”

She slumped back, forgetting to stroke the dog for all of twenty seconds before it turned its rancid breath to her as a reminder. “So, the consensus is that they are unremittably bloodthirsty, regardless of the readily available and ethically sourced alternative options?”

“I cannot answer that in confidence,” Lidwig said, shrugging.

“Wonderful.”

Lidwig, having exhausted his search, sat down in a faded armchair that maintained the shape of his body, knees creaking as he went. Immediately, the little dog hopped down from his spot beside Hermione to take up residence atop his master's slippered feet, going back to sleep within seconds of settling.

“There are men, be they Muggle, Wizard, or Creature, who have stable incomes and functioning kitchens, and still decide to hunt with bows and eat raw liver,” he said.

“So, you’re saying we might be dealing with a particularly enthusiastic omophagist?” she chuckled.

He smiled and shook his head. “Possibly, but I am not an Auror.”

Silence descended, in which she took the time to scan the books he’d placed in her lap. Old, to be sure, but all of them appeared to be standard issues. In fact, she even owned a copy of at least two, though she would read these ones just to be sure.

“What I can tell you is only rumour,” Lidwig said, recapturing her attention, “and you must understand that rumour is not something I usually indulge in.”

She winced. “I think rumour is *all* we can indulge in right now, professor.”

“You might be right,” he said, pausing to breathe in a long inhale, his hands rubbing against his thighs nervously. “There have been whispers, for years, of ancient texts written by the first cursed hands of the first cursed houses. I have never seen them, obviously, but they are supposedly rich in lost artefacts and history. Tales, which may only be tales, of ancient civilisations, of a time when the darkest creatures not only walked among us but made up a sizeable chunk of the ruling class. The structure was a little more tenuous than anything we have in place these days, naturally, but the possibility still fascinates...”

Hermione leaned in closer. “Vampires and creatures alike were once...in charge?”

“Possibly. As I said, Miss Granger, I have neither seen these texts nor verified these claims.”

“Where can I find these texts?”

He laughed, a pitying sound, and her stomach sank to her knees. “If I knew the answer to that, I wouldn’t be living in such squalor.”

She decided not to argue that he would likely be living in these conditions regardless of wealth, instead letting out a defeated sigh as she rose from the sofa and collected her bag. “Thank you, Professor, for your time and resources. I will return the books as soon as—”

“Collectors.”

“Pardon?” she asked, pausing.

Lidwig pushed his glasses further up his nose and peered at her. “Start with collectors. Every item of historical value has, at some point, been overshadowed by its monetary value. The rich collect and hoard like dragons upon gold. If those texts exist at all, my best guess is that they are currently sitting under a scaled belly.”

Hermione frowned, thinking of the vaults at Gringotts, of goblets and jewels that multiplied and burned and buried.

“Thank you.”



Femur arrived late in the evening with two hearty bowls of stew, which were much needed after a day of digging through seemingly unending piles of completely irrelevant books. Her quill and parchment continued taking stock while she ate, the diligent scratch of feather upon paper accompanying the sound of their chewing.

Will hardly looked up from his bowl, but Hermione was distant, watching the books arrange themselves under her ongoing charm, deep in thought about any way in which she could narrow her search, lest they be here forever. By the time her spoon scraped along the bottom of her bowl, Will was already up and transfiguring the chairs into small, single beds.

He worked efficiently, performing neat magic with merely a mumble and a flick of his wand, positioning the beds just as he wanted them; his closest to the door, where he had a clear view of their entries and exits, and hers in the centre, furthest from both.

“Don’t want to put it too close to the windows either,” he explained, though she hadn’t asked.

He was, she decided, going a bit overboard, but his one job was to protect her from any harm that might befall her in these old, weeping walls, and she was reassured by how seriously he was taking it. Especially because she had to admit there was something extrinsically *off* about the manor, and she couldn’t put her finger on exactly what it was.



The gathering in Kingsley's office was a sombre affair indeed, as news of the latest attack had not yet reached the media, but had certainly reached the Ministry. This time, it was one of their own: Elise Singleton, head of the Department of Magical Transportation. She was on her way home from work—not even two hours ago—when she'd been discovered feeding upon the lifeless body of a Muggle woman, two more bodies already at her feet. Currently, she was sedated and locked in St Mungo's alongside the others.

The call for a meeting had been quiet but urgent, and nobody had denied attending.

“Robards,” Kingsley addressed the head of the D.M.L.E. “How is the investigation?”

“Potter is still at the scene with several Aurors.”

“Good,” Kingsley said, though his grave voice indicated it was anything but.

Hermione stepped forward. “I would like to personally consult with him and Mr Weasley regarding the situation.”

Kingsley looked to Nico first, who gave a noncommittal lift of one shoulder, then turned back to her. “I needn't remind you of the importance of discretion.”

“You needn't.”

“Then I see no reason for you not to consult with them,” he heaved a weary laugh, hardly more than a breath. “Merlin knows it cannot hurt to have the three of you put your heads together.”

“Thank you,” she said, stepping back.

Camilla cleared her throat next. “Sir, Miss Granger and I have been working with the archivists to track down the ancient texts as previously mentioned.”

“Keep at it, it's the only lead we have right now,” Kingsley said with an encouraging smile. “What about you, Edward? Have you managed to secure permission to move the affected to an off-site facility?”

“I am awaiting imminent approval, Sir. The papers are due to be signed tomorrow morning, during—”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Camilla cut in, “but I had more.”

Hermione's head jerked towards the unspeakable, who hadn't yet informed her of whatever this '*more*' consisted of, despite the pair of them spending an ungodly amount of hours

searching together. They'd tucked themselves away in the archives and summoned lists of known collectors, their historic transactions, and decades of auction sheets, scouring them with tired eyes for any mention of ancient texts rooted in vampiric lore and coming up woefully short.

Camilla shot her an apologetic smile. "Apologies, Miss Granger, I would have informed you beforehand if the chance arose, but this information was handed to me as I left my office this evening."

She produced a thin roll of parchment from her briefcase and placed it on the table for all to see, but Hermione, feeling starved for information, snatched it up first. Her heart picked up speed as her eyes fell to a line circled in red ink, to the scribbled title of '*Casele Cechilor Vampiri*', then stopped altogether when she read the line that followed: purchased in return for a plot of land, dated 1767, by one Septimus Malfoy.

"Malfoy?" she croaked. "As in..."

"I cannot say I know of any others," Camilla confirmed solemnly.

With reluctance, she let the document be pried from her grip and passed around the room, her mind spinning as though circling a plug. Of all the leads, of all the names, it had to be a *Malfoy*. It wasn't even that surprising, knowing their history and their penchant for owning, but it *was* shocking. Not often was she confronted with the reminder of that family without significant preparation.

The paper landed in Nico's hands last, and he peered down at it with pinched brows. "The Malfoy estate is under Ministry supervision, is it not?"

"Supervision is a strong word," Kingsley said. "We do, however, have unlimited access to any and all parts of it whenever we require."

"Including the library, I presume?" Nico asked.

The library.

She may not have given much thought to the Malfoys in recent years, but she'd always wondered about the famous Malfoy library. Supposedly, it was large enough to require a map. Supposedly, it housed a rare collection of 'lost' first editions. Supposedly, it was as fiercely warded as any Gringotts vault. Hermione, a lifelong bibliophile, could not deny the allure of its mystery, but even allure wasn't enough to outweigh the transgressions of its inhabitants. Malfoy—the youngest, the one she'd known for a long, miserable time—always claimed it superior to the library at Hogwarts, and she'd never quite known by which metric he measured that claim. Was it in size? Was it in selection? Was it because Hogwarts offered favourable tales of Muggleborns, and his library offered undue, vindictive lies about her very blood?

"Hermione," Kingsley said, shaking her from her stupor, "we'll arrange for you to go and locate these texts. If they are at the manor, ensure they are placed under Ministry ownership. Camilla, if you could continue your search of the archives for any further—"

“Pardon?”

Everyone turned to Hermione, who hadn’t truly been aware that she’d spoken, still unsure if she was even hearing correctly. Her mouth was agape, her eyes widening and narrowing as she attempted to make sense of the utterly nonsensical. It wasn’t until Kingsley’s mouth softened with guilt that she realised his words had not been imagined.

“If there is anyone most adept at scouring a library, it is you,” he said.

She fought the bubble of hysteria threatening to pop in her throat. “If there is anyone *least* adept at being anywhere near that building, it is me.”

Thus began a staredown, unrepentant fury in her eyes, unwavering resolve (and a healthy dose of remorse) in his. Hermione refused to relent, refused to let herself be sent to the gallows without putting up a fight, refused to be ushered through a tour of her worst memories just to find an old book that may not even be there.

Nico looked between them, raising a placating palm. “Maybe if we—”

“You know what happened there,” she said quietly, still fixed on Kingsley. “You know how they feel about me. I am not welcome at Malfoy Manor, regardless of how little they can deny my entry.”

For a moment—a blissful, hopeful moment—Kingsley looked as though he were about to concede, but Robards spoke up first, stamping on that hope with the thick tread of his boots. “As far as I am aware, the manor is almost entirely vacant.”

“What?” she asked, voice too high, eyebrows rising with it.

“The elves are still there to maintain it,” he explained, “but Lucius and Narcissa are long dead, and it is presumed that their son has taken residence at their home in Vézenobres.”

She blinked, dumbfounded. “I didn’t think he would be able to leave the country.”

“Why not? He was acquitted.”

He was, and she supposed it made sense, legally speaking, but somehow it still felt...wrong.

“So, he’s not even there?”

“Nobody has seen him since the trials, and we have been to the manor a great number of times since then, never once have there been any reports of any living presence aside from the elves,” he said.

“I still don’t think it’s prudent for me to go, any one of us could go, and...” she trailed off, knowing that her words were not strictly true; she was the only one in this room who was not heading a department, heading the task force, or holding an active seat in the Wizengamot. She could, in theory, spend as much time as would be required in that library—if it were any other, the idea might even thrill her. If she knew this, Kingsley surely knew it too, so she met her eye and implored silently, the only way she could: *I don’t want to, please don’t make me.*

The Minister tipped his chin to the ceiling and let out a resigned sigh. “Robards, do you have a spare Auror?”

“I can find one.”

“Then you will not go alone, Hermione.”

She almost scoffed. “You’re sending me with a bodyguard?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t—”

“With all due respect, Miss Granger,” Nico said calmly, “this is of the utmost importance.”

Her protests died on her tongue as she looked upon the empty chair where Elise should be sitting, as she thought about the parade of crime scene photographs and the drained faces of innocent victims, most of whom hadn’t even known of the existence of creatures before being killed by one. She thought about the war, about how she’d never been able to bring herself to sit anything out, even when she hadn’t been the one the burden fell upon. She thought about Harry and Ron, both already doing their part, and how desperately she wanted to talk to them first.

Then, with disinclination, she thought about Draco Malfoy, a boy with more spite than sense, who she’d never once let hold her back, who hadn’t factored into her considerations at all in so many years, who *wouldn’t even be there* to stop her from what she needed to do; help. Help the families of those fallen prey, help to prevent any further changings and attacks, and most importantly, to help the public servants now confined to an unplotted ward, guzzling blood from bags and sobbing through the nights.

“I’ll go,” she said firmly, lifting her chin high, “and I will not leave until I have secured the texts or am absolutely, unreservedly sure they are not to be found there.”

Kingsley’s shoulders dropped with relief. “Thank you, Hermione.”

“And the Auror?” Robards asked.

“Yes,” she answered, perhaps a little too quickly, but she wasn’t above admitting her nerves. “I don’t want to be there on my own.”

“That’s settled then.” Kingsley clapped his hands together. “Hermione will go to the manor and search for the texts, Camilla will continue her overhaul of the archives, Dixon will accompany Robards to the scene of Elise’s attack and...”

It was all white noise in her ears, a low whistle that reverberated through her bones until it became a shriek, a sound so similar to the ones she’d made on the floor of that Manor that night. She could still feel the pain in her ribs from the curse, the ache in her fingertips from clawing at the ground, the bitter coldness to be found in the watching eyes. Malfoy, the names he’d called her, the joy he’d taken in it, the hollowness of his tone, his father, his mother, his *aunt*—

Nico was watching her with increasing concern, his mouth forming a silent question: *You okay?*

She was not, but she nodded anyway, and that concern morphed into an expression she'd seen so many times before, one she'd coveted from Harry or Ron, from her peers or parents, from teachers and superiors alike, an unmistakable gift she could not squander; trust.



Hermione woke with a start, lifting her head from the page of an open book and feeling the instant sting in her neck. Will was sleeping, his snores filling the otherwise unnatural hush of the library. The candles had mostly extinguished, leaving her cloaked in darkness, lit only by the muted light emitting from her discarded wand. Stretching, she reached to collect it from between the book pile, deciding that falling asleep on the stone floor was, if nothing else, an indication that she'd reached her limit.

That's when she felt it.

Hermione knew what it was to be hunted. She knew the feeling of prying eyes, to be the focus of lingering glances and hushed whispers, and that is how she knew, with absolute certainty, that something was watching her now. She grabbed her wand and stood on weakened legs, the rough bevelling of the stone indented in her flesh, and pointed straight into the nearest shadows.

"Lumos maxima," she breathed, her heartbeat thundering in her ears.

The light increased, revealing nothing but more bookshelves in its wake, though the feeling of eyes upon her back did not dissipate. She turned on her heel, scanning every corner of the room she could find, eyes narrowed and focus sharp.

"Is someone there?" she asked, braver than she felt, braver than she ought to have been. "Femur?"

No little elf emerged from the dark, no little voice called out for her to relax, response only coming in the form of deafening silence, broken by her guard's rhythmic snores. Impulsively, illogically, she walked through the library with keen interest, scanning every row with the flick of her wand.

This library, this manor, had been standing since the sixteenth century. It had housed all and every kind of magic, from the lightest to the very, very darkest. It stood to reason, she told herself, that the watchful stare she felt upon her skin may well have come from the walls themselves, cursed and cold as they were, unwilling to allow her peace in a place built to

defile her. Even the gentle breeze felt abrasive, like sandpaper on skin, as she tiptoed a circle around their immediate area.

“Show yourself,” she demanded, one final request to an ungranting silence.

Her wand fell limp, her hackles lowered, and she scuffed the ground with the front of her shoe, chiding herself for being so foolish. The manor was aged, not haunted, and allowing herself to be tricked by shadows would only make the duration of their stay harder than it was already set to be. With a rueful laugh at her own ridiculousness, she turned for the bed and tapped out her wand, letting the darkness coat them like a weighted blanket.

Rest, it seemed, was a fruitless endeavour, for no matter how often she reminded herself that it had merely been a trick of the mind, the hairs on the back of her neck never quite settled.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, hello.

Firstly, thanks to everyone on Instagram who fed us so much Vampire Draco content; this is entirely your fault, and I haven't slept in weeks.

Secondly, this is the first time I've had two active WIPS, so to avoid me going genuinely insane, I will be updating this one as and when. Which means, unlike DWD, this will have no schedule (although I am an impatient and obsessive creature, so I doubt the wait will ever be too long).

This is something a bit different for me, but we'll figure it out together, and I hope it's as fun for you as it is for me.

Thank you to my dear friends, who let me rant and spiral and steer me with firm, sexy hands towards coherency. I love you, and stuff:

[Miagas](#)

[Accio_Funky_Pants](#)

Chapter 2: Nor ear can hear nor tongue can tell The tortures of that inward hell!

Chapter Notes

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

After two weeks of cancellations, finally getting the chance to sit down with Harry and Ron felt like breathing fresh air. Hermione twirled pasta around her fork and listened to them update her on all their investigation had been able to uncover, which was, it turned out, not much more than her own. However, their firsthand accounts of the scene were able to provide her with more clarity on Elise's situation—she'd been discovered weeping and ravenous, hunched over the bloodless body of a young woman. When the Aurors had approached, she'd lunged for Ron's subordinate, missing their throat by the narrowest of margins.

In turn, Hermione told them about the task force, about the ward in which the affected were kept—or caged—and her meeting with Professor Lidwig. When she told them about her role and the manor it would lead her to, they responded much the same as she had.

“Does it have to be you?” Harry asked, his meal forgotten.

“Yeah, surely Kingsley knows better,” Ron added.

“It doesn't matter if it *has* to be me,” she said, forlorn and forbearing, “it *is* me.”

The three of them slumped back and reached for their bottles of beer—the better part of two decades in each other's company had caused their mannerisms to blur together. The silence was contemplative, three minds working hard to deny the truth of her situation, but it was no use; she was to leave for Malfoy Manor tomorrow and stay there until she uncovered the answers, for better or worse.

“I can come with you instead of Will,” Harry finally said.

Ron nodded. “We both can—”

“No, you can't,” she cut in. “The investigation is too important to be reassigned.”

“*You* are more important, Hermione,” Harry said, a forest of sincerity in his eyes.

She smiled at them with aching fondness, wanting nothing more than to say *yes, come with me, stay at my side as if we were still fearful children*, but they were not, and they had far more pressing concerns than her apprehension.

“It's not just work, though, is it?” She looked up at the ceiling pointedly, to the room above where she knew Ginny would be sleeping beside the cot of a three-month-old James, his baby hands curled into baby fists. “You need to be here.”

“I don't,” Ron argued. “I'm not heading up anything, they can easily replace me with—”

“None of that,” she and Harry snapped in unison.

Ron’s eyes flicked down to his hands, to his fingers picking at the soggy label of the bottle, and he did not push back. A lifetime of insecurity had left its marks on him, as it had left marks on them all, as *everything* had, but slowly, they’d learned to navigate it.

“Robards said it was abandoned, anyway,” she added, feigning nonchalance with surprising success.

“As far as we know, yeah,” Harry confirmed. “I’ve certainly never seen him there.”

Ron winced. “The elves are a bit weird, though.”

“Weird how?” she asked.

“You know, just...creepy.”

“Fantastic.” She tapped her almost-empty bottle against the tabletop and let her shoulders drop. “What about the guard?”

“Will?” Harry’s head tilted. “He’s...”

“Fucking dull,” Ron mumbled.

Harry’s trembling lip betrayed him, small, spluttering sounds of choked laughter bursting from the seams, and it took all of her mental capacity not to join in.

“Sorry.” Harry ran a palm down his face to collect himself. “He’s good, Hermione. I would have already pulled him otherwise. I swear, he’ll look out for you.”

“He’ll have to,” Ron said sternly, “or we’ll kill him.”

That night, she slowly folded enough clothes to last her a full week into a small suitcase. It might have been wishful thinking, but she couldn’t imagine staying there for one night, let alone six, and it wasn’t as if she couldn’t return for more of her wardrobe as and when she required. With the year still so young, Hermione packed her heaviest knits and highest denier tights, opting for comfort over compatibility.

When she was done, she trundled down to the kitchen, which was sparsely decorated and even more sparsely stocked, and opted to make herself a packet of instant ramen noodles for dinner. Often, always, she found herself far too distracted or far too exhausted for proper nourishment, seeking the swift refuge of pre-packaged meals. She watched the noodles soften in boiling water with glazed eyes, checking off the mental list she’d made of jobs to do before retiring to her bed for what could be the last good night’s sleep she’d get for the foreseeable.

Unwittingly, she let her gaze fall to the ceramic bowls sitting empty on the floor, once the most coveted household items of the most coveted household creature. She wouldn’t need to call in anyone to feed him while she was away this time; he had no need for it from his little grave under her garden’s wildflowers. Grief panged through her chest like a snapped elastic,

and she pressed the flesh of her palm into the sensation in a vain attempt to disperse it. Crookshanks' death hadn't been unexpected, nor had it been too soon. He'd lived a long and mostly good life, surviving where most others hadn't, luxuriating where most others couldn't.

Yet, in the six weeks since she'd brought his body home from the vet, wrapped in his favourite blanket, she hadn't been able to bring herself to pack away his bowls.



Hermione brushed a fallen curl from her eyes as she surveyed the shelf, preparing herself for another round of dusting, stacking, and manoeuvring herself into the crawl spaces behind the groaning drawers—in search of something that may not even exist.

Will rarely offered to help her, choosing instead to stay in the centre of the library, where he could, if he were to be believed, get a better view of the entry points. The lack of company, paired with the vacuous expanse of the immemorial library, made for a painfully soundless workspace, and she could bear it no longer.

Reaching back, she plucked the wand from her hair, feeling it tumble over her shoulders as she summoned the bell from wherever Will was hoarding it. Femur appeared after the first shake, his tiny body bent over in greeting.

“Miss Granger.”

“Good morning,” she said, offering the little elf a sickly sweet smile that he didn't even attempt to return.

“How can Femur be assisting?”

“Do you have a radio?” she asked, but Femur only blinked at her, the permanent wrinkles in his face deepening. “Or perhaps a gramophone? Anything, really, to liven this place up a bit.”

“We don't...” he began, shaking his head in utter confusion.

She sighed, doing her best not to let irritation cloud the sound. “Just a glass of water, please.”

Relieved by her altered request, he clicked his fingers and produced a fresh glass, handing it to her with another bow. She took it, forcing gratitude upon her curved lips, before the little elf vanished just as quickly as he'd appeared. Hermione set the water down upon the nearest side table, where it would likely remain untouched for the rest of the afternoon, and got back to work.

Amongst her organised book piles, another began to form; books she knew were not the texts she sought, but could prove helpful nonetheless. She took to reading them when she should have been eating or sleeping. Will, who never seemed bothered by her total lack of interest in

conversation, found other ways to pass the time, be it playing exploding snap against himself when she was nearby, or patrolling the library when she wasn't.

Though their interactions were borne mostly of necessity, it never felt unmanageable to be in his company. He was, as Harry said, good at his job—and a thorough gentleman; he called for her when food arrived and assured she ate it; he offered, on occasion, to help carry books to and from shelves; he found her when the shadows crept in through the windows and urged her to rest. It reminded her of the scornful, affectionate pleas from Harry and Ron, who had spent much of their lives urging her to do the same, and she wondered if Will was simply acting upon their instruction.

The thought made her smile, even as the temperature dropped and the candlelight dimmed.



“We’ve got stew again.”

Hermione peered up from the line of books she was in the middle of returning to the top of a particularly tall bookcase, her eyes drifting across the dark library until they found Will, bathed in firelight, holding up two bowls with a grim expression.

“Is it beef?”

“Who knows?” he replied. “Whatever it is, it’s chewy. I thought the point of having house elves was that they were supposed to be better at this stuff.”

She hummed, considering the rusted locks and hinges that adorned every door and window, wondering if the elves suffered the same curse of underuse.

“It’s going cold, Hermione.”

“You could put it under a stasis charm,” she pointed out.

Even from a distance, even under dim lighting, she could see annoyance bloom on his face. “*You* could just take five minutes to come and eat it.”

Fighting a pout, Hermione relented, letting the books settle at the bottom of her ladder for later relocation before instinctively sparing a glance at the nearest window. The darkened sky came as somewhat of a shock, time had seemed to slip by without her notice—how could the days be going so fast when she was making so little progress? In the three days since their arrival, she’d managed to sort through more bookshelves than she cared to count and could not possibly estimate how many she had left to go. She was, embarrassingly, beginning to feel like a glorified cleaner.

Her eyes lingered on the woods at the far end of the sprawling estate, at the dark and dreadful promise offered by the towering oak silhouettes, then dropped to the large expanse of overgrown gardens that led across the Manor grounds, once prim and proud, now a forsaken floral graveyard of idle—

Movement caught her eye.

A figure marching at an incomprehensible speed through the gardens, heading straight for the forest. A billowing cloak whipping in the raging winds. A hood falling back to reveal a head of platinum-blond hair.

The blood drained from her face as she watched, unblinking, a man who could *only* be Draco Malfoy walk into the mouth of the forest, swallowed whole by the fringe.

Her hands shook against the ladder, and she found passage back to her own body before it toppled over, descending with wobbly legs and heading straight for where Will stood waiting. The splash of stew could be heard echoing through the stone walls and gathering in the alcoves as she inched closer, then Will was before her in an instant, his hands now occupied with his gripped wand.

“What is it?” he said raggedly, putting himself squarely between her and the oversized doors that led to the oversized hallway. “What’s happening?”

“Relax, Will,” she muttered, rubbing at her forehead. “I’m fine.”

“You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

A breathless, mirthless laugh escaped her. “Maybe I have.”

“Oh, *great*,” his voice pitched dramatically. “So, this place is fucking haunted, too?”

“No, I just...” She paused, looking back at the window, unable to see much now that she was back on ground level. “I think I saw Draco Malfoy.”

Will’s posture snapped straight, his eyes wide as they rounded back to her, his voice hardly more than a low whisper when he asked, “Where?”

“In the gardens. It had to be him, but...I thought he was in France?”

“So did I,” Will grumbled. “Maybe he’s just visiting?”

Teeth sank into her bottom lip until she could taste iron, the vision of his purposeful stride still clear in her mind, how he’d stepped into the forest’s edge without hesitation; if it *was* just a visit, it was an odd one.

“Maybe,” she mumbled.

“Hey.” Will placed a hand on her shoulder to rouse her, and when she finally looked up, she found his previous agitation had melted into a calm confidence. “It doesn’t change anything, you’ll be just fine.”

Hermione could do nothing but nod, joining him at the table for another silent meal—the meat was not chewy and was certainly not beef. Night crept over the stone floors until it reached their socked feet, and her mind drifted with it, letting it float through the stained-glass panels of the overhead windows and down, down, to the bed of forest and twisted branches below, where flashes of blonde hair would drop her heart into her stomach.

Will, however, never took his eyes off the library doors.



With every passing hour, the library—perhaps even the Manor itself—became increasingly hostile.

On the morning of their fourth day, she began rooting through cabinets and the long, low units that bordered the walls. When she reached into the first, a rat, which she could have sworn was the size of a small dog, ran up the length of her arm. Her resulting shriek of horror had Will blasting her once organised piles of books to the side in his valiant attempt to reach her, and as punishment for her *'overreaction'*, he refused to help her reorganise.

It wasn't just the pests, it was the very walls surrounding them. Sometimes, when stretching her legs after hours of curling over books, she could swear the walls were whispering. Though whenever she let her rationale slip and pressed her ear to the cold surface, the sounds would cease in an instant. *It was just the elves*, she decided with a firm shake of her head, *moving about the building*. The same excuses could be found every time she heard the turning of pages, despite Will being on the other side of the room; *must be a draft, nothing to linger on*.

Still, she lingered.

In an effort to distract herself from the growing unease churning her gut to butter, she let herself daydream while she worked. It helped some to begin with, then helped none at all, as her thoughts all seemed to lead back to one shrinking figure in the dead of night; his cloak adrift, his hair reflecting the moonlight, his walk closer to a glide. Those trails only worsened when she opened a drawer to find the crudely carved initials of a young boy, the one she'd once shared classrooms and physical blows with, knifed into the wood.

Her fingertips traced the letters with a sense of woeful nostalgia, for before he'd been a bigot, he'd once been a child, mouldable and fragile. Hermione had harboured so many feelings towards Draco Malfoy over the years, but all that remained was pity...until now. *Now*, she felt begrudgingly inquisitive.

Femur arrived at midday with the lunch, which consisted of terrible, bland ham sandwiches that they ate in quiet misery. When he returned a handful of minutes later for their plates, Will held up a hand to stop him.

“We’re in dire need of a shower, mate,” he said, and Hermione almost wept with relief. Scourgify could only go so far, and she needed to feel the scalding sensation of hot water on her skin to believe it clean.

Femur paused, pursing his lips and rapping his fingers against his hips, before nodding decisively. “Tibbs will be escorting.”

He was gone in with a sharp pop, replaced seconds later by a bug-eyed elf with comically long ears that she didn’t seem keen to let go of. Tibbs didn’t speak, just waved for them to follow her out of the library, and they did. She led them down a long, winding hallway, the walls dark and brutal, lit by candles that only caught flames in the brief moments they passed by before self-extinguishing, as if even they were trying to keep secrets.

The candlelight offered her a fleeting glimpse at an entryway as they passed by, and Hermione couldn’t help but notice a distinct lack of dust upon the doors, couldn’t stop her eyes from catching on the scuff marks left upon the floor from use. She stopped, turning towards the entryway with unbridled curiosity, only for Tibbs to grab hold of her sleeve and tug her back on course.

When they arrived at the bathroom, Tibbs climbed onto a nearby ottoman and pointed to the door, waiting to see which of them would go first. Will looked at her imploringly, and she almost rolled her eyes.

“It’s all yours,” she said.

“Thank god,” he groaned. “I’ll be quick.”

She waved him off. “There’s no rush.”

“Yes, there is. Don’t go far.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” she mumbled, taking the spot beside Tibbs as the elf turned away and curled in on herself.

It was so, so dark in this Manor, nonsensically so. It had to be purposeful concealment, but she could not for the life of her come to any conclusion as to what there was to hide, especially when the Manor had been so thoroughly vetted.

“Tibbs?” she asked, and the elf peered over her shoulder with giant eyes. “What is through those doors we passed?”

The elf said nothing, didn’t even blink.

“Is that where you and Femur live?”

The elf said nothing, didn’t even blink.

“Can you talk?” Hermione asked cautiously, and Tibbs let her head drop forward in a stilted nod. “Are you going to?”

Much quicker this time, Tibbs shook her head in determined refusal, and Hermione decided it was a lost cause, letting her head fall back against the wall with a loud thud.

Will was out in record time, taking her spot on the ottoman as she took in what was quite possibly the most ostentatious, ridiculous bathroom she'd ever seen. Painted a deep purple, the colour of burst vessels, of bruised skin, and lined with golden skirting. In the centre sat a tub large enough to rival the one she'd once had access to in her old school's prefect's bathroom. The floating candles gave the room a serene feeling, and she was sure that it had never, not once, been chilly in there.

There was a shower tucked away in the far corner, but she didn't even give it a second look, too fixated on the bathtub. It would be kinder to shower, to not make Will sit in silence for too long, but she wasn't feeling nearly kind enough to pass up an opportunity like the one presented before her. So, with an eager flick of her wand, the taps turned to fill the tub.



Her body, submerged in a heavenly cradle, is held and warmed by gathering bubbles. Her hair lies wet upon her forehead, her head wet upon the copper rim, her eyelids flutter closed and stay there. A moan of relaxation rumbles up the length of her spine and out of her parted mouth, muscles soothed after days of crawling, bending, scraping over stone floors and frangible pages.

Her limbs are blistering, ripples of water lapping like flames at her skin, tension seeping from her pores with every fresh wave, twisting her up and wringing her out, until release locates upon limb; *her arm*, it's leaking... It's *pouring*. The water gets hotter, thicker, iron vapour fills her nose and lands solid in her lungs. Her eyes won't open, glued shut by viscous liquid, head tipped back by the weight of it in her hair, and she's not resting, she's not floating, she's sinking.

Blood.

It's blood. Hot as sin and spreading over her body, coating her chin, filling the too-large tub with too much blood from the tap in her arm, carved in words of hate, her muted scream echoed by the wicked cackle of a long-dead witch—*is she here?*

No.

But someone is.

Someone is in here with her, standing over her and *watching* eagerly as crimson pulls her under and boils her alive. She struggles, writhes, opens her mouth to spill a broken plea. It is a mistake, a fatal error, and blood rushes over her tongue and down her throat, filling and spilling all at once and oh—oh *god*, she can't possibly feel it, but—hunger, waves and waves

of hunger crash against the shores of her body. She should spit it out, open her eyes, climb out of the tub and flee, but she doesn't, the need is too strong, too pinning.

She opens her mouth wider and lets her head submerge—



Hermione woke on a desperate gasp for air, slipping under the water and muting her own curdling scream. Scrambling, arms reaching and legs kicking, she hauled herself over the side of the bath and stood, naked and drowned, in the expanse of the bathroom. On high alert, she spun on her heel, scanning every corner of the room and curling her hands into fists, ready to lunge at whoever had been standing over her naked body and watching her nightmare unfold, but finding no other soul in the vicinity.

Water pooled at her feet, and she sucked in a few laboured breaths before daring to look down at herself; skin coated in soapy bubbles—*not blood*. Next, she looked to the bath, still full to the brim with steaming, welcoming water—*not blood*. Slowly, she brought her fingers to her mouth and ran them across the flat of her tongue, releasing them for examination under nearby candlelight—*not blood*. On a broken whimper, Hermione stumbled to the sink and caught herself on the edge, shoulders trembling with terror and exhaustion. When she braved her own reflection in the gold-framed mirror, she saw flushed skin, heated from the water, but decidedly *not* coated in blood.

Her reflection stared back with blown pupils and whispered a stern, “Get it together.”



Still wired from her tryst in the bathroom, Hermione allowed herself a relatively early night, leaving her station near the shelves in favour of curling up on an old chaise with one of the books from her pile of intrigue. There was much to discover within the pages, though nothing of direct note.

She read about the common Muggle misunderstanding of occult practices, of ancient mythic blood rituals, of vampiric theories that ranged from mildly plausible to entirely absurd; aversion to garlic, followed by supernatural powers of mind control. Some of it made her laugh, some of it made her sit up straight and call for her quill. The section on blood bonds—the relationships vampires form with those they feed from—captured her interest more than any other. The act of drinking the blood of another was considered to be highly, intensely intimate, if this book were to be believed.

Hermione tried not to think of the nightmare she'd had in the bathroom, but she couldn't help it; the taste of iron was still so bitter on her tongue, just as her hunger was still so prevalent in its wake. The sensation lingered, the contradiction of feeling so very *within* her own body while also merely a prisoner to it; a voyeur, watching from above. Shaking her head, Hermione stuck a bookmark between the pages and slammed the book shut.

"You should sleep," Will suggested, busy making his bed.

"Can't," she answered briskly.

He stopped fluffing his pillow and raised a brow her way. "Why not?"

"It's difficult to relax here."

"Hmm."

Her attention turned back to the bathroom, and though she was vaguely aware of the ringing bell, of the familiar pop of elf apparition—coming, going, coming, going—followed by footsteps, so loud in her head, like a hammer to the side of her skull...it wasn't until Will knelt at her side that she bothered to look at him.

He held out a small vial in offering, ignoring her physical recoil. "It's just a sleeping draught."

"I don't need it," she protested, pushing it away.

"Don't argue, just take it."

"It'll give me nightmares." God, she hated how young she sounded, how pathetic, how needy, but Will didn't bat an eye at the whine in her voice.

"It'll give you *rest*," he said.

"But you—"

"Will stay up and watch out for any ghouls." He pushed the vial back towards her. "Just take it before I lose my patience."

With a humiliating little huff, she took the vial from him and knocked it back, wincing as the potion slid down her throat in what felt like one solid lump. It didn't take long to come into effect, the dark alcoves of the library growing darker as her eyelids became heavy, every blink lasting just a moment longer than the last.

When she slept, she dreamed of nothing.



There was an earthquake occurring on the grounds of Malfoy Manor, tectonic plates jumping along fault lines that hadn't existed there the day before, possibly even a shift of the planetary alignment, urgent and painful and shaking her within an inch of her life.

"Wake the fuck up!"

She was being hauled out of bed, her mind still spinning, her eyes still adjusting, groggy and stubborn like a boot being pulled from deep mud. Her feet dragged beneath her, but the movements never slowed.

"What—?" she tried.

"Of all the nights to give you a fucking sleeping draught..."

She was tucked firmly under Will's arm, nothing but a passenger as he practically carried her through the library, trying to find her footing while her body slowly came back into itself. Not willing to wait, Will leaned back and gave the library doors a mighty kick, sending them flying outward. The cultivated warmth they'd spent the last four days building was gone in an instant, the bitter chill of the hallway hitting her like a sharp slap, waking her with immediate effect.

With consciousness came comprehension, and Hermione was suddenly very aware of the thin pyjamas she was wearing, just as she was very aware that they seemed to be leaving the library and all of their belongings still in it. She tried to pull away, to wriggle out of his hold, but he was unrelenting, his grip almost bruising.

"What are you doing?" she bellowed, giving his shoulder a useless smack.

He didn't bother looking back at her when he snapped, "We need to leave, immediately."

"But the books—"

"Forget the fucking books!"

His voice, his body, his sweaty but painfully firm grip on her arm, all pointed to one thing: Will Prosper, the Auror selected specifically by Robards to protect her, was frightened. More than that, he was *terrified*.

"Tell me what's going on," she demanded, no longer fighting him as he marched them through blind hallways, looking around wildly for any landmark to tell them where they were.

"I thought I heard something," he said, pulling her around a dark corner; so dark he could not possibly know where it led, the candles only lighting as they passed before going out again,

just as they had earlier in the day, only now it was the middle of the night, and she could hardly see her hand in front of her face. “So I went to look, I know I shouldn’t have, but—*fuck*, we need to get *out* of this place right now.”

“I don’t understand,” she said, stumbling in a vain attempt to keep up with his long strides.

“It’s him,” he croaked. “He’s here, and he’s—”

Candles lit at the far end of the hallway, activated by movement neither of them had made. Will stopped abruptly, his body freezing like ice as a tall figure emerged from the shadows, illuminating only his silhouette. Hermione sucked in a sharp breath and held it there in her lungs, unsure what else to do, but Will recovered quicker, drawing his wand and reacting as if he’d come face to face with hell itself.

“Stay back!” he warned, hauling her behind him.

She bracketed herself with palms on his shoulder blades, daring to peer at the creeping figure, watching as the candles reacted to his movement and lit up, dancing across a face she once knew—except, it wasn’t the same face at all. Draco Malfoy looked back with pale, wicked eyes, surely not his own. Flame illuminated his skin, and she might have been shocked by how sickly he appeared, were her eyes not immediately drawn to the thick trickle of blood dripping from his chin. He was coated in it, as if bathed in ichor, and she held her breath when he took one step forward.

Suddenly, without even enough time to protect herself from impact, she was thrown backwards by a mumbled spell to the chest. The wall was as hard as brick, the scone as sharp as a knife’s edge as it connected with the crown of her head. She crumpled to the ground with a gargling sound, dulled to the pain, blind to the chaos, but she could still hear spells firing and rebounding, sparks of biting light flashing as they travelled overhead. Will was calling for her, telling her to run, to get up and out, but there was just no way. Her head was a pulsating neutron star, spinning too fast to make sense of up or out.

A hissed, vicious word, and she heard the thump of Will’s weight hit the floor. Her vision cleared enough to make out the shadowed heap of his body. Horror-induced clarity followed when Draco Malfoy, who could not be Draco Malfoy, yet somehow *was*, stalked towards her lifeless guard. His movements were so fast—too fast—that she almost missed them. He had Will by the collar, lifting his limp form with terrifying ease.

Before she could think, she acted, reaching out a shaking hand and begging, “Stop!”

Malfoy stilled, letting Will drop a few inches closer to the floor and turning his head with unnatural stiffness. Her breath caught in her throat as his wild eyes locked with hers, glinting dangerously even in the dark; absolutely predatory. Instinctively, she pushed up on unbalanced feet, caught between the inhuman look on Malfoy’s face and the scene before him, desperately trying to make sense of both. For a split second, and only a split second, his hard stare crumbled.

Then, something hot and flowing ran from her temple to the line of her jaw, and any humanity she might have found on his face evaporated.

Run, her instincts screamed, but it was too late. He was there in a flash, pinning her to the wall with his body, burying his hand in her hair and ripping her head back to expose her neck, his breath a menacing breeze on her burning skin. She tried to scream, to call for help, but only a small whimper fell from her trembling lips. She found herself entirely unable to fight back when his teeth, too sharp and too ravenous, dragged along the thundering pulse in her throat.

It was beyond her control, beyond all reason, the quiet sense of calm that washed over her the second his mouth brushed against her flesh. She closed her eyes, body sagging in his hold, propped up only by the arm still pinning her in place. There was nowhere to go. He was all over her, and the tease of teeth breaking skin was so bewilderingly consuming. She felt him shudder and gasp against her neck, felt his fingers tighten their hold of her hair, felt his lips move against the veins he hadn't yet dared to puncture.

"No," he was saying, sounding so close, so far away, "*no, no, no...*"

Slowly, she raised her hands to rest against the forearm pressed across her shoulders, not to push him away, not to dig her nails into his muscle and scratch—only to hold. Hermione was not in control of her body anymore, merely at the mercy of his.

"Stay still," he hissed, a command she felt melt into her from where he'd pressed it under her jaw, seeping into her inner ear, into the marrow of her bones. "Just...don't move."

His lips were still on her throat, dragging back and forth as he shook his head, but the bite of his teeth didn't follow. His body was shaking with need, or perhaps restraint, and she was so lost, so completely not herself, so *very* herself. She held her breath, trying to stay as still as possible.

"Fuck!" He tore himself from her and backed up against the nearest wall, wild eyes dilating and constricting rapidly.

Stupidly, she reached up to press her palm to her throat, where his mouth had just been latched. There was something wet there, something thick. When she pulled her hand away and held it under the dim candlelight, she saw fresh blood, still seeping from the wound on her head.

Fingers wrapped around her wrist so tightly she almost cried. Malfoy stepped closer again, holding her palm merely inches from his face, tongue darting out to run along the seam of his lips. A portrait of unbridled desire, of hunger.

"Malfoy?" His name was hardly even audible, but he heard it all the same.

His gaze lifted to hers, and her earlier thoughts returned like a boomerang. He didn't look right. He looked, somehow, like he was still at war, only now the battle was located entirely within himself. With a sharp tug, he tossed her to the side, sending her stumbling over unseen furniture until she landed flat upon the floor. When she turned back to see his shadowed figure, he was in the process of retreating, feet dragging along the floor with concerted effort, his hands clenched into shaking fists.

“Get *out*, ” he said, agonised. “It’s not...safe.”

Malfoy disappeared into the darkness, leaving as swiftly as he’d arrived, the slam of heavy doors serving as the only confirmation of his exit. Unsure of what to do with herself, unsure of where else to go, she began crawling towards the still unmoving heap of limbs that belonged to her guard. She rolled him over, shoving her fingers under his jawbone and letting out a muffled sob of relief when his pulse answered her.

With the help of poorly performed magic, she managed to get him to his feet, his limp arm slung over her shoulders, his wand shoved into the pocket of her blood-stained pyjamas. They shuffled down the hallway, Hermione grunting with the exertion of hauling his weight, with the panic of not knowing which way they needed to go, with the confusion of everything that had just occurred. Will murmured something about a left turn, slowly coming to, and she followed his direction.

What felt like hours later, they finally reached the sharp chill of the outside, where the moon shone high amongst the red mist, the grass crunched with frost under her socked feet, and she found herself considering all the information she had: Draco Malfoy was still at the manor, and was, it seemed impossible to deny, a vampire. A vampire who, merely a handful of minutes ago, had his teeth bared at her throat, yet somehow hadn’t bitten down. How he’d stopped himself, she didn’t know; the answer was likely still inside the library, sitting on a bookshelf she hadn’t had enough time to scour, or at the bottom of a pile she’d overlooked.

He’d had her right there at his mercy, unable to resist the siren of his presence, and she’d been scared—of course she had—but now that she was out here and he was in there, some part of her knew without question that her fear had not been of *him*. That, she could not explain.

Finally, most nonsensically, even as she wrapped her arms around Will and placed her mental apparition pinpoint, even though the manor had proven to be inarguably unsafe, even though he was still inside and likely still starving for the life in her veins, the act of leaving filled her with inexplicable *reluctance*.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome, freaky Vampire Draco.

I know I said this wouldn't have a schedule, and then posted again the next week, but I really did mean it! I'm going off vibes only.

The deepest, slickest kisses to the betas, whose thighs I long to caress:

[Miagas](#)

[Accio_Funky_Pants](#)

See you when I see you!

Chapter 3: But first, on earth as vampire sent,

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione peered up at the iron gates, which would once have morphed into a taunting face, would once have guarded the grounds from unwelcome intruders, but were now nothing more than twisted, rusted, magicless metal. The air was bitter; winter swirled overhead with a warning whistle, like a hungry peregrine, and the manor's imposing hedges were stripped bare. The garden was terribly unkempt, overgrown branches crawled over each other, giving the illusion that nothing alive resided at the manor—she knew better.

At her hips sat two large suitcases, each packed to the brim with all the earthly possessions she required to live comfortably. She could have shrunk them down; it was simple magic that she'd become rather proficient at, but she wanted *him* to see them, wanted to prove a point.

Without letting another minute slip by, in which she ran the risk of re-evaluating her decisions and finding herself non compos mentis, she kicked open the rusted gate with the sole of her shoe. It gave an almighty scream, and she could not tell if it was in protest or warning.

Either way, she did not heed.



The arches of her feet begged for relief, but she needed to maintain the appearance of professionalism, so she shoved her heels back on and made her way to the Minister's office. The working day ended an hour ago, and the building remained inhabited only by diligent employees who had nobody waiting at home, or overwrought interns scrambling to meet deadlines. Hermione ignored them all as she marched down the tiled corridors, her robe riding the breeze in her wake.

The other members of the task force were already there and waiting, including Nico Carlsen, who was the first to greet her with a concerned once-over, followed by a pinched-faced Robards.

“Miss Granger,” said the head of the D.M.L.E. “How are you?”

“I’m well, thank you,” she replied warmly. “And Will?”

“I’ve signed him off for a while.”

“Oh, that’s good, he needed it.”

Robards breathed a weary sigh, offering a small shake of his head. “I regret not checking in with him more frequently. If I’d known the kind of stress he was under, I’d—”

“He’s a hard worker,” she cut in. “Four days with him taught me that much. He seems like the sort of person who wouldn’t rest until somebody forced him to.”

“You’re right about that,” Robards chuckled.

Hermione fell into the living room of her flat with Will slumped against her shoulder, the sound of their sudden apparition immediately drowned out by his deep groan of discomfort. It was dark, but her eyes had since adjusted to the presence of shadows. Nobody was here to welcome them home, not even a plant; it was as expressionless as she’d left it.

Carefully, she set Will down on the sofa and placed her hands to either side of his head, tilting it for inspection. When sure, she plucked her wand from her pocket and pointed it straight at his temple.

Will flinched. “What are you—”

“It’s alright,” she soothed, “I’m just checking for injuries.”

“Shouldn’t we be going to the hospital for that?”

“I was a healer, trust me, this will be much quicker.”

Under her breath, the spells slipped free, mendacious words of comfort; care draped in a veil of deceit. His eyes widened as she spoke, lingering on the blood still drying on her pyjamas and in her knotted hair. Her wounds were already healed, but the evidence of them was clear to see.

“You’re...” he began, swallowing hard, “covered in blood.”

“I know, you cut your head when you fainted.”

He blinked rapidly, brows pulling together. “I fainted?”

Hermione gave him a solemn nod, whispering more underhanded spells, all while Will remained none the wiser.

“Worked yourself to the bone. I don’t think I even saw you sleep the whole time we were there,” she said, lying with an ease that should have been troubling but only felt urgent and necessary. “Scared the life out of me when you fell off the ladder.”

“Fell off the ladder...” he echoed incredulously.

*“Don’t worry about it now.” She twisted her wand, and the cords of memory attached to it.
“Give me two minutes, and you’ll be good as new.”*

Nico drew the attention of the room with a sharp clearing of his throat, and they all moved to take their seats. Kingsley smiled as invitingly as he could, but it was obvious the day had worn on him, pulling down the corners of his almond eyes until they drooped. Hermione scanned the room for a quick headcount; everyone but Elise, who was still secluded in a ward, gagging on bags of blood and digging her nails into the skin at her throat.

Every single face in the room looked tired, and it was difficult to believe that it had only been a week since they’d last gathered; everyone seemed to have aged. Even she felt like she’d lived a whole year in the last seven days. The meeting, however, was surely rudimentary, a weekly report, nothing that *should* have been overly taxing.

“Right,” Nico said, taking his seat last, “Camilla, do you want to start us off?”

Camilla sat tall and proud as she spoke, “Further inspection of the archives has solidified my belief that Septimus Malfoy was the last recorded owner of the texts Miss Granger has been seeking. He was reported, in a Daily Prophet article from 1820, to have displayed ritualistic tomes during an evening party at the manor.”

Hermione’s gut churned with anticipation when Camilla produced a copy of the article, handing it first to Kingsley, who next handed it to Nico, who scanned it briefly before pausing, his eyes drifting to Hermione, then handed it to her. She devoured the article, hammering the limited description of the texts to memory; they were supposedly leatherbound, which didn’t narrow it down, and encrusted with geometric symbols, which *did*.

She frowned, trying to recall the rows upon rows of books she’d sorted through and listed during her brief stint at the manor, unable to remember any that matched the offered description.

“Thank you, Camilla,” Kingsley said, as Hermione passed the paper along. “Do you feel there would be more to gain from further searching of the archives?”

“It is difficult to say, sir, until I have another lead to chase.”

“We’ll reassign you to the D.O.M for now, then,” Kingsley said, and Camilla bowed her head in acknowledgement. “Robards, the investigation?”

“Ongoing,” Robards sighed. “We have begun working with a small subsection of Muggle law enforcement to garner any information they may have, and Mr Potter is still attempting to extract memories from the affected vampires—”

“Can we not call them that?” Iwan asked, wincing deeply.

Every head turned to him in stunned silence, but it was Nico who found his voice first, pitching it low and slow when he reminded Iwan, “That is what they are now—*who* they are

now.”

Iwan scratched at the stubble under his jaw. “I know, but it just seems...”

She felt her face twist with irritation while she waited for him to finish his vapid sentence, catching Nico doing the same. Iwan’s cheeks reddened with embarrassment as he stumbled for the right—or perhaps just *new*—words, and she would have been content to watch him squirm like a bug under a boot for a little bit longer, had Robards not swooped in with a wholly undeserved rescue.

“Only Genevieve has been able to give any semblance of a coherent statement, and even then, it wasn’t... particularly coherent,” he said.

Kingsley pressed his thumb to his temple. “Where does this leave us?”

“Tugging on threads, sir.”

Silence followed as everyone pondered just how little they really had to go on. It had been a quiet week with no attacks, marking the longest stretch of peace since the first turning occurred. The comfort was shrouded, overshadowed, by a growing sense of unease; all of them waiting on edge to see when the next attack would come and who it would come for. Would it be another one of them? Someone they knew? Someone they *loved*?

“Miss Granger,” Kingsley said, rousing her, “we are suspending the search of the manor until Will can return to work or we find someone else to take up your post. In the meantime, please return to making enquiries and—”

“No,” she said quickly, her stomach lurching. Kingsley raised his eyebrows, sharing a glance with an equally shocked Nico, and she shook her head. “Sorry, I just mean...why can’t I return to the manor alone?”

Kingsley’s surprise was visceral. “You were quite clear that you did not *want* to attend the manor on your own.”

“That was before I’d confirmed for myself that it was safe.”

Memories tumbled through her mind in rapid succession: Draco’s eyes pulsing with inhuman intensity, his too-long teeth scraping the pulse in her neck, the blood on his chin coating her throat, the pain in his voice when he’d warned her that being at the manor was, in fact, *not safe*.

She shouldn’t want to return, she shouldn’t feel a pull to that infernal building and the volatile creature it concealed from the world...*yet*. There was nothing deeper than the desire to return, to pick at the fraying threads she’d left behind. It burned like a bluebell flame in her chest, feeding off every lungful of oxygen.

“Safe?” Nico asked cautiously.

“Or, at least, abandoned,” she amended. “It is just the elves there, as we suspected.”

Kingsley schooled himself. “Either way, it’s better to wait until Mr Prosper can return or we can arrange a suitable replacement for him.”

“I appreciate the concern, but there really is no need for it,” she said softly. “All I am doing is sorting through bookshelves and reading anything of interest. It is not a dangerous task.”

Kingsley turned to Nico, and Hermione was once again confounded by his apparent need for the Dr’s blessing.

“If you approve, I have no reason to argue,” Nico said with a shrug.

When Kingsley turned his attention back to her, he didn’t look like the Minister for Magic, he looked like the man she’d known since she was a teenager; he bore the same weary face he’d worn before he’d helped her polyjuiced form climb atop a thestral, knowing they were about to fly into hell.

“Hermione,” not *Miss Granger*, not a boss speaking to his employee, but a friend speaking to a friend, in the gentlest tone he could muster, “if you are saying this because you feel an obligation to—”

“Forgive me, Kingsley,” she said, “but if there are answers to be found, then as a public servant, I *do* have an obligation to find them.”

He hesitated, letting her words float suspended in the stifling air, before offering her one sharp nod and resuming the meeting. She sat back, listening to it all play out before her, zoning out when Iwan began talking about setting up floo access at the new offshore facility.

Absentmindedly, her hand came to rest against the base of her throat, fingertips brushing over the exact point where Malfoy had pressed his fangs not even two days before. The marks were glamourised, but she knew they were there; thin lines of grazed skin, surrounded by blooming purple, tender to the touch.

Will was sleeping on the sofa, freshly clean and covered in her softest blanket, his mild ailments healed and his memories carefully modified. She remained, as ever, exceptionally good at complex spellwork, and it was hardly her first tussle with memory magic. Loath as she was to be proud of it, she could confidently admit that it was neat and near-undetectable work.

Knowing she would need to clean herself up before calling for anyone to collect Will, knowing she would spend the next few hours lying through her chattering teeth, she made for the bathroom to fix herself up. As soon as the door closed behind her, she stripped off her bloody pyjamas and tossed them in a pile, ready to Scourgify—or maybe incinerate—them.

Before she could decide which spell would best cover her tracks, and therefore the tracks of the Vampire who’d pinned her to the wall, she caught sight of herself in the mirror. There was a large, bloody handprint wrapped around her throat, a mangle of dried blood in her hair, brushes of it still visible on her trembling shoulders, and a long bruise across the expanse of her collarbones.

She thought, possibly, that she was still running on pure adrenaline; there was no other explanation for her reckless behaviour, for her impetuous decision-making. The feeling was undeniable, though; she had to go back. Her gut was screaming so much louder than her brain, and it told her that her flat was not where she needed to be; she was not done with the manor, and the manor was certainly not done with her. Hermione had always been stubborn, always been headstrong, never one to deny a gut feeling. It stood to reason, even if it was categorically unreasonable, that she would want to tug at this thread.

Besides, Malfoy had her right there under his palms—and fangs—only an hour ago...if he'd actually wanted to hurt her, he would have.

Wouldn't he?

So, she cleaned the blood from her aching, overly alert body, combed the clotted blood from her hair, and when she spotted the mouth-sized mark at the base of her throat, she pressed her thumb into it until she gasped, then covered it with a glamour.



In possession of full Ministry clearance and an old key, Hermione dragged her suitcases through the manor's front door without knocking, grunting and huffing as she stumbled over the threshold. The suitcases *had* been made significantly lighter by magic, but she was trying to make a dramatic return, after all.

It was dark inside, as it had been before, like daylight hadn't been allowed to touch the walls in years—but rebellious streams filtered in through the high windows anyway, past the dark drapes that covered the stained glass. They allowed her to see more clearly than she'd been able to the night she'd fled under the arm of her limp guard, and unlike the first time she'd been led down this very hall, reluctant and abashed, she *wanted* to look.

Now, she could make out the carved stone lancet arches, repetitive structures that drew her eyes up, *up*, to the ribbed vaults of the high ceilings. Cobweb graveyards gathered in corners, and she wondered if she, too, had been lured back into a trap.

Femur appeared in front of her with a sharp *pop*, his little hands reaching up in a blind panic and twisting into the fabric of her robes. "Miss Granger! You cannot be here!"

Tibbs arrived not a second later, her wide and fearful eyes glistening with unshed tears, tugging her oversized ears hard enough to flatten them against her undersized head. Hermione dropped her suitcases and knelt to their level, attempting a warm smile and failing miserably, offering all teeth and no mirth.

“Morning.” Her greeting was a touch too brisk. “Is he still here?”

Femur looked horrified. “You cannot be coming and causing scenes—”

“Vampires aren’t actually nocturnal, are they?” she asked, ignoring his pleas. “I’ve met them in the daylight hours before, I’m sure of it.”

The elves shared an open-mouthed look, neither seeming able to respond, so Hermione pushed to her feet and balled her hands into fists, bringing them down hard against the first door she could find. Femur and Tibbs rushed forward at once, grabbing at the front of her robes with their little hands, two sets of pleading eyes staring up at her in alarm.

“Master will be having the foulest mood!” Tibbs cried.

“Miss Granger *must* stop clanging!” Femur wailed.

Hermione steamed past them and slammed her palms against the walls, rattling the empty picture frames, disturbing years of dust buildup, and muffling the shrieks of the elves jogging behind her. The chaos offered a sort of comfort, overtaking the anxiety of being *here*, of calling so much attention to herself in a building that seemed so keen to watch her.

She was on the verge of knocking an iron bust from its pedestal or whipping out her wand to direct an isolated Reducto, when she heard it—*him*.

“Do you have a *death wish*?”

She turned in almost a full circle until she found him, standing at the very top of an obscenely ostentatious staircase; a spiral of pale stone so large and imposing that it even managed to make Malfoy, who had seemed larger and more imposing than life only a few nights ago, look small. He was shrouded in the shadows, too far away for Hermione to discern even an inch of his face. She began moving forward to meet him, making it to the foot of the staircase before his rough voice rang clear.

“Stop.”

Immediately, her movements ceased. Stubbornness flared in her bones, but his command was unwavering, unquestionable, and she didn’t even think twice about complying—in fact, obliging felt like the most natural thing in the world. It reminded her, with a sudden and absolute feeling of certainty, that she was once again in the company of a predator, one capable of stunning her into immobility.

“I told you to leave.”

“And I left,” she said quickly. “You didn’t tell me I couldn’t return.”

“I thought that would have been implied when I almost killed you.”

Hermione shook her head, feeling a bit top-light, a bit unmoored. “You didn’t.”

“Oh, I *did*.”

Finally, he turned his face out of the encroaching darkness towards her, and she held her breath at the sight of his muted skin and hollowed eyes; marginally better than how he'd looked the other night, significantly less unravelled, less inhuman, but still...deeply, *profoundly* unwell. He seemed to make a point not to meet her eye, and she got the feeling that he simply could not bring himself to.

He stepped back, and so she moved closer, one step higher, locked in his gravitational pull.

"Surely they wouldn't send you to arrest me alone?" he taunted.

Her words were jigsaw pieces she could not quite put together, broken, nervous splutterings that served only to expose her weakness, but she spoke them anyway. "I'm—I'm not here to do that."

He laughed, and it was a horrible, bare-boned sound; brittle and lifeless. "Why not? I attacked you and your nosy little guard, didn't I?"

"I took care of that," Hermione said, not entirely sure that she was standing instead of floating, inching closer to his looming silhouette without forethought or intention, simply guided by some innate inertia, a call that reached her entire nervous system before it reached her brain.

Malfoy, who had yet to truly move, tilted his head ever so slightly. "How?"

"Memory modification." Her admission was without even a hint of the remorse she *should* have felt. "I am...practised."

"Now," he began slowly, half-curious, half-mocking, "why would you do a thing like that?"

"Because I..." Her fingers threaded together over her stomach, twisting in futile self-soothing while she tried to steady her climbing heart rate. His hands fisted at his sides, and she wondered, almost hysterically, if he could *hear* it. "Because I want to stay."

"I beg your pardon?" he whispered rigidly.

She rose to the next step on the staircase, and he took another further into the shadows—was she pushing, or was he pulling? "I've been sent here to find something, and I want to stay until I do."

"It cannot be of such importance that you would risk your life for it."

"But it is." She was still moving. "There have been...mass turnings."

His head snapped to her then, and she witnessed the crack in his hardened facade, the inquisitive apprehension that lingered in the fissure, before he sealed himself and forced his gaze to the floor. "Define *mass*."

"Five in six weeks."

"Not nearly enough for me to care."

Hermione's feet finally stopped moving, but her body did not; trembling all over, ribs rattling her lungs, turning her organs into paste. Still, she managed, "Innocent people have died."

Malfoy nodded at the ground. "That is what people tend to do around vampires, something you should consider immediately."

"I have," she whispered, too afraid of her own volume. "I *am*, but if what I'm looking for can help, then I need to—"

"How do you know it's not me who has been orchestrating these attacks?" he asked suddenly, face completely unreachable now, though her eyes tried. "It could be."

Hermione felt like a rather large brick had struck her head, blinking rapidly in the face of his question, unable to parse why it seemed so ridiculous to consider; it was, after all, a fair one to ask.

"Is it?" she asked quietly, and his only reply came in the form of clipped laughter, of the sound of his cloak billowing as he turned his back on her and began to retreat. She leapt forward, surprising even herself, her hand shooting out to cling to the bannister—for stability, for control, for any remaining shred of dignity, she wasn't sure. "You wouldn't have spared me if you were behind the attacks."

"*Spared you?*" he echoed incredulously, voice bolstered by the darkness encasing his body. "Is that what you think I did?"

"I—" *Was it?* "Yes."

"Go home, Granger."

"I can't," she choked, fighting the overwhelming urge to fall to her knees and beg. "If there is anything in this library that might let us help the victims, then I *have* to find it, it's my job, it's...it's my *responsibility*."

"The victims are already dead. Pay your respects and move on."

"No." She shook her head, eyes squeezed shut, trying not to cower. "The other ones. The vampires."

His shadow froze; a blank slate of sediment, an absence. "The vampires?"

"Yes," she began. "They are distraught."

Even in the dark, he seemed...mournful? It wasn't obvious; he hid it well, but she could feel it rolling off of him in waves—that he *knew*, that he *related*. Hermione, having almost no tools left in her armoury, saw the opportunity his misery provided and refused to pry her shaking fingers away from it.

"I want to stay," she swallowed audibly, "and study you."

"Study me?"

“You—yes. You seem in control—”

“Is that what you call almost drinking you dry?” He emerged from the longest stretch of shadow until she could see the unbridled fury in his pale eyes, the disbelief, grey and rimmed with purple exhaustion. It sent a shiver down the length of her spine, then back up again.

Faced with him once again, she couldn’t help feeling a vibrating rush at the memory of their previous encounter, and it was odd—how thoroughly her fear mixed with curiosity. Even now, alone in a manor that seemed to breathe, standing before a vampire who seemed determined not to, merely days after he’d ripped her hair and scraped at her throat, she could not parse the two feelings apart.

“But you didn’t,” she breathed. “You stopped.”

Malfoy narrowed his gleaming eyes. “What, then? How would you *study* me?”

“I want to stay and do my job, and,” she sucked in a deep breath and tried again, “I want to... observe you—”

“Absolutely out of the question.”

“I’ll not be in the way,” she hurried, rising another step.

He leaned back, lip curling. “You already are.”

“But—”

“This is not an argument. I will have Femur and Tibbs carry your luggage and escort you off the property.”

“*Please.*” Her plea was almost a whine, it was humiliating, dehumanising, but Hermione had felt it before, here in this very manor, and hadn’t backed down then either. “If there is even a possibility that they can be helped, then I have to *try*.”

In a series of movements so fast she couldn’t be sure that she even saw them happen, he stalked closer to the top of the stairs, towering over her in shadowed glory, his fangs on full display as he glared down. She couldn’t look away, couldn’t stop feeling them at her neck, over her pulse, like her blood was dancing with...if not fear...then *what*?

“Help them?” he asked, deep and full of warning. “Just feed them blood, that’s all they’ll want. There is no cure to this affliction.”

“Yet.”

“What happened to your humility, Granger?” he snarled. “You think you’ll succeed where centuries of scholars, academics, and experimentalists have failed?”

“I don’t know that I will.” Her wobbling chin raised in stubborn defiance, she refused to let herself look away. “And I don’t know that I won’t.”

Malfoy recoiled, and he looked so tired, so pale—not just *Malfoy* pale, as had been a discernible familial trait—and so very...vacant. He turned his head from her, and when he spoke again, she could hear the child in his voice; the one who'd lost both parents to the war, the one who'd locked himself away when it was over, the one who thought himself an *affliction*.

“You’re serious.”

She nodded, but it was a lie, one that she felt guilty for telling. Her goal was indeed to make the lives of these new vampires easier, to understand and help them, but not even Hermione Granger could change what had already happened. Not this time. Malfoy, however, needed a reason to let her stay—and she really, really needed to stay.

His brows creased as he stared studiously at something she could not see, and something flickered there, merely a dash of light across a night’s sky. “What makes you so sure of yourself?”

“I’m not,” she said, daring to take another step, “but there could be a chance.”

Malfoy lifted his eyes to the ceiling, exposing the long lines of his neck to her, an animal baring its belly. “By searching my library? And...*observing* me?”

“Yes.”

“Observing me do what, exactly?”

Hermione tried to take a deep breath as she looked around nervously, hoping inspiration would strike upon her tongue like lightning if she just began speaking. “Your routine, your capabilities, your feeding habits—”

“Not that.” The ferocity with which he spoke made her jolt, but he was uncompromising. “Never that. If you are determined to play chicken with your own life, I will be the one to establish the rules.”

Her head was spinning with increasing velocity, and her knuckles bleached as she gripped the bannister tighter. “The rules?”

He heaved out a laugh, entirely at himself, and covered his eyes with one wide palm. “*What am I doing?*”

“Malfoy.” The sound of his name, spoken in her voice, seemed to shock him as much as it shocked her, and she willed her breath not to betray her when she continued, treading carefully. “If it’s not me, the Ministry will just send someone else.”

His gaze was downright dangerous in the low light. “It seems I hardly have a choice, then.”

There was no response she felt able to give; too unsure of how confirmation would be met, too aware of how volatile he could become, how little chance she stood if he truly intended to harm her. Still, a beating, pulsing surety soared through her veins as naturally as her blood, a determined voice telling her that no, *no*, he did not.

Then, his body sagged as if admitting defeat, and he let out a shallow exhale. “You will keep your distance, you will stay clear of the west wing and remain in the library, as before, until the precise moment I have Femur fetch you. You’ll take *great* care not to injure yourself again, I’m sure I don’t need to remind you why—” Though she would have liked to argue that it hadn’t been her fault, she let the protest die on her dry tongue, “—and you’ll set aside any harebrained, reckless desire you have to *observe my feeding habits*. Do you understand?”

She hesitated, as it really was one of the more important behaviours she needed to witness, but *something* was decidedly better than *nothing*, and once again her gut screamed for her to take the opening, no matter how reckless or harebrained.

“I understand.”

His eyes pinned her in place, shards of metal rooting her to the step. “Do you agree?”

Swallowing slowly, Hermione gave a stilted nod of her head, but it wasn't enough; those silver eyes turned molten, blazing with such intensity that she felt it in the very marrow of her bones.

“Say it.”

“I agree,” she whispered.

For a while, neither of them moved, talons locked as they cartwheeled through the heavy air with increasing velocity. Then, finally, he looked away, like he couldn’t stand the sight of her for a moment longer, and she felt oxygen rush back into her screaming lungs.

“I thought the west wing was decommissioned?” she asked, a little raggedly, a lot dazed.

He paused, waited, and then said, “It is.”

Before she uttered another syllable, he was gone, leaving her four steps from the top of the spiral and breathless, reeling, questioning if she’d just made the final mistake of her life. When her brain retook command of her body, she turned to find Femur and Tibbs still watching from the bottom of the stairs with matching bewildered expressions.

“Miss Granger has lost her mind,” Femur muttered.

“I think you might be right,” she said, descending the stairs on shaky legs.



It didn't take long for her days to return to their previous structure, and soon enough, it felt as though she'd never even left. Only this time, it was notably lonelier in the ancient library; with no Will to remind her when to stop and eat her food, her stew went cold.

In the two days she was absent, nobody seemed to have touched her book piles, and she was endlessly grateful for it. Even her clothes were left as she'd thrown them; the bed she'd been hauled out of was left unmade and transfigured, like there had never been any doubt that she would return to it. So, it was easy to pick up where she'd left off, moving through the bookshelves with efficiency; dusting, removing, listing, piling, replacing. She called for the elves when she needed them and tried to relax in the silence when she didn't.

The feeling of being watched, much like her untouched belongings, lingered with quiet vehemence. It was as though the library—possibly even the manor itself—was gathering reports of her progress, or lack thereof.

When the sun, which was perpetually hidden behind grey stratus clouds, gave way to the creeping vines of night, Malfoy would call for her. Femur collected her, leading her to a parlour deep within the manor, lit by sparse flames and warmed by a large, circular, handwoven wool rug in the centre of the room. Malfoy would take his perch in the far corner, where she could hardly see or hear him, and hide his nose in a book.

He did his very best to pretend she wasn't there.

If she asked how he was, he'd grunt. If she moved a little closer, he'd find a new place to sit. If she asked what he was reading, he'd close the book and stare at the wall instead. One evening, he changed things up, deciding to play a particularly competitive game of chess against himself while she watched, becoming increasingly impatient. Tired of his pointed refusal to give her anything worthy of observing, she flicked her wand and sent one of the red knights to D5. He threw her his most scathing glare but continued the game, leaving only once she'd thoroughly swept the board.

When she returned to the library, frustrated and confused and unsettled, Hermione often found herself reading under candlelight or trying not to let the crawling shade disturb her already fitful dreams, but it didn't matter; it always managed. In oblivion, she was offered vivid sensations of teeth at her neck, of a hand at her jaw, of ichor rising up her throat and spilling from her mouth.

She concluded, after four days of unearthing nothing and observing just as much, that he was putting on a performance. That his existence in this manor, on this earth, was merely that; an *existence*. He hid in a decommissioned wing of a rotting manor where nobody could find him, only venturing out to let her watch him breathe for an hour under the cloak of night. So, on that fourth evening, when she grew tired of watching him pretend to read (he hadn't turned a page in fifteen minutes, and she knew him to be literate), she swallowed the lump of unease in her throat and found the courage to speak up.

"When did it happen?" she asked raggedly.

At first, it was as though Malfoy hadn't heard her, his eyes remaining downcast and fixated on the same line of text they had been locked onto all evening. It wasn't until she inhaled

deeply and opened her mouth to ask *again* that he finally snapped, “Years ago.”

A warning, it seemed, not to press any further upon that particular bruise.

So, she pressed upon another. “Is it difficult to be around people?”

“Unendingly,” he drawled, eyes down.

“Because you want to drink their blood?”

That did it; the book dropped to his lap, his eyes lifting slowly to assess her. “Because they ask too many questions.”

“You seem better,” she continued her tepid intrusion, “than you were the other night.”

“The other night you were bleeding and—” he hissed through his teeth, the points of which she couldn’t get a good look at from so far away. “And I hadn’t fed in a while.”

He seemed ashamed of it, a feeling so palpable that it was as though it came from deep within her own chest, but she was determined not to let it stew. She suspected, somehow, that despite the fact he’d pinned her to the wall and bared his fangs, she had never truly been at risk of harm. However, intention and action were two separate animals, and she wasn’t yet sure which she was dealing with.

“You were already covered in blood,” she said quietly, catching the twitch of his eye.

“Your guard interrupted me.”

Hermione chewed her bottom lip, knowing better than to ask her next question, just as she knew she had to ask it anyway. “Where did you get—”

“I think we’re done for today.” Malfoy stood briskly and turned for the door. “Tibbs will take you back to the library.”

“I know the way,” she protested, but it was no use; he wasn’t listening, walking out of the room before her words died in the air.

The little elf stood in the doorway with her ears in her hands, waiting for Hermione with those bug-eyes that always looked on the verge of overflowing, and she blew out a shaky breath.



Her observations began with deception, which she would have been ashamed of if she weren't so proud. On her fifth night after her return, she rang the bell for Femur and requested that he bring his master to the library instead of taking her to the parlour. She was surprised when Malfoy acquiesced, cloaked as usual and equally distant, looking especially worse for wear. When she pointed at a large stone gargoyle, torn from its perch and left upon the floor, and asked him to move it, he raised an unamused brow.

"Just use magic."

"I can't quite get the spell right," she lied bluntly, without the barest scrape of finesse, "and I'm not exactly going to ask Femur or Tibbs to move it when they already do so much—"

"*You* can't get the spell right?"

"Correct," she said, but it sounded more like a question. "Can you help me?"

He stormed over and picked the gargoyle up with startling ease, setting it aside without so much as blinking or breaking a sweat. His strength was...considerable, and though she would need to investigate further, it was certainly something worth testing with the crazed vampires currently being moved from a secluded ward to an even more secluded facility. Really, she shouldn't have been surprised; Malfoy had her flat against the wall not even a week ago—god, she really *wouldn't* have been able to get away—and lifted Will's whole weight with one hand.

She wondered, with a rising blend of fascination and horror, how often he used it.

"Anything else?" he asked, fangs dripping with sarcasm, and she shook her head. "You made me walk from the other side of the manor, just for that?"

"Why didn't you apparate?"

"Because," he seethed, "I fucking *can't*."

Her blood slowed in her veins as his admission settled like a soil tip. "What?"

"Haven't come across that in your books yet?" he asked, vicious and viperous, sending shudders down her arms. "It's not possible."

"At all?" she asked, and he gave the most minute shake of his head. "Then, I suppose you are welcome."

"*For?*"

She turned back to her book pile and shrugged. "The chance to stretch your legs."

With a huff and a hissed curse and not another word, he stalked out of the library, leaving her to sort through her books, the smallest, most unwise smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

Her next trick came the following evening; after a long day spent on her hands and knees and crawling through cupboard space only to emerge empty-handed, Hermione granted herself

the relief of a long, scorching shower—she couldn't trust the bath again—and began devising a plan.

Now that she'd seen proof of his strength, she needed to confirm his speed. Memories flashed behind her eyelids of his glide across the moonlit gardens, of the way he'd moved faster than she thought possible that night in the hallway or the stop of the stairs, of Rowan Armitage charging at the hospital room window. So, when the dim light of day became lost to night and Femur arrived to escort her, she went with nefarious, if not still apprehensive, intentions.

Malfoy sat in the far corner, as usual, but instead of staying away and watching with consternation, tonight she took it upon herself to trail the perimeter of the room, aware that he was watching her, aware that she would be a fool to get too close—especially since he'd proved himself a flight risk.

"What did you do today?" she asked, her voice pitching unnaturally as she pretended to admire the carved alcoves.

"Sleep," he answered flatly.

"That's a myth, isn't it?" She turned to him in question, and he didn't deign her with a response, but it mattered not; her eyes had latched on to a delicate vase upon a marble stool; perfect, hand-painted china. Antique, to be sure, expensive, almost certainly. Slowly, she began inching closer to the vase. "So you sleep all day...like a teenage boy."

He glowered. "The last time I was human, I *was* a teenage boy."

"Human, sure, but you're still alive, still ageing." She shot him a careful look, making a point to roam the length of his too-still body, as if to prove her point.

"Have you forgotten our schooling so easily? I am considered the living *dead*, Granger."

"*Living*," she repeated, feigning confidence while she crept around the room, her destination merely steps away. "It's somewhat ironic, isn't it?" The sound he made was long-suffering, but she didn't deviate. "For someone so obsessed with blood purity, to end up relying on—"

"Don't," he warned, an order she felt expand in her lungs, to the point of pain.

Deliberately, spurred by both the task at hand and his absolute warning to steer clear of her current line of enquiry, her foot caught the edge of the rug and sent her forward. Her arms stretched out to catch herself, knocking the vase clear from its perch. There wasn't even time to make a startled sound before Malfoy was there, the vase in one hand, the other pushing her upright, his grey eyes blown wide.

"I told you to be *careful*."

Her mind was spinning, her tongue dead in her mouth, still, she mumbled, "You move very quickly."

"When an idiot knocks over my mother's vase, yes, I do."

She stilled. “It was your mother’s?”

He turned, carefully setting the vase back upon the pedestal with a gentleness that was nowhere to be found when his attention returned to her. “If you’d cut yourself on a shard of smashed china, what then? Are you truly so—”

Impossibly, his eyes widened further, his spine snapped straight and ripped back from where he’d encroached in her space. His breath seemed to catch in his throat, like he’d caught a whiff of her and never wanted to again. Heat rushed to her cheeks involuntarily, which only seemed to make everything worse, and she felt it: that rush of fire, of *hunger*, coiling at the base of her spine. Her breath stopped altogether as he leaned closer, his eyes latched to the thundering pulse on the side of her neck. Just like before, pinned to the wall in the dark hallways of his dark manor, her legs felt too weak, her body too infirm, to resist the lure of his song. His teeth bared, and she tilted her head, unbidden, to reveal more of her throat.

“*Fuck*,” he rasped, stepping back with considerable, *visible* effort.

Malfoy tore away and hurried, with just as much haste as he’d arrived, to the other side of the room, not bothering to bid her goodbye before pushing through the large parlour doors that led to a part of the manor she’d been forbidden from entering. She found her own way back to the library from there, lungs full of liquid warmth, feeling like she could choke on it, *drown* in it.

When she pulled on her pyjamas and crawled under the wand-warmed duvet, she thought of the way his eyes had dropped to her neck, the way his breath had left the lightest touch on her skin, and pressed her knees together.



The manor was not gracious with its offer of rest. It plagued her, twisting shadows into silhouettes and flickering candles into hurried movements that didn’t exist. The breeze turned pages when she had her back to it, the stone floors held the echo of footsteps she hadn’t taken. Hermione found sleep sparingly, and never for longer than an hour at a time, her body unwilling to settle so easily under the surveillance of the arched walls and stained glass windows.

So, when the first beams of daylight came in hues of green and red, she was already up and curled over a roll of parchment, writing her report to Kingsley. He hadn’t explicitly asked for one, and she was due to meet with the task force again in merely a couple of days, but there was something reassuring about letting him know where—and how—she was.

In her current predicament, reassurance was nothing to scoff at.

Malfoy joined her in the library that evening, not from any act of trickery. She'd been making decent headway on a series of four interconnected and obscenely tall bookshelves and didn't want to waste valuable time in the parlour sitting and waiting for him to offer morsels of information she might otherwise find between pages. After a brief back and forth via a progressively more distraught Tibbs, he'd relented first, storming in, standing under the window depicting the abandonment of a small child, as far away as he could be without being entirely out of sight. A small part of her wanted to laugh at him, the part that could see his peevish face and still think him a peer, a boy, someone she'd known.

A larger part of her knew better.

"Can you turn into a bat?"

"No."

"Oh," she said, stacking the pile of books she'd deemed irrelevant. "That's a shame."

"Is it?"

"You liked to fly."

It was an odd thing to say, even more of an odd thing to remember, but it was the truth; the only times she could recall seeing a genuine smile upon his face were when on a broomstick or when on the receiving end of unalloyed approval. His other smiles had always seemed dipped in malice, coated with a hard layer of mockery; never for him, always for someone else.

Malfoy watched her in silence for a few minutes, his eyes burning into the back of her head, before he pushed off the wall and angled himself towards the door. "Are you nearly done?"

"Almost," she said, desperate to think of a reason to keep him here...where she could study him. "Can you eat normal food?"

"I can *digest* it," he replied with a deeply disgusted twist of his pale lips.

She cocked her head. "But you don't enjoy it?"

"No."

"What about garlic?" she asked, setting her hands on her hips. Even from his place on the far side of the vast, shadow-shrouded room, she could make out the distinct shape of his grimace. "So it's not *all* myth."

"Finished?" he asked, clearly exasperated, and she was.

"I think so." She spared a glance at the bookshelf, which now stood empty, encircled by her book piles. "I'm hungry."

"Femur will prepare you—"

“And you,” she cut in, bolder than she ought to have been, more secure than she ought to have felt. “I want to observe how you eat human food.”

He looked absolutely mortified. “*Why?*”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“No.”

“Yes,” she argued, in the same tone she’d reserved only for Harry and Ron over the years, the one that had convinced them to complete their History of Magic homework or keep their shirts folded while sharing a tent. She wasn’t sure what effect it would have on a scowling vampire, certainly not one who was faster than she was, *stronger* than she was, and seemed to have a penchant for reducing her to her most irrational. “How am I supposed to help anyone, let alone work towards finding a cure, without observing how you interact with basic human nutrition?”

“I fail to see how it would be relevant,” he replied in an uneven voice.

“You don’t need to see it.” Her hands clasped together nervously at the small of her back.

He stared at her then—the longest time he’d kept eye contact without turning away—and she saw the deep ridges of his cheekbones in all their glory; muted, thin skin pulled tight, dark circles enclosing sky-grey eyes. He looked ill, *starved*, and she wondered when he’d last eaten his *own* food, how long it would be before his hunger became too prevalent to ignore, before, maybe, it would turn towards her.

She wondered, most of all, why that question made her not want to run but stay right here, to move closer, look harder, find the answers he’d hidden behind his long teeth.

“One hour, then,” Malfoy said quietly, walking away in one sweeping, fluid motion, until she found herself alone under the arching shelves, trying not to let them swallow her whole.

As promised, Femur arrived exactly an hour later to escort her to the parlour, which had been somewhat transformed into a dining room. At the centre, where a deep purple sofa lived for every night she’d spent there, now stood a dining table. It stretched long and narrow, seven chairs comfortably tucked on either side, two more at either end, one already occupied by Malfoy.

It was there, at the opposing heads of the table, that she found two sets of placemats, upon which sat fine plates of porcelain and extravagant goblets. Beside the plates, and seeming out of place next to such outrageous displays of wealth, she was surprised to find simple cutlery made of stainless steel.

Not, she noted, *silver*.

She plucked the knife from her placemat and held it up under the dim lights. It was, at best, a butter knife.

“A precaution,” Malfoy explained.

“I wasn’t planning on stabbing myself,” she muttered. “I won’t be able to cut my food.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “You won’t need to.”

It suddenly made a lot of sense. The endless stews and soups, the pre-cut sandwiches; nothing that required the use of anything beyond a spoon. It was so ridiculous, so cautious, that she almost wanted to laugh. Instead, she took her place at the opposing end of the table and watched, from all the way down the long cut of mahogany, as Malfoy filled his goblet with wine. Her own filled along with it—a clever trick, one she might have asked about at any other time, with any other person, in any other circumstance.

Tibbs brought their food a few moments later; farfalle pasta with a light cream sauce—she’d been allowed a fork, at least. Her stomach screamed in protest, unwilling to open in the presence of a predator, but she forced it to anyway. The tension grew with every mouthful, every chew slow and deliberate as she did her best not to stare at her reluctant companion, who kept at a suitable length.

Malfoy didn’t touch his food, not until she finally looked up and frowned at his still-full plate. Begrudgingly, he forked a piece of pasta and brought it to his mouth, chewing it like it was made of cement, swallowing it like it was lead, then washing it down with a generous gulp of wine. The red liquid in his clear glass, the slow movement of his bobbing throat, the way his fangs caught on the lip of the bevelled glass—it all made her feel somewhat heavy.

“What books are you looking for?” he asked, wiping the corner of his mouth with his thumb, and it took her a second to stop tracking the movement.

“Um,” she said foolishly, “*Casele Cechilor Vampiri*.”

He frowned. “Czech?”

“Possibly.”

“Who wrote them?”

“All I know is the title.”

He set down his fork, already done with his meal despite hardly having touched it, and leaned back in his chair. There was an entire world between them, mapped by unmade table places and flickering candelabras, and yet she could feel the exact moment the day wore too long for him. His exhaustion, his misery and revulsion, the haggard and hollow pit in his stomach that could not be satiated by farfalle, all of it felt like her own.

“You asked me what I do with my days,” he said slowly.

She nodded. “You sleep.”

“I do now, but before this place was housing a usurper, I spent most of my time in the library,” he continued, paying no mind to the way her shoulders rose to her ears or how her fingers tightened around her fork. “I read every book in there that so much as *mentioned* vampires. Do you think, if there was anything here, that I wouldn’t have already found it?”

It wasn't ridicule in his voice, nor condescension; it was sadness, *guilt*, like he was trying to let her down as gently as he could. She opened her mouth to respond, finding a stunning lack of conceivable words.

"It is a pointless endeavour, Granger," he added, "all of it."

It was worthy of consideration, and so Hermione considered it, imagining the years he'd spent hiding away in this manor, rejecting his own hunger, trying to find the one page that would allow him to reverse his own changed biology, and it left her with a deep sense of pity.

Like him, she leaned back in her chair and picked up her glass, not bothering to hide the tremble in her hand.

She could take his word for it, write to Kingsley and declare the library useless, return to her position and fulfil the duties she'd been hired to fulfil, return to the world and her friends and the warmth of her own bed, where no shadows lingered and no whispers plagued. Or, she could lean into the feeling that drew her to the manor, to its master, and indulge in a favoured pastime—proving him wrong.

Slowly, she brought the wine to her lips and filled her throat with warm, rich crimson.

Chapter End Notes

I did mention this Hermy is a freaky girl, right?

Thank you, always, to my favourite cwittens for betaing in such a lethally sexy way:

[Miagas](#)

[Accio_Funky_Pants](#)

See you soon, till then...bounce on itttt

Chapter 4: Thy corse shall from its tomb be rent:

Chapter Notes

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

To say the new facility offered improved living conditions to the affected vampires would have been a severe understatement. Gone were the bright white walls and the overpowering scent of disinfectant, gone were the thin hospital beds and starched sheets; all were replaced in favour of state-of-the-art quarters. Each room offered a living space not unlike a home would be, carpeted and warm and furnished with care.

Each vampire had their own unit, where they were free to roam without restraint, to sit and sleep and read and *scream* until their voices gave out. Whoever had designed the facility, and Hermione had not bothered to ask whom, clearly aimed to instil a sense of ease that St Mungo's sorely lacked.

There were bedrooms, double-bed frames holding foam mattresses that cupped their sleeping forms, cream lamps upon bedside tables that emitted soothing tungsten light, soft Egyptian cotton bedsheets in calming neutrals, walls painted to provide the illusion of space. There were lounges, four-seater velvet sofas and plush rugs held down by walnut coffee tables, non-descript pictures of non-descript landscapes hung perfectly on off-white walls, false fireplaces with false flames and very real heat, bookshelves stocked with popular new releases even Hermione hadn't had time to read for herself. There were also kitchens, bare-boned and depleted, no knives in the block, no cutlery in the drawer, no stove, no oven, no delicate porcelain. The vampires seemed to hold little interest in the kitchens, spending most of their time in bed, curled in on themselves and trembling, or stock-still on the sofas, waiting for blood to be delivered. It wasn't perfect by any means, but she thought it was, possibly, good enough to convince them they were simply staying in a hotel room, even for a fleeting second.

Hermione could not convince herself of the same, though, for she stood with Kingsley, Nico, and Robards on the other side of a two-way mirror, observing the affected as war raged within them. Most of the time, they were subdued; heads down, mumbling unintelligibly between their knees, dragging in laboured breaths through their open, panting mouths, shying away when the shielded nurses tried to approach. Other times—usually when they'd gone too long without feeding—they were lost to their most base instincts; fangs bared, eyes hollow, wretched shrieks of desperation ripping from their already-torn throats.

It was in those moments Hermione found herself most entranced, noting every twitch of their fingers and every gasp for air that seemed too thick, too hot, too *suffocating* for them to breathe.

“How did it go this morning?” Nico asked, leaning against the counter of the facility's communal kitchen, available only to the staff.

Hermione, who was busy adjusting the stove's flame, gave a half-hearted shrug. “About as could be expected.”

The morning had consisted of several trials and tests, all based on her observations of Malfoy...though she determined to keep that to herself. With her wand to her throat and her voice amplified, she'd spoken to Genevieve, the victim of the first turning and therefore the one who had made the most progress in reclaiming her mental faculties.

First, she'd sent in blood, warmed and preserved in a metal thermos, to rest upon Genevieve's coffee table, and asked her to approach it as slowly as she could. Genevieve almost complied, much to her surprise; her socked feet had begun inching towards the table at a commendable pace, but all hope fell into the ether when she caught a whiff of the steaming thermos. In the blink of an eye, Genevieve was crouched in the corner of the room, blood dripping from her chin to the pale carpet below, the room filled with her feverish gags as she swallowed large mouthfuls of hot vital fluid, her eyes rolling back in carnivorous bliss.

Speed, Hermione concluded, seemed as involuntary as their bloodlust.

Next, she'd watched from the other side of concealed glass, like an omnipresent voyeur, while the nurses restrained and administered what were essentially tranquilisers to each of the vampires. They'd fought back, throwing themselves against Protego charms with mindless fury, snapping their fangs at pointed wands and scraping their nails along the freshly painted walls as they attempted to delay the inevitable. Wilhelmina, in a startling display of coherence, even tried to apparate. It was, of course, to no avail.

Once the threat of their outbursts was neutralised and their fluctuating temperament stabilised, Hermione took it upon herself to collect their vitals. The results were...staggering, to say the least; nearly unreadable, each individual lost to their unique biological chaos. Not even the senior healers were able to make heads or tails of it.

"What's next?" Nico asked, rousing her.

"Dinner," she replied, still slightly absent, shaking the sizzling pan in her hand.

Dr Nico Carlsen, who had made a career out of leaning closer to the macabre and mysterious, reared back from the pan with a curled lip. "What even is that?"

"Black pudding."

His frown deepened. "Isn't that pig's blood?"

"And barley," she hummed, turning over the circular cuts with a flick of her wand, "some oats too, and onions—"

"Is that even safe to give them?" he asked, alarmed.

"Safe? Yes..." She tilted her head cautiously. "But I don't think they are going to like it."

Hermione frowned at the book in her lap and peered up, finding Malfoy on the far end of the parlour, as usual, scowling at nothing, as usual, while shrouded in carefully maintained darkness, as usual.

Tonight, he pretended to be absorbed in a crossword puzzle; she wondered, with mild amusement, if the paper in his hands was Muggle. The notion was so ridiculous, so absurd, that she shook it off immediately.

"I'm going to the facility tomorrow."

He looked up reluctantly, not offering so much as a hint of feeling beyond a low, rumbling, "Hmm."

"The problem is," she pressed, "these books are vague and indirect. How is it that so little is known about vampires?"

"Boggles the mind," he mumbled, returning to his crossword.

She waited with petulant impatience for him to deign her with his attention again—he did not.

"Malfoy..."

His eye twitched.

Hermione opened her mouth to demand his focus, to lament his lack of cooperation, to ask why he was so resistant to conversing with her when, as far as he knew, her goal was to help him—to help all of them—but the words dried and died on her tongue. Instead, at a loss for what else to do, she rose from her chair and took steady strides towards the sofa, directly towards him.

Malfoy's entire body went rigid when she took her perch, still a fair distance away, right on the opposite edge of the long cushion from where his stone body sat.

"What are you—"

"Please," she breathed the soft plea; a heart extended in her open palm, a vein exposed, "will you at least answer some of my questions?"

He appeared to consider it, watching her with dark, wide eyes, and she could have sworn something flickered within them; a hint of blue sky on an overcast day. His resistance, it seemed, was as futile as her own, for as much as he wanted to repel her company, he simply could not. She understood. It was, after all, the same compulsion that lured her back to the manor, that kept her sitting on this sofa, in this room, in his presence.

"There are things I don't wish to discuss," he finally said, all rough edges.

"That's fine, you can say no."

"And I'm to believe you'll accept that answer?"

She frowned. "Of course I will."

He studied her, the dark circles under his eyes settling into deeper pits as he swallowed, but what followed was unmistakable: a sharp nod of his head, phlegmatic permission for her to pry, a silent warning for her to do it gently.

“How often do you need to feed?” she asked.

“I can manage fine with once a week.”

Manage. Not thrive, not want, not need, but manage. She wondered how much of his life was merely managed.

“How much do you need?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

He shifted uncomfortably, plush and pleated fabric scraping against his robes. “If it’s been a week, I’ll need more. Otherwise, I’d have the same as you would in a bowl of soup.”

She had half a mind to call for her quill, but withheld. “Was it different when you were first turned?”

“Very,” he said, looking like he would have happily crawled out of his skin to get away from the conversation, from the reality of his answers. “I don’t...I don’t remember a lot from those first few months. Aside from the hunger, which was...unwavering.”

Months.

Months of confusion, of distress, of a total loss of self. The vampires in the facility still had so much of it ahead of them, but they at least had a team to usher them through it, to provide their nourishment and safety. Malfoy had gone through it alone, hiding away in a rotting manor the world believed abandoned. The last of his line, kept company by old books, unsociable elves, and his own unwavering impulses.

Hermione’s hand shook with the overwhelming urge to reach out and touch him, but she did not—she knew it would be as unsafe as it was unwelcome.

“Do you, erm,” she cleared her throat, dislodging the lump of rising emotion there, “need to prepare it?”

“It’s better warm.” He appeared so visibly repulsed by even having to talk about it; fists tightly clenched in his lap, chest pulling in lungfuls of air like he was on the verge of vomiting, mouth straining with words he could hardly bring himself to say. “Which means it’s better...fresh.”

“Are you selective about the source?”

“Tremendously,” he rasped.

Her resulting laugh was a little breathless, entirely lacking any humour, and she felt slightly guilty for it, but there was too much weight behind it, too much history, to stop it bursting forth. "So, mine is safely off the menu, then?"

He did not share in her laughter, instead watching her with distant eyes, the hollows of his cheeks so deep in the shadows; he looked so, so unwell. "What?"

"Well," she waved a limp hand towards herself, "with my blood being so...muddied, as you've kindly put it in the past."

"Be serious," he snapped.

"You're the only one who always said—"

"I said a lot of stupid things," he began, pinning her with a hard look, "when I was a stupid boy."

And now, she thinks, what are you now? But she couldn't ask, couldn't find the chance to, for his eyes met hers and locked in place, and it was as if the world around them ground to a halt. There was no parlour, with its stone floors warmed by handwoven rugs, no manor, with its stretched hallways and its endless library, nothing but the flecks of silver being swallowed by his dilating pupils.

Slowly, his eyes drifted to her throat, where her heart was lodged and pounding furiously—she could almost feel it; the intent of his stare, the want for her pulse, the burning shame that drowned everything else.

"Trust me, Granger," he murmured, "there is nothing wrong with your blood."

"But you don't want to drink it?"

He shook his head. "I'm not going to drink it."

It wasn't what she'd asked, but even his well-calculated answer wasn't enough to shake her surety. She could feel the truth like it sat on her own tongue, like it had slipped between her own ribs, solid and sharp and felt with every inhale. She believed him.

"When was the last time you fed?"

Malfoy cleared his throat and tore his gaze away. "A few days ago."

"You look paler than yesterday," she said. "Is that normal, the longer you go without?"

"I've always been pale."

"Sickly," she amended.

"I wouldn't know, I haven't seen my reflection in years," he sighed, and her eyebrows shot up; another mental tick in another mental box. "It wouldn't be so bad if I drank human blood. But I won't do that."

Hermione blinked, trying to process the sheer impossibility of what he'd just said. "You don't drink human blood?"

He stiffened, looking like he might faint, or vomit, or flee. "That's enough for now."

She wanted to push back, to tell him it wasn't nearly enough, especially not after what he'd just admitted, but she'd made him a promise, and it would do no good to break it so soon. So, she summoned her book from where she'd abandoned it and settled into the sofa. Malfoy pretended to go back to his crossword, forgetting that he was supposed to fill it in.

When she chanced a closer look at the paper in his hands, she saw that none of the pictures were moving.

Nico grimaced. "If you're sure..."

"Honestly, Dr Carlsen, I'm not sure about anything," she admitted on a resigned exhale.

The look he gave her was tired but unmistakably fond, then he rolled up the sleeves of his pressed shirt and set about helping her serve the black pudding. Together, they pushed the plates through the hatches of the vampires' living quarters and watched, one by one, room by room, as they ate it conservatively.

It went the same for all of them; there was a brief moment when all seemed well, when they swallowed with ease, took second bites, and then turned to the side and vomited all over the floor. The following burst of unbridled fury was like lead in her stomach. Elise went so far as to throw her plate at the mirror, as if she knew they were there, as if to say *You! You have done this to me!*

And maybe they had.

Hermione watched with morbid fascination as Elise proceeded to lick the dried, cooked blood from the wall, stopping only to gag and spit out more mouthfuls of vomit.

"I don't think they'll be enjoying a fry-up any time soon," Nico said, bewildered, his eyes still firmly on the now weeping Elise.

"No," she agreed.

And she thought about Malfoy, as she often found herself doing these days. She wondered if he was equally revolted by his voluntary diet, if he had the same difficulty digesting it. Why would he put himself through it when there were so many alternatives available that required no violence? What had happened to convince him that his life was so unworthy of fuel?

She watched Elise lower onto her hands and knees, head bowed to the stained carpet, and knew, one way or another, that those were questions she could not yet ask.



Not a myth, she mused, watching the silver chain clatter to the cold floor.

Malfoy hissed, shaking his hand, experiencing discomfort at best and genuine pain at worst; after a brief conflict over his participation in her ongoing tests, he'd grabbed the chain as if to prove a point, and his fangs shone under the window streams within half a second.

"Fuck," he grunted, watching the skin on his palm boil and blister.

Without hesitation, she plucked the small jar of ointment from her back pocket and tossed it across the room, trying not to flinch as his other hand shot out to catch it, lightning fast and purely instinctual.

He turned it over with a scowl. "What now?"

"It's not silver," she assured him, rolling her lips together to suffocate a threatening smile.

Lip curled, he snarled, "I can tell *that* much."

"Rub it into your burn." She pointed at her own palm, the exact place an angry welt had risen on his, and turned her finger in circular motions.

Cautiously, tentatively, he did as she instructed. The ointment absorbed with a brush of his thumb, working its way beneath his skin and soothing the raw flesh below. In seconds, the red mark was gone, as if nothing had ever happened, and he held his palm up to the dim light of the window in unabashed awe.

"Where did you get that?" he asked, softer now.

She turned away to hide the rising heat in her cheeks. "I made it."

He didn't say anything to that, did not congratulate or commend or even so much as thank her, but he also spent the rest of the evening staring at his hand, turning it back and forth with a sense of wonder. At one point, she watched him touch the chain again, just to reapply the ointment.

With every hour she spent in his reluctant company, they both seemed to settle into a tense sort of companionship. She didn't hold her breath when he passed by, and he didn't recoil quite as violently when she asked blunt questions—not now, when he knew he only needed to say no.

"You said you were turned years ago," she asked one evening, calling out to him from their respective sides of the parlour. "When?"

“I don’t remember exactly.” His brows knitted as he made a surprising effort to recall. “It was a few months before the war ended.”

“How did you hide it during the trials?”

“I served my arrest at the manor,” he explained. “Femur and Tibbs are very good at keeping secrets, but the restraint was...a steep learning curve.”

She worried her lip, thinking of those still locked in the facility, how daunting the curve still seemed from where they stood. “And nobody questioned why you looked the way you do?”

“I was facing the possibility of the Dementors' kiss, I don’t think anybody expected me to look like the picture of health.”

“What about the *teeth*?”

A smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth, one fang glinting under candlelight. “I kept my mouth shut, as one should when on trial.”

She wouldn’t know; she’d missed the trials, too busy working double shifts in the hospital and watching young people die, too busy sleeping in the limited time left over. She’d been asked to provide testimony, and she had, through a series of late-night meetings with a rotating cast of Aurors. Ron confirmed that her words had been read aloud before the Wizengamot at every trial she’d provided testimony for, including Draco Malfoy’s.

She hadn’t seen him, but even if she had, would she have known? Would she even have *cared*?

“I suppose Potter is running the D.M.L.E. by now,” he drawled, picking at the front of his robes.

“Nearly,” she said. “I don’t imagine it’ll be long.”

“What about the other one?”

“The other one?”

“Weasel.”

“*Ron.*”

He waves a dismissive hand. “Mhmm, that one.”

“He’s there too. They are partners.”

Malfoy released a mocking chuckle. “And the night is dark.”

She could join them too, if she wanted; the offer was waiting for her at the Ministry, and there was no doubt that it would be a significant step forward in her career. Benedict's words

drifted on the chilled parlour breeze, disturbing the hairs on her neck—*there was a time when you had no power at all, yet you managed to accomplish rather a lot of good.*

Malfoy was watching; she could feel his eyes upon her back, likely wondering what had halted her usual onslaught of questions. She expected him to take her silence as an opportunity to leave, to let her linger alone in contemplative melancholy, left to the mercy of the shrouded alcoves, but he didn't. Instead, he leaned back against the sofa, relaxing from his usual stony, straight-backed posture into something more...human. It stunned her, *scared* her.

And then he asked, “What did *you* do after the war?”

She turned back to him, finding an earnest curiosity fighting to remain upon his ashen face. Perhaps he didn't care, but his attempt to humour her was still a far sight better than his usual rebuff.

“I was an emergency healer for a while.”

He tilted his head. “Immediately after the battle?”

“Yes.”

“And now?”

“Now I'm the deputy head at The Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.”

His expression was mercifully blank for a stretched-out second, then it crumbled, a sharp laugh tearing from his lips, sending her heart rate soaring through the cobwebbed roof and above the overhanging clouds, high enough to evaporate.



Hermione took her seat at the circular table, tucked far in the corner of the empty restaurant, and looked at the Minister. They were the first to arrive, and he seemed keen to harness that opportunity.

“How are you getting on?” he asked kindly.

“No change from my last report,” she said. “The library is extensive, but I am moving through it at a solid pace.”

“Hermione, how are *you* getting on?” he asked again, concern flickering in his dark, familiar eyes. “I don't like thinking of you alone there.”

“I’m not alone, the elves are very hospitable.”

He sighed. “Mr Prosper can rejoin you by the end of the week—”

“There’s really no need,” she cut in, plastering on a wide smile. “He should be working on the main investigation, not watching me read.”

“Alright,” he conceded with a sigh before leaning across the table to squeeze her shoulder. “If anything changes...”

The others arrived in a flurry of apologies, drowning out her reply. Nico took the seat beside Kingsley, as he tended to do in their weekly meetings, except this time he seemed content to let the Minister take the reins. He met her eye from across the table and offered a warm, welcoming smile—almost too perfect—she returned one in kind.

“How are they?” she asked him quietly.

“We’ve noticed small improvements to their mental function,” he said, looking pleased. “How’s the hunt?”

She snorted. “Dusty.”

He stifled a chuckle just as Kingsley rose from his chair, a loud clear of his throat calling upon the attention of all at the table.

“Thanks, everyone, it’s been a long week, hasn’t it?” he began, and *oh*—if only he knew, “but you’ll be pleased to hear that, as of this afternoon, we’ve had a break in the case.”

Everyone leaned forward, heads turning rapidly to each other in search of confirmation, which came once Robards pushed to his feet and smoothed down the front of his robes’ lapels.

“We have arrested a man by the name of Baysangur Anzorov, a born vampire, on suspicion of orchestrating, or at least having some involvement in, the recent attacks.”

Iwan jumped in first, “You found the guy?”

“We apprehended a suspect,” Robards corrected. “He recently relocated to the area, he matches the description of a man witnesses claim to have seen around the time of the last three attacks, and he was discovered in possession of a bloody handkerchief. Muggle DNA testing proved it to be a match for one of Elise’s victims.”

Hermione slumped back in her chair, utterly dumbfounded, but Camilla remained alert at her side.

“Has he said anything?” the Unspeakable asked.

“So far, he has been uncooperative, but he is still undergoing interrogation.”

“*Still?*” Dixon echoed.

Robards nodded sternly. “We’re aiming to make it last as long as we can. Maybe he’ll get frustrated enough to talk.”

“Why, though?” Hermione mumbled to her lap, and then louder to the table, “Why do any of this? I mean, he’s a born vampire, so why *now*? What’s the point?”

When she finally lifted her eyes from her lap, everyone at the table was already looking at her, and their reply was loud in the silence; *she* was supposed to be providing the answer to those questions.



Hermione pulled her hair back into a slack twist, her wand slipping along her scalp to prevent it spilling out, and wiped the sheen of sweat from atop her brow. The bookshelf appeared endlessly tall, looming and hulking with a visceral sense of mockery, and she let out a resigned exhale.

What echoed was a rumble, a growl, a choked groan that could not possibly be her own.

She frowned, peering over her shoulder to scan the vast stretch of library, high on alert for any fast-moving elves or lurking, broodsome vampires—finding neither. It wasn’t the first trick the library had played on her, and likely would not be the last; these ancient walls held ancient magic with secrets just as old, and all of it was decidedly unwelcoming.

Unwilling to waste any more time, she set to work, climbing and descending the ladder, pulling down books from the shelves, organising, making notes of each title and genre, setting up stacks upon stacks. By the time she lowered her knees to the cold bite of the stone floor, the sensation of lingering eyes re-emerged on the span of her back. She ignored it, as she often tried to, focusing instead on the beading sweat along her hairline and the back of her neck, on the ache in her knees when she reached into the lower cabinets, on her echoed groans when she shifted boxes of odds and ends that ultimately led her nowhere.

The manor’s watch was a constant, breathing presence, but Hermione did not have the time to hide from it.

With a laboured heave and a sharp curse, she pulled a heavy box from the back of the cupboards, letting it hit the stone ground with a reverberating slam. She drew a ragged, exhausted breath and dropped her head against her shoulders.

“It sounded like you were dying.”

Hermione jumped out of her skin, a half-realised yelp tearing from her throat as she spun towards the intruder, finding Malfoy directly behind her, framed by tall towers of useless

books. He was closer than he usually allowed himself to get, the inches between them less of an ocean and more of a pond, and the air immediately evacuated the room through the cracked, aged walls, leaving her lungs aching.

“Sorry!” She pressed her hand to her chest. “I didn’t know you were coming in—”

“Femur informed me that you were too busy to come to the parlour,” he replied flatly.

“That was...considerate of him.” She heaved another strained breath, waving limply to the array of organised books surrounding them. “It’s been a long week. The library is just *enormous*, you know? I fear I’ll be here forever. Which is a problem, seeing as there has been an arrest in—oh god, are you feeling alright?”

His eyes had turned into perfect, circular saucers, pupils dilating and constricting just like that night in the hallway. He was looking at her with his jaw pulled tight; the potency of his expression was a tangible thing: insanity, desire...like he wanted nothing more than to consume her, and hated her for it.

Heat flooded her face, and he stepped closer, tongue darting out to lick along the seam of his lips, fangs peering out with dangerous, tantalising promise. Her heartbeat kicked up to the pace of a marching drum, pumping blood through her veins with staggering impetus, and the increase of her pulse seemed to shock him; he stumbled back, dragging in and then abruptly holding a sharp exhale. There was horror upon his face, twisting every feature that had dared to soften in her company into something inhuman again.

“Lock the fucking door,” he groaned, catching himself on a bookshelf, pale fingers wrapping around the wooden edge.

“What?” she asked, utterly baffled.

There was a resounding crack, loud enough to send a jolt down the length of her spine; the soundtrack of her youth played through the vast library: splintering wood and popping joints, bones snapped in two, wands broken by rebounding spells. He turned for the door, cloak whipping with the speed at which he moved, catching on the unbreathable air and hanging there, as unsettled as its wearer.

“Don’t come out until...the elves,” he grunted.

“The elves?” she asked, foolish and overwrought, but he was making for the exit with increasing speed. “Where are you—”

He was already gone; the hard slam of the door ringing in her ears like tinnitus, the sound bouncing through the library and hitting her like an open-handed smack. Cold air coasted across her burning skin and made her shiver. When the dust settled back upon the low shelves and her lungs managed to fill with much-needed oxygen, her eyes went straight to the bookshelf Malfoy had bumped into, lingering on the two hand-sized chunks now missing from the wooden base.

With a trembling hand, she raised her wand to the ornate library doors, holding her breath as the heavy iron lock clunked into place.



Grey skies turned navy, shadows wrapped around her shoulders like a gossamer scarf, but Malfoy did not return, nor did he call for her to attend the parlour. Neither Femur nor Tibbs had shown up, the large doors remained heavily locked, and her stomach churned with so much *more* than hunger.

Hours passed, evening became night, but she could not sleep. Instead, she found herself amongst the books, turning pages under glimmering candle flames. With nobody else here, the library at night made her exceedingly nervous—Will had at least been pleasant company, serving to make the expansive room feel a little less empty. Now, it was just her, the books, and the disturbingly observant walls.

Her eyes stung, her head swam with exhaustion, but she flipped to the next page in a vain attempt to shake the impending sensation of dread. As she scanned the book, she latched onto a section titled *Rituals*. Some religious, some secular, substantive or factive, from various locations and cultures, all practised on dark creatures to varying results.

“*Separatio Corporis Et Desiderii*—the separation of body and desire, a resistance to a primal pull by way of rejecting your greatest desire, a bodily sacrifice to free the soul...” she read to the open space, hoping to cut the growing silence at its stem.

It was less of a ritual and more of a taunt; a near-biblical demand to deny impulse, but she read every word with total avidity. The feather quill above her shoulder scribbled notes at the speed of thought, swaying like maram grass in a coastal wind. Hermione cleared the surrounding floorspace and spread out her parchment, copying entire sections of the book with sedulously isolated *Gemino*’s, her mind going into overdrive with tumbling questions.

For example, would it be possible to separate the desire for blood from a body that lusted for nothing more?

Blood...

Hermione jumped to her feet, gathering her notes with a flick of her wand and marching to the table, where her pile of books that ‘*could be useful*’ sat waiting. With sleep a distant memory, she threw herself into the skewed chair and began flipping through, scanning the indexes for any mention of blood until—*there*, tucked safely in the back of *Ночные Создания* (*Night Creatures*) by Lev Balakin, she found *exactly* what she was looking for.

Blood, Lev concluded, was an innately intimate substance; the fluid of sustenance, the core of nourishment, and sharing it indicated a deep familiarity. When it came to vampires, the offering of blood was usually voluntary, a gift that had the potential to satisfy both parties, often serving as the baseline of sexual relationships between the fed and the feeding.

Hermione was...enraptured. Book after book passed across the tabletop, notes piled upon notes as she dove deeper, read further, discovered more about the intimacy of blood, feeling her own life heat and pulse through her veins with every turned page. Outside, the stars blinked across a blackened sky, and she cared not for them.

Blood bonds were a safely guarded myth, and there was very little information offered in the books she'd discovered thus far, other than that they were exceedingly rare. She read that once an offer of blood was made between a bonded pair, knowingly or otherwise, neither would ever be sated by a drop from any other. Not parasitic, but symbiotic; emotional equals, a feeling so deep and powerful that it would become impossible to tell who it belonged to.

She couldn't help but question why, if they truly existed, Malfoy would deny himself the possibility of experiencing such a bond.

Before the thought could form into a question safe enough to ask, the air changed, desolate night turning the vastness of the library into something claustrophobic. A ghost of a breath brushed the back of her neck, the hair there rising to greet it, and she was on her feet in less than a second, turning in slow circles, searching for the culprit. Her pulse turned over like an engine, kickstarting into a dizzying pace, and—*there*.

A dark corner, carved out of a curved stone wall, taciturn in the face of her unyielding stare. Perhaps it was a trick of the dark, perhaps the manifestation of her lack of sleep, perhaps the manor had simply finally crawled its way under her skin, but she could have sworn there was the faint outline of a human figure. One she'd seen before.

"Mal—"

The library doors gave an infernal scream as Tibbs pushed them open, making Hermione choke on a yelp.

"Sorry, Miss," Tibbs's large eyes immediately took on a glassy quality.

"No," Hermione said, catching her breath, "it's fine."

"Will you be wanting a late dinner? Tibbs can be making leek soup."

"Um," she pressed a palm to her sternum, rubbing over her aching heart, "thank you, but I'm actually rather tired."

Tibbs looked concerned, but did not push. "An extra big breakfast then, miss."

"Sounds perfect," she said, still winded.

When Tibbs left, Hermione instantly returned her attention to the shadowed corner, finding nothing but dust and dark. She shook her head, resisting the hysterical urge to laugh at her

own gullibility, and then made straight for her transfigured bed, not sparing another glance at the notes left scattered across the table.

It took a while for sleep to greet her, but when it did, she dreamt of pointed teeth at her neck, of how sharp they'd feel if they dragged along the lifeline buried there, of how deliciously it might sting if they pierced it.



Hemione followed Femur down the hallways, taking minuscule steps so as not to outpace him, making no effort to hide her curiosity at every passing entrance.

The little elf looked over his little shoulder and asked, with genuine interest, “Will misses be back before dark?”

“I’ll be back before lunch,” she replied. “I just need some air, the dust is getting to me.”

He didn’t offer a response until they arrived at the hulking iron doors. He pressed one tiny finger into the keyhole, and the Manor revealed them to the outside world like it was unveiling a prize.

“Femur will be waiting to escort you back to the library,” he said, brokering no room for argument.

She wanted to argue anyway, to laugh at the ridiculousness of having a tiny chaperone to move her between empty rooms, but it all died on her tongue the second she felt a set of eyes fall upon her. Where they came from, she did not know, but there was no denying the sensation; she knew it well, had felt it every evening in the parlour room, every time she turned a page or stretched her arms above her head.

Somewhere, possibly from a window on high or a hallway dimmed low, Malfoy was watching her leave. Her stomach churned with anticipation, with the frustration of not being able to parse exactly what feeling his gaze elicited—was it curiosity or regret? Either way, she didn’t let it stop her from hurrying out of the manor and into the biting air.

When her tenure as a Healer was over, and the only thing left to do for the dead was mourn, Hermione had been ushered into a six-week programme with a mind healer. She hadn’t put up much of a fight, having seen how beneficial Harry had found it. Before long, she became a creature of routine: sleep, work, therapy. It stood to reason that when the programme ended, and her mind was deemed sufficiently *healed*, she had to fill the vacant slot with something new.

Thus, Hermione started swimming.

Every weekday morning, she would hurry to the pool and dip her tired body into the chlorine cradle and swim laps, letting the water fill her ears and drown the world out. She chose a Muggle pool where nobody knew her; therefore, nobody stopped her, and she was free to push herself through the water with mindless repetition. One lap, back again—her body working where her brain didn't have to. There was peace to be found in the unburdening, in the pausing of active thought.

As she kicked her legs and stretched her arms, she didn't think about the vampires at the facility, nor the one in custody, nor the seemingly endless bookshelves she still needed to sort through, nor rituals and blood bonds and the connection they supposedly gave—she just felt the water wrapping around her limbs, just let her body move through it with instinctive grace.

Awareness of her body was one thing, and one thing always led to another. Her *body*, so capable of strength, or battle, of gentleness and pain and pleasure, sometimes all at once. Of all the burdens Hermione had borne, discomfort in her body had been the most fleeting. Like all teenagers, she'd experienced a few awkward school years of knobbly knees and pointy elbows, but war was the ultimate equaliser, and it was difficult to care about the size of her breasts while in the company of a whispering horcrux. After the war came to its bloody end, she simply did not have the capacity to feel ashamed about her own shape.

All this to say, Hermione wasn't a prude.

Sex was something she'd never shied away from, not when she and Ron had tried to mend the broken pieces of each other in the quiet loft of a mourning Burrow, not when she'd been approached by handsome men at overpriced bars and offered more than a drink, not during her flash-in-the-pan relationships or her casual encounters, and not now. Sex had always been just that: a biological desire, an itch to scratch, something she had enjoyed just as much as she needed to. Nothing more, nothing less.

Often she found herself left...wanting. Not for any particular person, nor any particular thing; she'd never considered her desires to be overly depraved, but sometimes she just didn't want to *decide*. She didn't want to be the one to scour, to find, to organise and list; she wanted to switch off, to dip her head under the water and relish the pulsing silence.

So far, nobody had quite managed to be her pool.

Unwittingly, her mind drifted across the foam-cut lanes and out of the building, through the city and over the rolling downs, all the way to Wiltshire, to a hollow manor and the hollow man who lived there. When had he last been with anyone? What would that even be like, as he was now? Who was he sinking his teeth into? Would it be another vampire? Did it *have* to be?

Her laps came to an abrupt halt, the disturbed water kicking back against her chin, and she pulled herself out of the pool with a sudden, inexplicable sense of irritation.



The parlour was warmer than usual, and she couldn't decipher if Malfoy had finally taken pity on her susceptible human body temperature or if her lingering annoyance was enough to stoke a more internal flame. Either way, she flipped the page of her book with a heavy sigh, not absorbing a single word.

It didn't matter; she'd read it before. Twice now, in fact. The rituals described were seared into the back of her eyelids, haunting her every blink, but she refused to arrive for their nightly meetings without a single distraction to fall back on. Malfoy seemed to agree, his eyes lowered to an article about the restoration of some historical wizarding architecture—as she turned her eyes to the dusty skirtings, the irony was not lost on her.

He looked better; his eyes were not too rimmed with darkened red, though he was still a little gaunt, his skin still a little bit too thin, but considerably more relaxed than the last time she'd seen him, at least. Nothing like he'd appeared in the library, when he'd gotten too close and had to flee—a survival instinct he seemed to call upon far more often than she liked.

“Are you feeling better?” she asked.

He blinked up from his paper. “Hmm?”

“You don't look so pale today.”

“Oh,” he frowned, “yes.”

She sank her teeth into her lip, worrying it as she weighed up the myriad of ways he could respond to her next question, deciding none of them made asking it any less worthwhile.

“Did you feed?”

“Yes,” he said instantly, shifting in his seat like he'd shocked even himself.

“Not human?” she asked, letting the book sit open on her lap, wholly forgotten.

Malfoy froze, only the slight twitch of his eye remaining operational, his voice like sandpaper when he confirmed, “Not human.”

She nodded, dropped her chin and fiddled with the soft pages of the book, but he didn't move an inch. Only in times like these, when he was so deathly still, did she truly realise how inhuman he really was, how *other*.

“Have you ever...” she began shakily, unwilling to lift her gaze, “fed from a human?”

The silence stretched, vacant airspace that grew heavier with every slow, elongated second, and for a long while, Hermione was certain he wasn't going to answer her. He was well within his rights not to, she'd told him as much, hadn't she? She'd promised to accept his limits, if only he allowed her to find them.

She hadn't yet earned the privilege of pushing them.

But then he exhaled, and it was as steady as her tripping heartbeat.

"Yes," he whispered, then—in a familiar move she'd seen coming from the second she opened her mouth—he pushed to his feet and swept out of the parlour with his head hanging low, leaving the rest of her questions to dissolve on her tongue like rice paper.

Questions like, for example, *who*?

Chapter End Notes

She-who-will-not-be-named did very little with Vampires in the books, so I'm taking some liberties. Also, fuck her.

Thank you to my pals for betaing, I would suck your blood (and other things) any day of the week:

[Miagas](#)

[Accio_Funky_Pants](#)

Chapter 5: Then ghastly haunt thy native place,

Chapter Notes

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

The contours of the manor were stark that evening; the chill seeped through her skin to settle like fine film around her bone tissue, but Hermione did not press herself into the chair turned outwards from the far corner, nor did she watch her disinclined host feign interest in another unturned book. No, with all the mettle she could muster, Hermione took her pew on the opposing end of the velvet sofa and presented an offer she knew Malfoy would not be able to refuse: a rematch.

The chessboard was directly before him in the centre of the round coffee table. Wisely, she allowed him first selection. She moved her pieces with the aid of magic, keenly aware that leaning too close to him, even if only to select a pawn, could send him fleeing. The overhanging silence that permeated their evenings was chipped away with every slide of their pieces, with every rook and bishop that tumbled.

It was not wizard's chess, she noticed; merely inanimate chessmen carved from red and white marble, placed strategically upon a matching board. Heavy, beautiful, clearly hand-crafted, and undeniably *Muggle*. She wanted to pry, to ask why this building, which had been made with ancestral magic and housed only pureblood, sacred-twenty-eight wielders of that magic, now housed Muggle board games and newspapers. Why he, Draco Malfoy—the boy who had torn up his timetable when it dared to offer Muggle Studies, who had ridiculed and belittled not only those without magic, but those who dared to associate with them—had a sudden interest in Muggle items. However, careful not to put even a pinprick in the coat of companionable silence that seemed to have cloaked them, she swallowed those questions for another day.

The game was paced, each of them falling prey to their own competitive base nature; her knight took his rook, his queen plowed through her pawns, and when she castled to evade his attack, he emitted a sound that could have easily, if he were *anyone* else, been mistaken for a laugh.

Which is why, when several moments passed and he had not yet taken his next turn, a seed of concern planted itself in the base of her skull, cracking open and crawling outwards with every passing second, until she had no choice but to pry her eyes from the board and plant them upon him. It shocked her to the very core to find him already watching her, thick brows pinched on his pale forehead. The sight caused her pulse to skip, trip, and stutter—when his eyes widened a fraction, she knew he'd heard it as though the organ beat in the palms of his own hands.

“Is everything alright?” she asked quietly, not trusting herself with any reasonable volume, not trusting *him* not to run from it.

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

“*What am I doing tomorrow?*” she echoed, dumbfounded; it was so very unusual for him to converse, let alone ask something so...cordial. He may as well have shrieked. “I’ll be doing the same thing I did today, hopefully with more success.”

He offered a slow, somewhat animalistic tilt of his head, dark circles casting shadows upon his sharp cheekbones. “That’s your job, though.”

“Yes?”

“Tomorrow is Sunday.”

“*Yes?*”

Finally, he released her from his optic hold, turning his attention back towards the board and making his move, taking her knight—not that she noticed—before resting his forearms over his knees. Time slowed to a grinding halt, and she felt it in her molars, in her gums, absorbing into her bloodstream and boiling until it was too thick, too viscous, to flow freely. It wasn’t until he cleared his throat, a startling sound that sent shockwaves through her body, that she realised it was her turn. Blindly, she moved a pawn into the path of one of his own.

“Do you often work the weekends?” he asked, avoiding her eye this time. “Even when you’re not...here?”

“Fairly often.” She pushed the words through closing airways.

“Hmm.”

“What are *you* doing tomorrow?”

Malfoy shifted, correcting his already enviable posture. “I am occupied in the evening.”

“Really?” She sat forward, ever eager. “What with? Can I observe—”

“No.”

Defeated, she leaned against the velvet back, the buttoned pleats catching on the fabric of her thermal robe, the only thing preventing an immediate descent into hypothermia. Malfoy watched her shrink, an almost-guilty expression crossing his face for a fleeting, irreversible moment, and her chest filled with unwarranted hope.

“I do not have plans during the day,” he tacked on, “if you require help.”

His offer was not instantly comprehensible, for he’d never offered such a thing before. His visits to the library had been few and far between; a stubborn demand from her lips to a wide-eyed elf, a reluctant acquiescence and a heavy-footed march across the manor’s reverberating floors, never an *offer*. Hermione felt her mouth curl upwards before she had the mind to prevent it, to catch it with the cup of her palm, to suppress it with a muffled apology. Before she knew it, certainly before she could *help* it, she was beaming at her insipid companion, who swallowed audibly in return.

“I would appreciate that.”



It was the fourth shirt that did it, in the end. It fit too tightly over her hips and too loosely over her breasts, giving her the alluring appearance of a bag of potatoes, post-ransack. She tore the shirt off and tossed it aside, pressing her palms into her eyes and releasing a shuddering exhale. Salt caught on her lips, and she licked it away, the sharp taste absorbing on her tongue. This despair was pathetic, especially over a t-shirt moments away from being torn asunder, so she pushed the tears from her cheeks with a rough shove and turned back to the open bag.

Her choices for daily wear were admittedly limited; either she needed to go home and do some laundry, or she needed to ask the elves for assistance, and she knew which option Malfoy would prefer. It was clear that he detested her being there—*usurper*, he’d called her, and perhaps that was precisely what she was.

The manor, with all its hulking capacity, felt particularly empty that morning, the library particularly daunting, her self-doubt particularly loud. There was rot under the stone flooring, and it crept upwards like vines, finding cracks in the sediment to reach through. She hadn’t noticed, not until it wrapped around her ankles and left marks deeper than skin.

Rotten, such was the feeling that formed a sinkhole in her stomach, causing her organs to circle like water would a drain. It spread, as rot does; outwards, upwards, downwards, until it reached every corner of the vast library and left no room for her to move, not allowing for even the expansion of her lungs. The walls loomed and whispered, passing judgment on her progress, her very presence; it was *sick* of her, Malfoy was *sick* of her.

It was the only possible explanation she could assign to his constant flight. If she got too close, if she spoke too much, if she moved the wrong way, lifted her hair from her neck or turned her head too fast, the specifics didn’t seem to affect the outcome; he always ran, and she always watched him go.

Settling for a shirt, which was older and looser than any of the others, Hermione set about her work. She began with the first of the day’s shelves, listing and stacking and *listing* and *stacking* more books with no distinct symbols, nor mention of vampires, nor any explicit use. Was it even here? Had she already overlooked it? Was she the wrong person for even this simple task?

Malfoy’s arrival went unseen, entirely unnoticed, until he made a show of opening a heavy book and dropping it upon a ledge. Something akin to disappointment curled over her shoulders, like talons, at the knowledge that he hadn’t wished to announce himself. He hadn’t

so much as offered her a nod in greeting. Perhaps his assistance had been merely borne of pity for a poor, overworked girl who was clearly obsessed with her job, possibly even to the point of delusion.

He'd never taken mercy on her before, of course—but he was different now, was he not?

Hermione descended the ladder in one smooth slide, tugging on the sagging hem of her time-worn shirt, holding in the bubble of nerves that rose from the back of her throat. She hadn't yet seen him in the mornings, under the dim, soft light of dawn, his skin brushed with gold instead of blue. It suited him; he looked...*good*. Not exactly healthy, not exactly nourished, almost certainly not rested, but *good*.

"Morning," she chirped, or, at least, she tried to.

"Morning," he murmured, eyes cast down to the open page.

She was about to ask him how he wanted to start, to offer him the momentous task of working on the next shelf over, to explain her structured routine and make sense of the surrounding book piles, but she did not get the chance to, for he chose that precise second to look up and deign her with the beginnings of a smile.

Her heart seemed to stop, to miss a step or two, before kicking back into a slow, lazy drumbeat that had her mind spinning; indulgent thumps that relished in the decadence of the moment. It was enough to spoil the fruit, and his blossoming smile wilted before the bloom. His soft eyes darkened as if pulling shadows from thin air; the leather bind in his grasp creaked as his hold tightened—a cry for help—and his head turned with such a rapid snap that she felt the ache of it in her own neck.

"Malfoy?"

"I apologise," he choked, taking one long step back from her. "I cannot help with your work today, after all. Something has come up."

"Oh...that's alright."

He rolled his lips together and turned, showing her the expanse of his cloaked back; it hurt a little, possibly even a lot. Hermione wasn't sure if she had the right to question him, to ask *what* had come up that was of such importance, considering he existed in hiding, a recluse who spent his daylight hours sleeping, but the words clogged her mouth like cotton.

"I'll be fine on my own," she appeased, *almost* convincingly.

"No," he ground out.

She reared back. "No?"

Malfoy's head dropped forward on a low, rib-rattling rumble. The library sent it back to him, every surrounding wall rejecting and expelling the sound, passing it to and fro with panic. His hands, long and slender, curled into tight fists, tendons popping with the force of his tension.

“You should go *elsewhere*,” he finally said. “Surely the Ministry won’t mind, it *is* a Sunday.”

“But I—”

“Go, Granger.”

The words landed like an open palm, the sting lingering long after the sound died. His insistence was suspicious, to be sure, but it wasn’t nearly as concerning, as *palpable*, as his dread. The source of his horror was no secret, no riddle to decipher; it was, simply, *her*: Her company, her voice, her nearness, was painful to him.

She sniffed, trying not to let emotion overrule her, to make her appear like a hurt girl instead of a professional woman, like a jilted friend instead of a *usurper*.

Maybe getting out of the manor, with all its arches and bevels and watchful walls, would do her a spot of good. It had been a couple of weeks since she’d last seen Harry or Ron, and even then their time had been occupied with discussions of their respective investigations, with the preparations she was making to visit this very manor, and with learning about Will Prosper. It had been a while, too long for her liking, since they’d spent time together that was purely about them, undiluted by outside circumstances or responsibilities.

As Malfoy had so aptly pointed out, it *was* Sunday—the second of the month, which meant The Burrow would be bustling with life, full to the brim with Weasleys, the surviving members of The Order, and anyone else who could spare the time to sit around the too long, too often vacant table and eat too much food prepared by the too aged hands of Molly Weasley. Hermione would be *welcome* there, at least.

“Alright,” she said, her voice small, swallowed by the surrounding expansion.

“Fine.” He nodded briskly. “Good.”

Then he left, which she suspected he would, without offering so much as a glance over his shoulder, which she suspected he wouldn’t, and she tried not to dwell on why it felt like he’d taken some tiny, desperate part of her with him.



The Burrow was, indeed, bursting with a sort of energy she had grown accustomed to the absence of. The grounds were fertile, so, *so* green and alive, so, *so* warm and bright; her eyes needed time to adjust when she formed from her apparition, such a stark change from the maintained murk of the manor.

The siblings were there—all of them, which was a rare and joyous sight—with their children in tow. Little James, the youngest, remained strapped to Ginny's chest as he blew bubbles from his pouty mouth. There were others, too, adoptees like Hermione, those who had been ushered under the red wings of the Weasleys and decided they liked it there enough to stay.

She hugged Harry first, then wrapped one arm around Ginny's side while she cooed sweet nothings at the gormless baby. Molly eventually found her, gripping her by the elbow and pulling her into the garden. Heads turned her way, most blazing like fire, and a chorus of wind-chime greetings rang out. Neville was there, as were Luna and her father, Lee Jordan with George, Fleur and her little shadow, Victorie, Percy with his tie still on straight and... even Charlie had come, all the way from Romania. All of them waved, their warm embrace a diaphanous thing, moulding over her tense shoulders and adding welcome weight, lowering them a few much-needed inches.

Ron, who was deep in conversation with his two eldest brothers, lifted his head last to find her. Then he was moving, patting his siblings on the shoulders with two hard slaps as he rounded them and picked up a light jog. She laughed when his too-tall, too-lanky body found hers in a short, sweet clasp.

"Blimey," he said, pulling at the strap of her bag, "you staying over?"

"No, just taking some laundry home. Didn't want to ask the elves at the manor...you were right about them being a bit, you know, *creepy*."

Hermione watched Ron, who looked flushed from the beer she could already smell on his breath, whose eyes twinkled with the exhilaration of such bountiful company, take in her words with excruciating assessment; his buoyant smile sinking, melting from his freckled face and settling into stern lines.

"Are you okay, though?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she quickly assured him, in a pitch that may well have been one octave away from congenial. "Will be better when I'm not rationing my socks."

"Just do it here, it'll all dry before you leave."

"Oh, no, I don't want to impose—"

"Don't be daft." Ron took her bag with a loud snort, throwing it over his shoulder and making for the interior, leaving her to scurry after his long strides.

It was far from the first time her laundry had been scrubbed in The Burrow's designated basin; her dresses had felt the summer Devon breeze as her own skin had, flowing freely in the wind while Hermione spread her fingers through freshly cut grass blades and shielded her eyes from the beating sun. Her jeans had been soaped and cleaned, only to be made filthy again after a labourious round of de-gnoming. Her socks had been washed and warmed, ready for a day of watching the Weasleys battle on broomsticks; good-natured attempts at bone fractures and brain damage.

When Ron left her to it, and she set her clothes into the warm, waiting water to watch them run the charmed gauntlet, something inside her sang with contentment, with the simple joy of knowing she was at home.

Her flat never felt like that, with its predetermined layout and walls she was forbidden from painting, with her annual rent increase and constant battle with mould in the bathroom silicone, with the shelves she'd tried and failed to warp with the weight of books, the scuff marks she'd kicked into the skirting in a futile attempt to make it look like she lived there, like she'd been so excited to return after a long day that she simply hadn't the capacity to practise caution. When Crookshanks was alive, his deafening mewel had offered some reprieve from the vapidness of the space, but now he was gone, and nothing—*nobody*—would be there to greet her.

“You feeling alright, Hermione?”

She turned over her shoulder to find Neville, considered, confident, *enormous* Neville, who no one would ever suspect of being the same boy from their first year, watching her with circumspection.

“Yeah, Nev,” she replied softly. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Haven't seen you around much recently.”

“I know, sorry, there's a project at work that is demanding a lot, if not *all*, of my time.”

“Anything we can help with?”

Hermione imagined leading them all through the groaning doors of the library, the Order acting once more as a unit—*usurpers*—and assigning them each a shelf to work on. Oh, how quickly she might find what she wanted, how swiftly it could bring about the end of her time there. The thought of it filled her with a suffocating sense of unease.

“I'll let you know.”

Neville returned a warm smile, as he often did; his mouth was too large for it, resulting in a lopsided pull that charmed her every time. She would have offered one back, albeit a tighter, slightly more reserved version, as *she* often did, were it not for the sudden and acute pain that ripped through her abdomen.

Bent over, hands clutching at her pelvis, she bared her teeth to clench, a sharp hiss emitting from behind grinding molars.

“Shit.” Neville ducked down to level with her. “What is it?”

“Oh, *piss*,” she moaned, because Hermione knew *exactly* what it was.

Neville did not stop her as she shot past him and made for the creaking, winding staircase, tripping over her feet to reach the bathroom. She didn't spare a second before pulling down her jeans and pants, a broken, spluttered noise tearing from deep within her throat at the sight

of thick blood, seeping into and staining her underwear. A searing, angry ache poisoned her abdomen, teetering her off her feet and onto the porcelain toilet.

Hermione let her head fall forward in frustration, let her body curl over itself in protective instinct, and swore to the tiled floor. Suddenly, the morning's tribulations made perfect sense; the swirling, downward thoughts, the self-loathing, the difficulty finding comfort in clothing, the sense of abject misery and rejection, Malfoy—

He'd *known*.

The last time she'd bled in his presence, he'd pinned her to the wall and grazed his fangs along the pulse in her neck, had curled his hands around her throat, had thrown her aside in an act of great restraint; even now, her stomach twisted with lingering alarm—or, was it anticipation? This morning, he'd simply turned his back and asked her to leave. His composure was truly remarkable...he hadn't even started to lunge at her, not for a second.

Was period blood so different from the flow in her veins? From the cut of her flesh? Was it the consistency? Thicker and fuller and clotted? Or did he want it just as much as any other?

She was hit, rather suddenly and entirely unbidden, with a vision of Malfoy feasting between her legs. His eyes, dark swallows of silver starlight, watching as she helplessly, hysterically writhed in a web he'd spun. Would he bite? Would he drink? Would he collect drops of blood on his tongue to savour the taste, or would his hunger be too frenzied to be sated slowly? The imagined sight of it, of *him*, dripped down her spine like cold water, pulling shivers from her body and marbles from her skin. She closed her eyes tight to oust them, but it didn't work; all she could see was the way he might curl his lips over his long teeth as he lowered his mouth to—

A knock at the door had Hermione clutching her chest.

"It's me!" Ginny called, a lighthouse in a storm.

"Thank god."

"Nev said you ran off looking ill, are you throwing up?"

"No, I..." Hermione almost wanted to laugh at herself; how many times had this exact scenario played out between them? How often had she uttered these exact words to this exact witch, from this exact spot, in this exact bathroom? "Do you have any tampons?"

A pause, and then, "Oh, fuck me."

"I know."

"There's got to be some left in my old room, just give me a minute."

And so she did, waiting there on the toilet, blood dripping from her core to the white basin, until Ginny returned with a whole unopened box (luck, she called it, but Hermione had other words). Ginny briefly opened the door to toss the box inside, and Hermione took her time to clean up the mess she'd made of herself, scourging the blood from her underwear and the

skin of her thighs, doing an abysmal job of pretending that she was not still imagining other ways in which she could be cleaned.



Sitting at the table, surrounded by family and peers who had known her as a buck-toothed child, who had watched her eyes alight with every discovery of magic they'd always considered intrinsic, made her feel much like a girl again. There was a warmth here that could not be found at the manor, a resolute sense of cohabitation.

The walls did not whisper; they laughed, and she laughed with them.

It was a familiar tradition, voices clashing over the long table, battling for condiments and dodging jabs of pointy Weasley elbows to the ribcage, grinning over a bowl of peas and scowling over the ravaged remains of the cauliflower cheese, sharing conspiratorial glances with Harry whenever George provoked Ron into threats of casual violence. She loved it, craved it, and spent her weekdays working towards the goalpost of this monthly milestone. The feeling was close to finding an old, beloved jumper in the back of her wardrobe and sliding it over her head, only to find it still fit to perfection.

That sensation only grew when Charlie took the last remaining seat beside her, tossing a full-bodied smile her way as their hips brushed. When Hermione was actually a girl, fresh from their third year and closing in on their fourth, spending the last of her summer at The Burrow during the build-up to the World Cup, she'd harboured a particularly consuming crush on the second eldest Weasley boy.

Though he'd never really been a boy, had he? Eight years her senior, and every one of them thrilled her. He wasn't just older, he was bigger, stockier, made of coal and fire and dragon scales. He worked abroad, had been kissed by the sun until his freckles joined to form a healthy tan, had corded and calloused hands from years of wear that made her skin prickle, had glinting eyes that held strings of knowledge Hermione wanted to pluck.

She'd laughed at herself back then, because it was all so very trite.

"Hermione," he murmured, a caramel greeting.

"Charlie."

He'd never looked back during that summer, of course, nor the one after; she was his younger brother's school friend, nothing more than a bushy-haired nuisance that giggled too loudly. He was already a man, out in the world and carving a piece of it for himself. His hair was

long then, as everyone's seemed to be, and for those few untouchable weeks, he was the most interesting person in the world.

Just because he hadn't had an interest in *her*—not in the way she'd had an interest in him—it didn't prevent him from flashing that charming smile her way and feigning engrossment when she spoke of her books, nor did it prevent her girlhood crush from forming anyway.

It had come and gone over the years, often raising its head on days like this, when they sat just an inch closer than the table required. Time had changed their relationship, as it changed her mind and body. Her metamorphosis from an overly eager girl to a working woman allowed his eyes to linger where they once had not; a little lower, with a little more heat. It had never gone further than a *what-if*, a niggling voice in the back of her mind, and maybe his own. They existed in the knowledge that they could, if they wanted to, and one day, they might.

So, it was bizarre, to say the least, when he shot that boyish smile her way, and the *what-if* failed to echo.

"It's my naturally alluring musk," he chuckled.

"What is?"

"The smell that's making your face scrunch."

"Huh," she said, "he's still got jokes."

He clicked his tongue. "She still doesn't laugh at them."

Hermione turned her head and huffed at her plate, but her amusement had a half-life, withering before the exhale could end. Charlie bumped her shoulder, and she found him looking apprehensive—not an expression he wore often, or well.

"You gonna tell me what's up?" he asked. "Or do I need to get my brother and boy wonder?"

With an active effort, she offered a placating smile. "You'll be disappointed to learn it's just work."

"Ah, but your work is very exciting."

"Coming from the dragon trainer."

"You can't *train* dragons, you can only—"

"Handle them, yes, I know."

Charlie beamed. The sight of his wide grin was usually enough to make her stomach swoop low, and maybe it was because of her period, maybe it was because nothing about her life felt *usual* these days, but no such feeling came. Unwittingly, she thought back to the small, barely-there smile Malfoy had offered her that morning, in the split seconds of armistice they'd enjoyed before he'd gone rigid, and it felt like she'd hit a pothole at great speed.

“Anything you want to talk about?” Charlie asked.

“It’s all very secretive.”

“Always is with you lot, isn’t it?” he mused, good-natured and good-looking, doing absolutely nothing for her. “I’m not asking for details, just offering an ear.”

Her eyes fell to his hands, scarred and thick-skinned, a pair she used to stare at over the dinner table or when working in the gardens. Malfoy’s hands were an absolute contrast, longer, slender fingers that could wrap around her entire throat to leave a bloody imprint or curl against the base of her scalp to pull her head back. Careful, calculating hands that turned pages in silence and moved chess pieces with precision; strong in ways, delicate in others. Beautiful, really, she had no interest in pretending otherwise.

“Actually,” she said, when the thought of Malfoy selecting a book from her stacks formed into something more useful; she’d been trying to find more on the first vampiric houses of Wallachia, and Charlie, who had intimate knowledge of the country, might be able to provide. “Have you had many interactions with creatures in Romania?”

“Almost all of my interactions are with dragons,” he reminded her.

“No, I know that, but I mean...others.”

He scratched the stubble on his chin. “Not really. I live and work on the reserve, so it’s a bit insular in that regard.” She faltered, and he strained to think harder. “But Romania is still... Well, I suppose you could call it a *less-than-friendly* place to be a certain sort of creature.”

“A certain sort?”

“They have a sordid history with dark creatures,” he added. “Even now, they aren’t exactly welcome.”

Hermione tilted her head, turning more towards him in her chair. “You mean the Drakul’s?” He nodded, chewing on a runner bean. “Are vampires still segregated?”

“In most places, yeah. It seems pretty bad,” he said. “It’s just a rumour, and I wasn’t there, but last year I heard that a vampire was caught feeding on one of our Longhorns.”

“What?” she gasped, leaning in and lowering her voice to a whisper. “Why?”

“Legal blood is hard to come by, I guess.”

“Then how on earth are they expected to eat? Non-human blood is...difficult for vampires to drink.”

Charlie frowned. “Is it? I haven’t ever really thought about it, or met any to ask.”

She turned back to her plate, incensed by the thought of so many vampires, born or turned in Romania, having to resort to the same form of flagellation that Malfoy deemed worthy of punishing himself with. The injustice of it had her teeth grinding, her hands curling into tight

fists, and that feeling...the one burning bright in her chest, a catching flame engulfing her quickly expanding lungs, was one she'd felt before. It brought her to The Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, it carried her through years of defensive campaigning and amplified her voice during debates. The absolute, unwavering belief that all creatures deserved to be nourished—*Malfoy*, too, deserved to be nourished.

“Are you staying here tonight?” Charlie asked. “Saw you brought a bag.”

She blinked a few times, uncurled her hands with concentrated effort, and peered up to find the *what-if* in his eyes. Was this his version—their version—of a proposition? Would he offer her his room and take the sofa, only to sneak back up in the dark and extend her a night from an old summer fantasy?

Regardless, Hermione did not need any time to consider it, for over the hills and through the clouds, a building cried aloud, beckoning her to return. It was a song she could not resist, a rope she couldn't stop herself from following, a call she could not help but return.

“Not tonight, Charlie.”



Deciding it would be imprudent to keep Tibbs waiting for longer than necessary, Hermione walked past the ostentatious bath and turned on the overhead spray of the shower, setting the water to a warm, perfect balm for her aching body.

She reached between her bare thighs, wincing when her fingers wrapped around the string of her tampon and pulled, the pressure making her jaw click as the cotton slipped free. She held it up under the flickering candlelight, swollen and sodden, before tossing it into the sink and incinerating it with a wave of her wand. It would not do well, she surmised, to risk causing Malfoy any further distress by letting it exist where he might stumble upon it.

She closed her eyes and stepped under the water, relishing as the rivulets cascaded down her arms, gathered in her clavicle, flattened her hair to her back, curls stretching and straightening. She let her head fall back, let the water hit her face to wash the day and all its woes and wonders, its laughter and its contemplation, its comfort and its concerns, down the drain.

When the steam rose, her mind drifted on it, travelling the hallways of the manor to land on Malfoy. Where was he this evening? What had required his attention? Why, why, *why* did he choose to live in such isolation?

He could venture into the sunshine, on the rare occasion it occurred, but he chose not to. He had access, in a way that the vampires of Romania did not, to clean blood, but opted instead to poison himself with unsuitable alternatives. He had a home big enough to host a small town, connections deep and old enough to summon the masses, and an acquittal in his pocket that opened the world's doors to him, yet he *chose* to stay here, hiding in a decommissioned wing of a desolate manor, away from it all.

It seemed...senseless.

Hermione tucked her chin and blinked through waterlogged lashes to watch a line of diluted blood trickle down her inner thigh, to watch it gather on the pale porcelain tray, watch it circle the shining drain, and conceded that Malfoy wasn't the only one making nonsensical decisions.

Once out of the shower, teeth scrubbed with mint paste—plugged with a fresh tampon, curls combed and separated, adorned in warm, clean pyjamas—she stepped out with an apology already half-formed on her tongue, expecting to find a too-patient Tibbs sitting on a too-high ottoman in the too-dark hallway.

Only when the candles lit to track her movements, she found the little elf was not there.

“Tibbs?” she called, her voice rebounding up and down the long hallway like a boomerang.

When no answer came, she began turning on the spot to search the shadows. The bell was still in the library, but her wand was in her pocket, and all it would take was a careful flick of the vine wood to summon it—but she did not, because another thought settled like sand at the bottom of an hourglass, a reprieve before it tipped and the countdown started again; *nobody was here to stop her*.

Hermione set her toiletries on the ottoman, deciding they were too cumbersome to allow for diligent trespassing, and began a slow, silent walk down the hallway, holding her breath each time a new candle flickered to temporary life. Before long, she found herself at the foot of the door she'd seen before, the one blessedly free of dust, the one that had left scuff marks on the floor from use. She wrapped her fingers around the delicate handle and, with one final glance in either direction, turned her wrist until the lock clicked open.

It was no surprise to find the room as dark and desolate as the rest of the manor, but the windows allowed for a blue-tinted twilight to pour in and dance across the sparse furnishings. The first thing she noted, and the thing that had her heading deeper inside, was that none of the furniture was covered with sheets. It looked relatively well maintained; dark, twisted pillars held up the coffered ceiling, which had been recently polished, the red cord square rug seemed freshly hoovered, and the staircase, quarter-turned, did not creak as she climbed it.

The stairs led to more hallways, more carved walls whose details remained hidden by shadows, more unlit sconces that only found life as she tiptoed past them. Around, around, under archways and through open doors, past an ornate and considerably aged organ—*when had it last been played? Whose hands had last touched the keys?*—and under increasingly detailed chandeliers. Her footsteps echoed off the Versailles flooring, the light slowly

increased until it remained, no longer flickering with her passing movements, but lighting the entire floor.

Hermione's breath caught in the netting of her throat when laughter, not belonging to the elves, nor to Malfoy's either, drifted through the cracks of a closed door. She followed the sound to the foot of another room, letting her eyes drift over the bevelled detailing of the entryway; roses, carnations, marigolds, lilies, tulips, an entire garden carved into the frame. Her fingers brushed over the petals, her mind lost at the displaced sound of humour.

Then, just as suddenly as it began, the laughter ceased.

"We have a guest," came a voice, one she knew, one she felt in the base of her spine, in the acid of her stomach, in the marrow of her bones.

If she turned and ran, how far would she make it? He was fast—she already knew that, had tested it once, and had been a victim of it before; he would catch her, and perhaps he would be less inclined to offer mercy if she made him run. So, she held her breath, opting to freeze instead of fly.

What had given her away? Was it her wet hair, emitting scents of coconut? Was it the citrus soap she'd scrubbed her skin with? Was it her...blood? Hermione dropped her head to check for a leakage, a stuttered hiss of relief escaping through her teeth when she found none.

"Come in, Granger," the voice came again, and she shouldn't—she *shouldn't*.

But she did. It was simply too compelling to follow his instruction; nothing in the world was more natural than obliging his request.

So, she pushed open the door and found herself at the threshold of a decadent space that could have once been for hosting; a grand room for grand parties that the manor no longer held. Malfoy sat on the far side, purposefully separated from the two other occupants, his body taking up the entirety of a deep wingback armchair. Closer, thigh to thigh on a maroon loveseat, she found Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini.

Theodore jumped to his feet and met her with a wide smile. Blaise remained seated, though his eyes swam with warmth, and Malfoy...Malfoy kept his distance, hands wrapped around the arms of his chair, but he looked a little less pained than he had that morning. His cheeks had some colour to them, muted and bruised, but colour nonetheless.

"I didn't think you allowed visitors," she said, only to him, and it didn't matter that she'd merely breathed the words; they travelled the distance between them anyway. Malfoy's head turned in a perfectly predatory tilt.

"We have to bribe him with the good stuff every couple of months," Theodore said, pointing with delight at the open bottle by Malfoy's feet.

It was empty now, and the label sat ajar on the glass. It was not factory-made, nor mass-produced, but a label made by hand, scribbled in ink, and—her eyes widened. It was not *wine*, not at all.

“Don’t toy with her, Theo,” Blaise drawled.

Theo laughed, his hand settling on her shoulder, pulling back when she jolted. “It’s chimp’s blood, babe, don’t worry.”

“Oh,” she exhaled, daring to meet the cloud-grey eyes on the other end of the room, “is that...better?”

Malfoy's head dipped once, and she could see how it made sense; they were the closest primates to humans, after all. Then, almost as if he could hear her internal rationale, his lip curled over his fangs in mild disgust, sure proof that while it might indeed be *better*, it was still not *good*.

“What about you?” Theo asked, regaining her attention. “What did *you* bribe him with?”

“I—” She stopped short, reluctant to reveal her false promises about finding a cure. It had been a foul untruth the first time she’d let the words roll off her tongue; the bitterness of a second taste would surely make her sick. “Actually, I believe it was less of a bribe and more of a threat.”

Theo laughed heartily, Blaise smirked into the rim of his whisky tumbler, and Malfoy, distant, sour-faced Malfoy, merely muttered, “*Usurper*.”

“Sit down, Theo,” Blaise ordered. “You’re crowding her.”

Theo retook his perch on the loveseat and gestured for Hermione to join them in the vacant chair. Not knowing what to do, she first looked at Malfoy, waiting for the flash of confirmation in his otherwise stony expression, before she lowered herself into it. They returned to their conversation as though she’d never intruded, starting mid-sentence and sparing no time to catch her up.

It was fascinating to watch them talk—or, rather, to watch Theo talk while the other two listened with remarkable diligence. Blaise spoke infrequently, though still quantifiably more than Malfoy, and she racked her brain for memories of them at school, for any information she may have retained from her years in their acquaintance or anything she may have heard in the years that followed. Not a whole lot, for even now they ran in higher, *greener* circles. It wasn’t so unusual to have such little memory of them, for everyone had a way of wilting under Malfoy’s shadow back then, of making themselves smaller to ensure he felt tall.

Now, the tables had turned; it seemed as though he was perfectly content to live under theirs.

Theo’s arms waved with increasing animation as he regaled a story Hermione could not hear, because she was too busy watching Malfoy, taking in the way his eyes came to life with the sound of his friends laughter, wondering why he went so out of his way to deny himself this simple pleasure more than once every couple of months. When his gaze snapped to hers, catching her in the act of observation, she suppressed a jump and averted her eyes.

“Did you actually have one?” Theo asked, turning to her.

She blinked, slowly coming back into herself. "Sorry, what?"

The two men on the loveseat shared a knowing smirk, and her stomach plummeted to her feet.

"A Time-Turner," he clarified.

Hermione's spine went unnaturally straight, and she tried not to visibly baulk. "I don't know what you mean."

"It was a rumour in third year," said Blaise, with all the calm of swaying marram grass.

"You should know how rumours can be," she said, forcing a laugh. "You three started most of them."

"Not that one," Theo muttered coyly.

Her hands wrung nervously in her lap, nails picking at the skin of her knuckles, joints cracking with tension. She looked at Malfoy again, seeking refuge, only to find him just as keen to hear her answer as his friends. That Time-Turner...the things she'd done with it, the things she *hadn't*, the time she'd wasted when she knew it was redeemable, the lives she'd saved, the ones she never could...all of it was too much to put into words, especially here, in front of them, in front of *him*.

"Granger is often sworn to secrecy," Malfoy supplied, commanding and unwavering.

He was saving her from bearing the truth, from pulling back flesh to expose her ribs, from letting their thoughts and opinions slip through the gaps to nest in her chest cavity. She didn't question it, didn't wonder why, she just breathed out a sigh of relief.

"Well," Theo scoffed, "that's awfully dull."

"Isn't it just..." she mumbled.

"I suppose it's handy that you've always been irritatingly good at keeping secrets, especially now you are aware of Draco's little...predicament."

Little predicament, she almost laughed, but could not. "I'll admit I'm surprised to find out other people know about it."

"It's only us," Theo said, then narrowed his eyes. "Well, and you."

"How did you tell them?" she asked Malfoy, who looked surprised at her direct address.

"I didn't."

She frowned, preparing to push for more, but Blaise spoke first. "Who do you think found him?"

The pull of her brows increased, but the conversation was swiftly and methodically moved before she could open her mouth to pry. Hermione sat back in her chair and listened while Malfoy's friends updated him on the world he refused to be a part of, on their old school friends' marriages and children and subsequent divorces, on the jobs they didn't need to work, the betrothals they didn't want to pursue, the nights they'd wasted in the bottom of overpriced bottles.

As Hermione listened, she watched her reluctant host and saw how he absorbed it all in silence, saw how it manifested in the most minute twitches of his face. She couldn't help but feel it all with him: sadness, envy, *guilt*.

When the time finally came for them to leave, Theo hooked his arm around hers and pulled her back, letting Malfoy and Blaise lead the way.

"You don't seem all that scared of him," he whispered.

"Should I be?"

"Sometimes, probably."

Memories formed of Malfoy in the hallway, of his forearm pressing her back into the wall, of his sharp teeth dragging along the pulsing lines of her exposed throat. A shudder tore through her, and Theo chuckled in return.

"So," she began, eager to regain whatever control, whatever *dignity*, she still had, "you know how it happened?"

"I do."

"Do you know who turned him?"

"I do."

"Can you—"

"No, it's not my story to tell." They rounded a corner, still arm-in-arm, still lingering behind. He lowered his voice another octave when he added, "You could just ask him. I don't think he'd deny you."

She shook her head. "I don't think he's ready for that sort of question."

"Maybe not yet." Theo smiled, the corners of his mouth pulling with repressed sorrow. "I'm pleased you're here, though. He called for *us* this month, which is a first, and I can only imagine that is down to you."

"Why would that be down to me?"

"Well, what else is new around here?" His free hand swept the old smoking room they moved through, and she shrugged, knowing not what to say.

“I just watch and bother him, or mess up his library.”

He peered down at her with an almost-fond expression. “Good.”

When they arrived at the doors, she waved them off with a bright smile. Theo kissed her cheek, which was unexpected and more than a little off—they’d hardly spoken a word to each other before this night. Blaise gave her a parting nod, which was markedly more appropriate. Then the doors closed behind them, shutting her in to the manor once more, alone in the dark with a man who could not simply be called a man anymore.

He was so...*there*. His presence so demanding, his breath so shallow, yet somehow taking up all the available air. When he inhaled, he did so deeply, and she wondered if he could smell the blood-soaked cotton between her thighs, if he *liked* it.

As if in response, he stepped forward, and Hermione tilted her chin to look him in the eye, to show him that he did not—perhaps even *could not*—scare her, even if he was trying to, even if he should. His lips parted, fangs slipping free and gleaming under the filtering moonlight, sending her heart into a maddening, almost painful tempo. When his eyes dropped this time, they did not land on her racing pulse, but on her mouth.

A loud *pop* sent them reeling back from each other.

“Misses went and got lost!” Tibbs cried, hands cupping either side of her little face. “Tibbs only went to do checks on dinner, and yous was gone! Master will be—”

“It’s fine, Tibia,” Malfoy ground out. “She was with me.”

Hermione whispered, wholly to herself, “*Tibia?*”

The elf’s lip wobbled dangerously. “I...”

“Please escort Miss Granger back to the library,” he said.

But he wasn’t looking at the elf, and he made no effort to move, to leave, to shift his attention anywhere but squarely upon her. When Tibbs—or *Tibia*—held out her hand for Hermione to take, she could do nothing but stand there, as though planted within the floorboards, and try to remember the steps by which she could obtain air.

“You should go.” Malfoy lowered his head and locked onto her eyes. “Goodnight, Granger.”

Her feet moved before her mind did, taking her past him, far closer than she needed to get, not as close as she wanted to. His inhale was an audible, tangible thing, and she took one of her own before whispering into the closing inches of their passing bodies.

“Goodnight, Malfoy.”



Art by Chaosandcodices

Chapter End Notes

He might be hungry, but she is a thirsty, thirsty girl.

Hermione's fantasy was brought to glorious life by the unmatched [chaosandcodices](#)

Thank you mi omega for fixing my chapters, not getting TOO upset that I edged you with Charlie, and for wisely telling me to remove the words 'uterine lining':

[Miagas](#)

Chapter 6: And suck the blood of all thy race;

Chapter Notes

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

In the centre of the parlour, where the circular wool rug could usually be found, lay an unravelled roll of Bermuda grass. Evergreen and soft to the touch, a perfect stage on which to set her carefully planned performance. She'd studied the language of flowers meticulously in preparation, selecting with exactness—grass for submission, thyme for endurance, gladiolus for strength, a whole spectrum of florals to cradle a kneeling Draco Malfoy.

The only light was made of flickering flames, as it always was, covering them in a serene, gentle luminosity that felt confidential. Candles floated throughout the room, dancing across Malfoy's patient features in a way that could have convinced her he was happy to be here, had she not known better; he was here upon her persistence, and nothing more.

Hermione placed a sealed thermos on the ground, knowing it was not yet time to release its aroma—after several pointed refusals, Malfoy's cooperation was solely dependent on the use of chimp blood over human—and stepped onto the bed of grass, careful not to crush any of the surrounding petals. Malfoy was waiting and understandably sceptical, doubt as clear in his eyes as it was in her mind, but there was no use in dismissing the experiment before it had begun, so she shuffled in close—closer than she should—and raised her hand to the buttons on his shirt.

He snatched her wrist in a bruising grip, along with the air from her lungs, and hissed, “What are you *doing*?”

“Revealing you.” She jutted her chin towards the open book on the marble side table.

“Exposure is part of it.”

“I can do that myself.”

She shook her head. “I need to do it. You're not supposed to be...comfortable with this.”

The line of his throat worked as he swallowed, and for a moment, she expected him to pull back, to stomp over her carefully laid bed of flowers and flee from the room again, but then he sighed, shoulders sagging in defeat, and released her.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Just get on with it.”

Malfoy's jaw remained tight, his hands curled into fists at his side while she worked in double time to unbutton his charcoal shirt. Inch by inch, more of his pale skin was exposed to the glimmering light; his broad chest, his taut—if not a little underfed—stomach, the sharp lines of his hips, the curves and angles of his arms, the veins filled with blood that felt cold, *so cold*, under her burning hands.

Perhaps she should have been more ashamed of the way her eyes lingered when she peeled his shirt away, or the way her mouth dried when he turned to place the folded fabric on the ground, exposing the lean muscle of his back, the dip of his spine, the three almost imperceptible freckles on his left shoulder blade. But she wasn't.

"What now?" he asked begrudgingly.

She held up her wand, stomach performing a series of acrobatic stunts, and tried for a reassuring smile. "I'm going to tie you up."

He scoffed, head hanging in commiseration. "Of course you are."

"It's just a precaution." She stepped behind him and waited for his hands to clasp at the base of his spine. "Like with the knives."

She did not touch him as she muttered *Incarcerous*, watching the thin rope wrap dutifully around his wrists, knotting tight against the flesh of his palms. He didn't flinch, nor swear, nor throw her a disparaging look—if anything, he looked nervous, his breath held in her proximity, and she could hardly blame him; they were, after all, about to test his limits. Once his hands were securely bound, so they could not reach for her or the thermos in desperation, she instructed him to kneel on the grass, and he *did*.

Eyes downcast, head low, hands tied, torso bared, he waited for her to begin.

Hermione collected the thermos and checked the book one final time, scanning the page for anything she may have missed. It was not Czech, like the book she was looking for, but Latin—a far more biblical take on rituals, rooted in sacrifice and a willingness to accept the otherwise unacceptable, through an incantation for which she'd found only the roughest translation. Once sure that she'd done all she could, accessed all she had been able to access, she took a deep breath and twisted the thermos open.

His head snapped up instantly, but she did not falter, pouring the thick venous liquid into a waiting goblet, securing it tightly in her hand. She began to circle Malfoy, whose eyes were locked on the glass, at a methodical pace.

"*Corpus meum do*," she began.

Malfoy tensed when she moved closer, holding out the goblet to his face, under his nose. He let out a rueful noise through clenched teeth. "Not too close."

She paused, only for a second, then moved the goblet even closer, feeling an unmistakable thrill when his fangs gleamed threateningly. "*Animam meam do*."

Malfoy swore under his breath, chin tucked to his chest, doing everything he could not to look at the blood in her outstretched hand, which would just *not do*. She stepped closer, bringing the rim of the goblet merely centimetres from his mouth.

"Concentrate," she murmured.

"*I am*."

Sweat beaded at his temples, the vein in his forehead pulsing with frustration. Hermione licked her lips unwittingly, captivated by the sight of him heaving for breath on his knees. She did not trust the potency of this blood, its virtue questionable for their intentions, but when she got close enough to press the glass to his lower lip and watched his body shudder in repudiation, watched him turn away with considerable effort—from the blood in the goblet, yes, but also the blood in her veins, pulsing hot through a wrist he could easily reach—she felt proud.

“*Desiderium meum do.*” Hermione pulled back, which was as unnatural as falling upward, and placed the goblet on the side table. Malfoy sagged onto his heels, looking worn out in all the ways she felt worked up. “How do we know if it’s worked?”

“You tell me,” he mumbled. “This was your stupid idea.”

She closed the book and whirled on him. “We should test it.”

He peered up at her, silver eyes rimmed with exhaustion, light hair falling out of place, bare chest rising and falling with laboured breath. “How?”

“By giving you something more tempting than chimp blood. We should use real—”

“Granger.”

“I’m right *here*, we should use mine.”

Every ounce of fatigue seemed to evaporate as his eyes blackened, pupils swallowing irises, white widening, face twisting with discernible horror and...hunger. Oh, *yes*—hunger. She knew it was there, could see it like the lashes on his waterline, could feel it like the pulse in her neck.

“No,” he said, the world all but dripping with warning.

Never one to back down, especially not to him, Hermione raised a brow. “Why not? We need to know.”

She pulled her wand from her pocket, and for a moment, she truly considered listening to him; untying his bindings, offering his shirt, letting him go about his evening without further delay, but what was the point of any of this if they were not going to put it to the test? He’d been doing well, hadn’t he? He’d resisted this ritual of guesswork. She’d bled for five days only the week prior, and he hadn’t gone for her then either. Only a handful of days before that, he’d had her pinned to the wall and *still* hadn’t sunk his teeth into her flesh.

So, she pointed her wand at the centre of her palm.

“What are you doing?” Malfoy barked.

“Just a little cut—”

There was an echoing snap as his ropes gave way, then he was there, the wrist of her wand hand giving way under his unnatural hold. His eyes were wild, thunderous, filled to the brim

with storm clouds, fury seeping into every furrowed line of his face. With another, almost bone-shattering squeeze, Hermione dropped her wand with a sharp wince.

“Do,” he whispered, not just a warning anymore, “*not*.”

“Malfoy, we can’t measure success if you won’t let me—”

“There is no success.” His eyes dropped to her neck. “It didn’t work.”

She deflated, still in his hold, a cold mist of failure trickling through the room, between every blade of grass, across every thyme stem and gladiolus petal. When she finally found her voice, it was two sizes smaller than it had been before. “It didn’t?”

“No.” In a flash, Malfoy brought her wrist to his mouth, brushing his parted lips across the veins that lived just under her skin. Without warning, she slackened, her eyes fighting to remain open. “I don’t want your blood any less.”

“Is that,” she swallowed, “a... permanent issue?”

“Yes.” He twisted her wrist, almost painfully, and ran his tongue along her rocketing pulse, making her knees feel like paper. “It’s always there, every waking minute and every second of slumber, there is almost nothing I want more.”

“What *do* you want more?” she whispered, wholly breathless, her mind swimming through a fog so dense she could hardly move, and a desire so sudden, so blistering, she felt the corners of her eyes *burn* with it.

Malfoy squeezed her wrist again, not nearly as brutally as before, and let her arm fall limply to her side. He took three measured paces back, his mouth a stern, downturned thing that she wanted to pull back to her skin.

“To not want it at all,” he said.

She watched him, not sure of her own body, as he collected his shirt and the goblet of chimp blood, not bothering to bid her goodnight before darting from the room and leaving her there, standing in a grass clearing. Without knowing quite how it happened, she ended up kneeling in the opening, encircled by flowers that hadn’t been placed for her, pressing her forehead into the verdant bed and inhaling the scent: earth, blood, him, him, *him*.

Her wrist, weak in the grass beside her head, bore the red mark of his hold. She hoped it would last.



On Tuesday, Hermione received word of another attack.

A high-ranking Auror with a thirty-five-year career had been discovered crouched in an underpass, the drained bodies of a fifteen-year-old girl and her mother at his feet. He'd been transported to the facility already, though Hermione had yet to visit. The news cast doubt on the detainment of Baysangur Anzorov, the born vampire and only suspect thus far, but he remained in custody—if anything, it only served to increase her suspicion that more than one individual was involved in the attacks.

Hermione doubled down on her efforts to find the texts, frustration mounting with every cleared shelf. She got up earlier, took fewer breaks, worked until the night crawled in and took the energy out from under her feet. In her determination, she'd forgone her nightly visits to the parlour and any fantasies she may have had at re-attempting the ritual, but that did not mean she'd forgone Malfoy's company entirely—he'd simply taken it upon himself to come to *her*, instead.

She never asked, never called for him, he just decided to join her, and something about it felt like sparks igniting between her ribs. The elves left them alone unless summoned, and they were *rarely* summoned, giving them plenty of time to exist in each other's space in ways they could not in the parlour. He stayed longer than their usual hour, sometimes arriving in the daylight hours and not leaving until the middle of the night, sometimes arriving at night and staying until dawn.

The library was a cavernous, eerie beast made of pockets of stagnant air and parroting alcoves. Every day she spent in it, her stature seemed to shrink another inch, the shelves seemed to grow impossibly taller, the watching walls seemed to taunt with increasing viciousness. Malfoy, however, managed to turn it into a place of potential; he looked at ease within it, leaning on cabinets and sprawling in armchairs, holding ancient books with one hand, thumb pressed into its hand-sewn spine.

It wasn't until now that she'd realised just how large he'd become, which was odd, considering how small he seemed determined to make himself. He took up *space*; there was no way around it. She found herself needing to pass him more often than she should, with all the vacancy the manor provided, eyes lingered on the lines of his limbs when she stepped around them, or the width of his shoulders when he towered, blocking out the already limited light from the high windows.

The hours eroded the wall between them like a constant lapping wave until she forgot to be shy, to be wary of his movements, just as he forgot to keep his distance. She asked him questions and he gave her answers—or he didn't, and that was okay. He let her watch his displays of speed and strength as he assisted with her explorations, and offered information about his early vampiric cravings, about the struggles he'd faced once reborn into a body that felt so unlike his own. She made a note of everything.

Sometimes, he even asked her something in return.

“What do you do when you're not working?”

She waved to the piles of books surrounding them. “I read.”

He rolled his eyes. “Obviously.”

“I swim, too, or see my friends, or...” She snorted. “That’s it, actually.”

“How thrilling.”

“It’s *two* more things than you do,” she barked. The sight of his returning smirk made her spine feel suspiciously gelatinous, so she kept talking. “I used to spend time with Crookshanks.”

“Ah,” he sighed, “that infernal creature.”

“He may well be down there now, yes.”

The pause that followed was still, weighted, and she let him process her meaning at his own pace. Finally, came a tentative murmur of, “He’s gone?”

Gone, she thought, was an interesting way to say *dead*. It was like Malfoy couldn’t bring himself to speak the word, couldn’t get it past his fangs. Crookshanks was buried under soil and wildflowers, his body nourishing a garden she never watered. It had only been a few months, yet the solitary proof of his life was the empty bowls sitting on the floor of her empty kitchen in her empty flat.

“Yeah,” she croaked. “It happened recently.”

“Sorry.” He swallowed thickly, and she watched the slow movement of his throat. “I know you cared for him.”

“I did.” The sting in her eyes was unexpected, to say the least, and she blinked it away furiously. “Thank you.”

They returned to their tasks; Hermione categorising books, Malfoy moving the stacks to wherever she pointed, the minutes passing without the tension that usually lingered in the air between them. It was easy to inhale, easy to exhale, to let herself become absorbed in the work, in something other than the presence in the room.

Malfoy returned from moving a book tower with a frown. “Why swimming?”

She held the ladder, her head tilting with genuine consideration. The movement drew his eye to her neck, where they so liked to linger as of late, and she didn’t mind—no, she didn’t mind at all.

“It’s peaceful.” She looked down at the book in her hands. “Quiet.”

“Is that what you want? Peace and quiet?”

“Isn’t that what we all want?” she asked, peering down from her rung on the ladder.

He rolled his lips together, contemplating. “Not always.”

“Oh?”

“Flying was...loud, chaotic. I wanted that.”

Hermione found herself nodding along, even though she vehemently disagreed; flying was indeed all of those things and more, and she'd hated every minute she'd ever spent on the back of a broom. Malfoy, however, had always looked the most real when he was flying. Not when chasing Harry or showing off, but just...flying. The moments in between, the lull in the game, when he'd breezed past the stands and paid them no mind, his eyes focused and his grip true. He'd *loved* it.

“Do you still?”

He looked away, instantly forlorn. “It doesn't matter now.”

“Can vampires not operate a broomstick?”

“I don't know.”

“You haven't tried?” she asked, disbelievingly.

Malfoy shook his head, and she found herself sliding down the ladder, leaning against it as soon as her feet hit the ground, appraising him. He looked able enough; he certainly still retained some muscle from what she'd seen—*appreciated*—during their failed ritual, and there it wasn't for a lack of equipment or space. Surely, if he wanted to fly, he could.

“Don't make me guess, Granger,” he sighed. “What is it?”

“You just...do that a lot.”

“Do what a lot?”

“Deny yourself,” she said. He froze immediately, shoulders high and defensive, but she wasn't done. “No friends, no flying, no food. Why?”

“It's easier this way,” he said stiffly.

“Vampires exist out there, you know. Quite freely.”

“As you have recently informed me,” he leaned closer until she could smell the lavender detergent Femur and Tibbs must use for his laundry, “they are also prone to the odd massacre.”

“One or two out of how many? Wizards are in the news every day for murder,” she countered, stepping into his space when he tried to turn away. “The blood you drink makes you sick, doesn't it?”

His eyes widened. “How do you—”

“I fed pigs' blood to the vampires at the facility, and spent the rest of the morning cleaning up their vomit.” Somehow, he paled further. “It’s not good for you, is it?”

His voice was barely audible when he said, “It’s revolting.”

Hermione softened, resisted the manic urge to reach out and place her hand on his arm, and asked, “Then why do you drink it?”

“Because it is better than the alternative.”

“There are bags.” She shook her head. “Pre-prepared and donated, completely ethical sources of—”

“No,” he cut in, his expression stony once again, his eyes mercilessly cold. “I will not risk it.”

“Risk *what*?”

“Losing control.” He looked agonised, like the words tasted of unsuitable blood. “It happened once, and I cannot—I *will not* allow it to happen again.”

Hermione did not push, not when he looked so sickened already, but her mind drifted to that night in the hallway, the way she’d pinned her to the wall, the way she’d been entirely at his mercy; pliant and unwilling to fight back. He’d had total, unmitigated authority of her person, his teeth at her neck, his fangs dancing across her pulse, yet he’d stepped back—he’d been *in control*.

She wondered how he might look out of it.



Grass flattens under her naked body, limbs spread, arms out at her sides, open veins pulsing to feed the earth below, making it grow taller, stronger, *red*. Malfoy stands above, watching her pour out, blood smearing his candlelit face; so beautiful, so predatory. He licks his lips, tongue grazing over well-used fangs, and she’s *so*—she’s so...*wet*, so *desperate*.

She whines, “*Please*.”

He kneels at her side and pushes one bare arm under her back, hauling her up. She is limp, floppy, an open vessel, a meal spread out and covered in petals. His gaze is the only source of warmth, and it touches her everywhere. When he brings her to his lap and tucks her head under his glistening chin, she is nothing but willing.

“You’ll let me feed, won’t you?”

She nods into his shoulder, over and over, every ounce of her remaining energy used to tell him *yes, yes, please, yes*. A large hand, attached to a large arm, brushes back the curls that have slicked to her neck, freeing the space for him to plant a kiss upon her vein, to whisper into the faint heartbeat found there.

“Good girl.”

His bite is sudden, igniting pleasure like nothing else that had ever been or could ever be. All she can do is cling to him, to shudder and gasp and give herself over to the intense rush. It coils and uncoils in the base of her spine, spikes between every vertebra and pries them open, making more room for the overstuffed feeling until there is nowhere else for it to go.

He sucks deeply, lifts her arms around his neck, lets her open wrists drip steadily down his back, and oh—*oh*, he is so beautiful like this, the feeling of him in her blood is so *right* and *warm*. It's what she's made for: to house his teeth, to give her blood, to fit against his chest as he takes all he needs. She moans deeply, falling blind towards the precipice, her eyes glazing over with the blistering, *burning* descent—



Hermione launched out of bed, hands spread wide on her chest to calm her beating heart. Each thump echoed through the library, rebounding from the high shelves and travelling between the walkways until they landed back upon her chest, like fists pounding against the cage of her ribs. She exhaled, covering her mouth with shaking fingers, slowly tracing the outline of her lips, then lower, brushing over her jaw. Finally, she let her hand curl around the base of her throat, fingertips stroking the exact spot she'd imagined his teeth would sink.

With a firm rattle of her head, Hermione dropped her arms and brushed herself off, unwilling to linger in the madness of her imagination. The night was young and so very dark, but sleep would not greet her again—she wasn't even sure if she wanted it to, now that she knew what lewd, unwelcome visions awaited her. So, she did what she'd been doing for weeks and made for the ladder.

If she couldn't sleep, she would search.

The bookcase was partially empty, with small stacks of books sitting at the base, but she still had the top shelves to search. With a shaky inhale, Hermione began climbing, trying to ignore the jelly-like feeling at the back of her knees or the slow twisting of her stomach. Halfway up, she paused to peer through the stained-glass window, desperate for the solace of the moon, finding it radiant and luminous amongst the vast expanse of stars.

And there he was.

Draco Malfoy, blonde hair whipping beneath his hood, ducked into the forest fringe. She froze as though he'd caught her, she knew, just *knew*, that he was going to hunt—to *feed*. It wasn't the first time she'd watched him go, but things were significantly different now; she knew *why* he was going, *what* he was going to do, and she wanted to see it for herself. Some answers would not be found in this library, amongst the pages of books she spent her days organising.

Under a scaled belly, Professor Lidwig said, and Malfoy was nothing if not his namesake.

Hermione scrambled down the ladder and marched to her boots, every footstep like a beating drum in the quiet of the library. She tied the laces with no consideration for undoing them, wrapped her cloak with no care for it being inside out, and ran, as fast as her legs would carry her, towards the library doors.



The woods were inked in shades of blue, lit by scattered pinpricks of moonlight breaking through the overhead canopy and the dim glow of her wand. Tree roots caught the tips of her boots and threatened to send her flying, but she persisted. It had rained today, and the night was so bitter. Petrichor filled her nose and gave the landscape an otherworldly energy, like it *wanted* her here, like it *needed* her to venture further, *deeper*, until it could swallow her whole. The wind howled through the oaks and sycamores, winter-bitten leaves littered the ground and stuck to the soles of her shoes; damp from dew, none of the dawn's frosted crunch.

Malfoy had a head start and the significant advantage of speed, but Hermione was smarter—her wand tracked him like a dowsing rod, lit low and pointing her in the right direction. She pushed onwards, treading carefully so as not to disturb the earth too suddenly, too loudly, knowing that he was the hunter in these woods, and she could so easily become the hunted. The thought should have had her running back for the manor, for the iron lock on the library doors and her perpetually warmed duvet, but it did not. If anything, it only lured her further.

It was so, so cold. The bitter winter settled into every branch, as it settled her bones and rattled them, but it mattered not, for her curiosity and compulsion burned like a flame. She kept going, and going, deeper into the overgrowth, juggling silent steps and steady hands. Webs shimmered between mottled bark, spiders clung to their snares and waited for prey of their own to wander in.

The sound of running water stopped her in her tracks, her wand making a sharp left turn to take her closer. She followed dutifully, ducking through half-shed bushes and around ancient trunks until she could just make out the sight of a stream, moonlight dancing along the

water's ripples. It was lined with combs of wet moss and drowned kindling—a mockery to any who sought warmth in these primordial trees.

At the edge of the stream stood a stag, antlered and proud, twice the size of any deer. Her breath caught as it lowered its majestic head to drink, beady eyes still open and alert, waiting for an ambush. What it didn't see, what she only recognised in the second before its movement began, was the shadowed figure watching from the treeline, a human form emerging from the darkness in a careful, considered prowl.

Hermione slowly moved behind the cover of a wide tree where he could not see her, kept upwind where he could not smell her, and planted her feet so he could not hear her. He moved utterly silently, an owl in flight, with an intense focus that captivated her so thoroughly, so forcefully, that she could not blink. She watched with held breath as Malfoy walked into its blind spot without preamble. Quicker than any spell, he stepped up and wrapped his arm around its neck, the stag's bassy scream ringing out into the night and piercing her eardrums, making her flinch.

Malfoy, however, did not relent. He ripped the stag back, folding it against his chest with considerable, undeniable, *inhuman* strength, and sank his teeth into the side of its throat. Hermione held her breath, eyes as wide as the moon above, transfixed to the gruesome scene before her, watching his body convulse as he pulled long gulps from the withering stag. The animal fell limp, though not to the ground, held aloft by banded arms around its lifeless neck.

After what could have been seconds, minutes, or an entire millennium, Malfoy let the stag fall to a heap at his feet. He looked up, as if admiring the stars, blood coating the front of his body and glimmering under the night's sky.

Then he turned to the side and vomited violently onto the forest floor.

Shocked, Hermione stumbled back from the tree; foolish, thoughtless movements that had fallen branches breaking cleanly under her boots. She looked up, hoping that the sound was not loud enough, had not travelled far enough, to reach the retching Malfoy. It was too late—he was already looking at her.

Run, a voice inside her head screamed, but there was simply no time.

In less than a second, her back was flat against the forest bed, pinned by the weight of the man—the *vampire*—atop her, one hand holding both wrists above her head, the other wrapped tight around her jaw. Blood was dripping from his mouth where it hovered, open and panting, at her neck. She felt it drip onto her skin, carmine gathering in her collarbone, hot and thick and *just* like in her dream—*is that what this was?*

His teeth flashed, protruding canines shining like knives in the moonlight, and she went as limp as the stag he'd pulled this energy from. When Malfoy bent forward, his mouth at her throat, she tilted her head back, entirely thoughtless, and released a piteous whimper.

“Please...”

The sound of her pathetic, desperate voice did something to him; the first drag of his teeth against her flesh was the last, and he ripped himself away from her.

“Shit,” he rasped.

She remained there, supine in the forest graveyard and glazed in blood—she might have been shivering, or breathing, or swimming, nothing was certain. She blinked at the stars, and they blinked back.

“What the fuck are you playing at?” Malfoy seethed.

“I followed you,” she replied meekly, but it could have been someone else, for her voice sounded nothing like her own.

“Why?”

“I wanted to see.”

“Well, you saw!” Malfoy was on his feet now, hands gripping the roots of his hair. “How could you be so fucking stupid—”

His admonishment ceased as his face twisted with pain, and he turned away from her, curled over himself until he fell to his knees. His back heaved, his hands clawed at the earth with the effort it was taking him not to vomit again, to hold in the dregs of the blood he’d just consumed. Impulsively, Hermione rose from her bed of damp leaves and went to him, placing one ungloved palm between the blades of his shoulders.

Malfoy flinched away, but he was too weakened to truly shake her off. Sweat glistened on his forehead, his eyes wound shut; he shuddered under at her touch. She moved around him, kneeling at his front, taking his pale face between her hands and tilting him for inspection. His eyes were no longer those predatory swallows of ravenous intent, instead, they reflected the blue of the moon; wide and fearful and so *very* beautiful. She was immediately in their orbit.

With the corner of her cloak, she wiped the blood from his chin, and he let her, albeit with a wobbly frown. When she shrugged out of her cloak entirely, deciding it wasn’t nearly enough to *just* clean him, and wrapped it around his shoulders, he found the strength to protest.

His hand came up to stop her. “You’ll freeze.”

“I won’t.”

With the cloak around his shoulders, she plucked her wand from the forest floor and cast a warming charm over them both, watching him sag with relief and nod with acceptance. Hermione hooked his arm over her shoulders and helped him to his feet, just as she had some weeks ago in the hallway of his manor with Will, who’d looked not so different from the vampire at her side now; exhausted, sick, *awful*.

“Granger...”

“Let’s go.”

To his credit, he actually tried to walk, dragging his feet along the forest and rerouting her when she tried to go in the wrong direction, but he grew heavier with every step, tripping on tree roots and catching himself on jagged branches as she all but dragged him towards the mouth of the forest. The light of her wand was enough to guide them through the thickest, most unruly bushes until the grass shortened and the night sky opened up in all of its endless expanses.

By the time they made it to the doors of the manor, Malfoy was seconds away from falling unconscious, sweat layered over his muted skin, and she felt...frustrated, confused, utterly *lost* to why he would routinely put himself through this. When she kicked open the first door and turned left instead of right, he tried to shake his head.

“Not...this way...”

“Where is your room?” she asked, ignoring him.

“No...*no*...”

She didn’t listen, pulling him from room to room, his feet trailing through years of dust along the hardwood floors, her grunts and hisses echoing through the endless hallways. When, finally, she was presented with a small, unmade bed tucked in the corner of an otherwise void room—which had been turned into more of a holding cell than a place of rest—she huffed out a sharp laugh and gave up. Twisting under his arm, she pulled towards the library instead, where she could at least find a mattress that moths hadn’t hollowed.

Candles lit and extinguished as she hauled him down the hallways, a passing frenzy of light that offered her a brief view of his willowing figure, his mouth turned down and drained of colour, his eyes hollow and sunken, his cheeks absolutely porcelain. Malfoy slumped, at last a complete dead weight, as soon as they reached the ornate doors.

“Femur! Tibbs!” she called, hauling him into the impending room, past the stacks of books and archives. “Help!”

With a pop, Femur appeared before her, momentarily shocked into stasis.

“Help,” she said again, a broken plea.

The elf rushed forward to grip the front of Malfoy’s robes, the touch of his magic alleviating some of the weight from Hermione’s shoulders. “Is Master unwell?”

“I think so,” she groaned, aiming for the transfigured bed. “Help me get him over there.”

Malfoy was beyond argument, beyond rebuff, his head lolling to the side and exposing the bloodstained lines of his pale throat. With Femur’s assistance, she managed to settle him, as slowly as they could, atop her bed. Without hesitation, Malfoy turned his face into her pillow and inhaled, his body trembling. She reached out and placed her hand on his forehead, finding it shockingly cold despite the sweat.

“Misses...” Femur began, and she questioned then if Malfoy often relied on their help during his feedings, or if he took it upon himself to suffer alone, curled up on the floor of the woods or a decommissioned wing of a desolate manor.

The answer, it seemed, was clear.

“Can you bring me some hot water, a flannel, and a bowl in case he vomits again?” she asked.

Femur didn’t even spare the time to agree before he was gone, so she set to unbuttoning her cloak from around Malfoy's shoulders, to cleaning him with gentle passes of her wand, keeping her hands busy to stop them from shaking. His brows pulled together, but his eyes remained closed; he looked pale, so horribly pale, that she could not stop the fury in her gut for anything.

“Is this supposed to be a punishment?” she snapped.

Malfoy’s eyes cracked open, revealing a sliver of silver. “Mmm?”

“Self-harm? Some kind of penance?”

“What...are you—”

“I cannot think of another possible explanation for why you would willingly do this to yourself.” She unbuttoned the collar of his shirt and pried it open, giving him more room to breathe. “I mean, *look* at you.”

Femur arrived before her words could hit, placing what she’d asked for on the table beside her bed. Hermione dipped the flannel in the water and brought it to Malfoy’s head, gently running it back and forth in soothing motions, not unaware of the way his body relaxed at the touch.

“Can Femur be doing anything else?”

The elf looked almost as nervous as she felt, so she smiled at him warmly, masking her tempest to create the appearance of calm. “It’s alright, I’ve got him. I’ll ring the bell if we need anything else.”

Femur was visibly apprehensive—it must have been against every instinct he had to leave his sickly master in the hands of someone still unknown—but he did not push back, departing with a bow and a final concerned glance at the man, who seemed more like a boy, shivering on the bed. Once alone, she turned her attention back to Malfoy, brushing his hair back from his sticky forehead, wiping his skin clean of the baleful stag’s blood.

“You shouldn’t have been out there...” he mumbled, unseeing.

She waited a minute before responding, flattening the damp flannel against his head, then whispering, “Neither should you.”

His breathing slowed, evening out into a peaceful rhythm, keeping time to the brush of her hands. His body sank into the sheets, their scents mixing in a heady, delirious way that made her lean closer, that brought her other hand to trace the knuckles of his own. Just when she thought he might have fallen into slumber, he spoke.

“My mother.”

She looked at his soft, shadowed face. “Hmm?”

“You asked me...whose blood I’d fed on,” he croaked. “It was my mother’s.”

For a moment, and only a moment, Hermione’s hand halted its movements, shock coursing through her limbs. Then, knowing that his rare vulnerability was entirely dependent on her reaction to it, she resumed stroking his hair, keeping herself quiet.

“My father was turned in the war,” Malfoy continued hoarsely, eyes still closed like he’d lose his nerve if he were to open them. “He wasn’t told what would happen or how to handle it, he was just sent home. When he saw us, it had only been a few days, and he...he wasn’t even there.”

She kept stroking, hoping her words could be heard in the silence—*you can tell me your secrets, I’ll keep them safe.*

“I don’t think he even knew it was us. All he could do was follow the instruction of his sire... to turn me, too.”

“His *sire*?” she asked, unable to stop herself. “And he couldn’t refuse?”

“No,” he tried to shake his head, merely turning it to the side, “not when he was so...”

He writhed fitfully, struggling to recall, even more to retell.

“I begged him not to, even more than the night they made me take the mark,” he said shakily. “I thought he was going to kill me. Then...*my mother*. All I remember is her screaming for him to stop.”

Hermione set the flannel aside and replaced it with her bare hand, letting her fingers dip into his hair, her nails scratching lightly against his scalp. He emptied his lungs, letting his shoulders settle on the exhale before he spoke again.

“I woke up later...minutes, hours, I don’t know. He was gone and she...her side was open and...the blood was everywhere, it was *so much*, I didn’t mean to—”

“Malfoy...”

“I could have helped her, there was time, she could have survived it,” he whispered, thick with emotion he would not allow to spill. “But I was blind to anything but hunger.”

She slipped her hand into his and squeezed. “You are not to blame—”

“When you drink from someone, you feel everything they feel, and I did.” He squeezed her hand back, seeking something, be it stability, acceptance, or just the knowledge that someone was listening. She tried to give him all three. “Her fear, her confusion, her disgust, her *love*... it was all mine. I don’t remember much of that time, but I remember *every second* of her death.”

In the moments that followed, Hermione thought of all the platitudes she could give him; that it wasn’t his fault, that she was sorry, that she wished it wasn’t so, but none of them would truly mean anything. It happened, it *happened*, it couldn’t be changed now, couldn’t be swept away.

But maybe, with enough time and a listening ear, it could be accepted.

Eventually, she murmured, “What about your father?”

Malfoy winced, from memory or physical agony, it was hard to tell. “I found him in the west wing, clawing at his throat, a few days after I turned.”

“What did you do?”

“I killed him.”

She’d expected it, which is why she did not flinch, keeping her fingers brushing soothing motions through his drying hair. He didn’t expect her to keep going; that much was clear, but no part of her felt compelled to stop. Malfoy had told her a truth so awful and tormented, he’d bared the depth of his shame, yet she felt sure of where she wanted to be, and that being there was *safe*.

“So,” her thumb brushed over his brow, “that’s why you won’t drink human blood?”

“I don’t want to lose control again.”

“You could have tonight, or in the hallway, there is no way I would have been able to fight you off...but you didn’t.”

Finally, he opened his eyes to meet hers, bloodshot whites and cloudy irises, so much misery and uncertainty within them. For the first time in a long time, possibly even since they’d grown out of their school’s house robes, he looked like Draco Malfoy.

“I won’t.” His fingers circled her wrist, not to pry her away from him, just to hold. “I’d sooner harm myself than you.”

With that, his arms fell limp at his side. Questions sat heavy on her tongue—she wanted to ask *why*, why he would, why she already *knew* it, what on earth was going on with her, with *them*, but his eyes were closed once more and his breathing slowed. Before she could collect her thoughts into words, Malfoy was asleep.

She rose from his side, letting her fingers slip through the silk of his hair one final time, before settling into a nearby chair and summoning her list of books, hoping to find one that offered further insight on siring vampires. The pages, however, remained open and unread on

her lap while she watched the gentle rise and fall of Malfoy's sleeping form, settling in for a long, long night.

Chapter End Notes

Alright...that's enough edging, I say!

See you in the next ;)

(Which will very likely not be until my other WIP is finished, so...two weeks?)

Thank you to Mummy's favourite cummy bears for beta:

[Miagas](#)

[Accio_Funky_Pants](#)

Chapter 7: There from thy daughter, sister, wife,

Chapter Notes

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

Unbelievably, when Hermione peeled herself out of deep slumber, she found that her neck did not hurt, her back did not protest, and her legs were not tucked tightly under her body. She was comfortable, *warm*, wrapped in a heated blanket that certainly hadn't been draped over her before she'd fallen asleep in the chair.

Except...she wasn't in the chair at all; she was supine and stretched, limbs spread across the soft mattress, fingers fisted in fresh sheets.

Hermione could acquiesce that her time at the manor had muddied the waters of reality and paranoia, the watchful walls had the peach fuzz on the back of her neck standing to permanent attention, her dreams dipped her into imagined ichor, and the candlelight distorted the high bookshelves into shadowed figures. Still, she could say with absolute certainty that she had *not* put herself to bed, which meant that someone else had—that *Malfoy* had.

He must have woken up feeling well enough to stand, well enough to trundle over to where she'd been attempting maladroit sleep in an iron-backed chair, and lifted her out of it. Had he supported her head when he carried her to bed? Had he taken off her shoes, or did she kick them away? Had he tucked her in and placed a warming charm on the duvet? Impossibilities, all of it, yet as she lay there in the scene of the act, the evidence seemed indisputable.

Blinking slowly, she rolled onto her side and glanced at the chair, half-hoping to find that he'd merely swapped places, that he would be sitting there pretending to read. She was disappointed to find it almost entirely vacant. Draco Malfoy was not sitting in it, with his too-long limbs and his too-morose face, but an unspooled sheet of parchment had been placed upon the cushion.

Hermione shot out of bed fast enough to be humbled by her iron deficiency and padded to the chair. The parchment was fresh, the ink still wet to the touch, and the words scribbled upon it, with what she could only assume was the finest feather from the finest bird, made her heart stumble just as violently as her feet.

Thank you. — D.M —

“Not sure why you bothered to sign it,” she muttered to the paper, still unconvinced of her own consciousness.

Then again, when she stumbled back to the bed and flopped down, rolling over to press her face into the cotton pillowcase, there was no mistaking the scent that filled her nose: earth,

blood, him, *him*.



The facility was sparsely populated that morning, with only the immediate medical staff on hand, all of them blinking blearily into cooling mugs of untouched coffee. The lights were lower than those at St Mungos, but still far too bright for the early hours, sending pulses of pain into Hermione's temples.

She wasn't alone in her lethargy; Dr Nico Carlsen, a man who seemed to pride himself on looking decidedly put together at all times, who managed to charm superiors and subordinates alike, looked more than a little worse for wear. It was to be expected, she concluded, since the most recent attack had set back all the ground they naively assumed they'd covered. They'd merely walked a paradoxical line and found themselves back at the start, scratching their heads.

"Do you need coffee first?" she asked Nico as they stood, shoulder to shoulder, at the threshold of Genevieve Rosier's room.

He winced. "One more drop of caffeine and I'll have a cardiac event."

"It's a good thing we are in a medical facility, then," she said. Nico snorted, then released a sound that was half-sigh, half-anguish. "Shall we?"

She didn't manage more than one step before Nico's hand shot out to wrap around her wrist, stopping her from entering the room. Hermione looked at his hand with confusion, slowly trailing her eyes to his face, which was etched with surprising unease.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked quietly.

"I'm not sure about anything, Dr Carlsen," Hermione admitted, patting his hand gently, which he correctly took as a cue to relinquish his hold. "But we need some proof of progression, don't we?"

He knew they did; the facility had taken more than a few bags of galleons to build, even more so to maintain, and it was their responsibility to demonstrate its necessity, to provide evidence of its success, to justify their wages.

"Alright," he said, nodding towards the room. "The shield charms?"

"Already up." Her eyes dropped to the holster on his hip. "But you should probably take out your wand."

He looked startled, as though the instrument of his magic was a bygone thing, lost in his exhaustion, or perhaps just overshadowed by the enormity of the task before them. He took his wand out and held it tight, entering the room first on high but well-concealed alert.

Genevieve looked up from the sofa when they walked in; her posture unnaturally straight, the tilt of her head uncannily slow, like she'd practised, like it took effort. She offered them a pleased but explicitly wary smile, and Hermione let out a breath of relief at the first sight of cordiality. The room was almost untouched, the sofa cushions in perfect position, the chairs tucked symmetrically under the dining room table, not a water ring in sight, not a single mug in the sink—it was a showroom, a falsehood, a suffocating sea of neutral colours that made Hermione miss the bevelled archways of the manor.

The shield spanned the length of the room and stood solidly, Hermione and Nico on one side, Genevieve very much on the other. Unless a person was looking for it, they wouldn't notice it at all, and Genevieve was too fatigued to search the air for misplaced shimmers.

"Morning, Gen," Hermione said with a friendly smile.

"Morning."

Genevieve's voice was a torn, scratched, ruined thing—raw from weeks of clawing, sobbing, screaming, of desperation and unsated hunger. Hermione felt an overwhelming wave of empathy crash against her sternum, the foam of it seeping through her skin and into her bloodstream; the woman had a whole life waiting for her outside of this facility, a husband and children wondering when, if ever, she would return. What had Kingsley told them? What did they know?

Either way, it wasn't her business, and it most certainly was not what she was here to ponder.

"How are you feeling?"

Genevieve swallowed slowly, like she could not produce enough saliva to wet her perpetually parched throat. "Hungry."

She nodded. "Did the nurses bring you food this morning?"

"*Food*," Genevieve scoffed under her breath, then louder, "They brought blood, yes."

"Was it enough?"

Genevieve winced, her hand clasp at the base of her throat. "It never is."

Nico coughed, making himself known, which had the adverse effect of drawing Genevieve's attention to the wand gripped in his white-knuckled hand. He held his other palm up in a show of surrender, which was, Hermione thought, rather patronising.

"It's just a precaution," he said, reminding her of the not-silver butter knife on Malfoy's too-long, too-empty mahogany dining table, or the ropes around his wrists. Genevieve frowned but did not protest, likely more out of enervation than understanding. "We are running

proximity tests this morning. I want you to tell me if you feel any discomfort, any sudden change, or an increase in agitation.”

Genevieve looked as though she might already be experiencing the latter, but Nico could see that just as clearly as Hermione could, so she left him to ramble about their fabricated motivations while she slyly fished a sewing needle from her back pocket. Carefully, she lined the point up with the pad of her thumb and *pressed*.

Faster than the pearl of blood could form, Genevieve’s eyes snapped to Hermione, blowing wide and brutally white, her face twisting with horror and pure, unfiltered agony. She leapt from the sofa, finally pushing one decorative cushion out of place, and scrambled along the floor until her back hit the far wall.

“No,” she wept. “*No, no, please—*”

“Gen...” Nico stepped closer to the shield.

“GO!” Genevieve turned towards the wall and screamed through her teeth—it sounded like a growl, a feral cat spooked in an alleyway, a fox fighting one of its kin, a woman on the brink of something she could not control.

Hermione didn’t realise how close she’d gotten to the shield until Nico was dragging her away from it, not letting go until they were back in the hallway, the door shut and locked on the vampire now clawing at the off-white paint. She watched through the observation mirror as the shields came down, as Genevieve wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked back and forth; not so long ago, in another life, she’d likely sent her children to sleep with those same motions.

“She resisted it,” Hermione whispered.

Nico looked to the mirror in earnest wonder. “Incredible...”

“That’s,” Hermione tried to calculate, “three months?”

“Just over, yes.”

“Brilliant, we have a benchmark.”

It was the first real breakthrough they’d experienced, albeit at the cost of their subjects’ sanity. Nico turned to her with twinkling eyes, his lips curling into a proud smile, which faltered immediately upon catching sight of her thumb. Within the blink of an eye, his joy was replaced by the same unease that had plagued him before they entered.

“You should probably fix yourself up before we go to the next one.”

Hermione looked at her hand, at the rivulet of blood dripping from the puncture point. “Oh, right...”

She popped her thumb into her mouth and licked away the blood, iron rubies on her tongue, metal in her mouth, returning to the warmth of her own body. Nico’s eyes widened, just an

inch, at her brazen clean-up—but they had no time for plasters. She plucked her wand from her holster and muttered a quick *Episkey*.

The next room belonged to Elise, someone they were both more familiar with than they wanted to be, given the suffering they were potentially about to inflict. One knowing look to Nico confirmed they both knew exactly how this was going to go; Elise was one of the newer vampires, the penultimate—currently, at least—of the turning victims; it would be a miracle indeed if she were able to exhibit even half of the restraint Genevieve did.

Nico held his wand again, but this time Hermione did not bother to mask her intentions, holding the needle between her index and middle fingers as they entered Elise's room. She was not waiting for them on the sofa, nor did she remain torpidly still, opting instead to sit on the floor, curling into the corner of the room. Elise did not bother to raise her head when they entered, and Hermione wasn't even sure that she could hear them over the cracked, unintelligible murmurings she was pressing into her own knees.

"Good morning, Elise," Nico tried to no avail.

Deciding time wasn't worth wasting on pleasantries that would not—could not—be heard, Hermione twisted the needle between her fingers and re-punctured her thumb, deeper this time, till the sting was sharp enough to feel faintly pleasant. She pulled the needle free, forming a canal from which her blood could spill, and it did. Thick, red pearls beading and running freely into her palm, urged onward by the pressure of her curled fist.

On cue, Elise's head snapped up so quickly that Hermione felt the burn in the back of her own neck. Her eyes were blown open, eager pupils swallowing irises, and it was a familiar look; the same one Malfoy had worn in the hallway when he'd pinned her to the wall, the same one he'd worn in the forest when he'd pinned her to the floor. Elise moved fast, faster than sight could follow, slamming her frail body into the room-splitting shield with an infernal shriek. Over and over and *over* again, her shoulders took the worst of each thundering hit, her mind completely numbed to the pain of it, too focused on the *food* Hermione held in her hand.

Hermione found herself unable to move, fixated on the sight of Elise's ravenous desperation, on the flash of protruding canines and the sound of warbled fury, blissfully unaware that she was still squeezing the blood from her thumb. Someone was yelling from her side, a sound that shaped known words, but it was a distant ring in her blood-logged ears, drowned by Elise's cries.

"Hermione!"

She blinked, coming back into herself to find Nico by the door, beckoning her over with a frantic wave. Her hand uncurled, the pump of blood slowing, and she took her leave. The shields came down with the click of the lock, and Elise ran at the door at full speed, sobbing as she rattled the useless handle. All preoccupation seeped out through the wound on her thumb, leaving behind only a crawling, choking sense of...*guilt*.

"Well," Nico ran a hand through his thick hair, "that's quite a difference."

“Yeah,” she mumbled.

“Your thumb.”

“Huh? Oh.”

Unthinking, she placed her thumb back into her mouth and licked the puncture clean, ignoring Nico’s discomfort. When she was done, she sealed the little wound with the tap of her wand, not even bothering to look, unable to pry her eyes away from Elise’s kneeling form still pounding at the door with weak fists.

Nico touched her shoulder gently, and she looked up to find him grimacing, like he would rather be anywhere else, with anyone else, doing anything else.

But he was not, so he asked on a shaky exhale, “Who’s next?”



The library floor was clear, her piles of books whittled down to only those she considered worthy of further exploration, the rest placed back upon their dustless shelves. It was odd and uncomfortable to see the expanse of stone slabs that spanned the immeasurable length of the room once more. Despite it, she’d always enjoyed the hours after a deep clean, the moments where it felt as though her life might not be in such a state of utter disorder.

If she were at home, she might slather her face in a collagen mask and give herself a poor imitation of a manicure, she might coat her skin in scented oils and slip into her softest pair of pyjamas, might pull out her father's old vinyl player and face the sharp pain of listening to his old records. But she was not at home; she was here, and somehow...here felt better. Tucking her legs beneath her as she settled into the deep, firm armchair felt better than stretching out on her financed sofa. Opening a book with a decomposing spine and a strong smell of lignin felt better than lighting one of her falsely scented candles. Wearing an oversized shirt and a pair of fluffy, bok-choy patterned socks felt better than her silk slip.

The manor was cold and imposing, and seemed to breathe in time with the expansion of her own ribs, watch with the movement of her own eyes, and whisper with the echo of her own thoughts. Yet, it felt *better*.

The library offered her something that her flat could not: mental stimulation. She had books, immeasurable amounts of them that would take her several lifetimes to get through, all old, most without equal, and some even stood as the only physical copies in existence. Her whole life had been cradled in the pages of a book, and there were plenty here to hold her, house her, transport and inform her.

Her afternoon reading was purely educational, focusing on the known feeding habits of vampires or searching through ancient rituals, Muggle recordings of the occult, magical recordings of tradition—all of it an ouroboros. The ritual she'd tried and failed, the separation of body and desire, *separatio Corporis Et Desiderii*, was one that she found herself lingering on, scanning the page for any steps she may have missed or petals she should have scattered, finding none. She found another, far more righteous and biblical, that seemed aimed at resolving sin—*agite poenitentiam et convertimini*.

The religious overtones seemed like a far shot from her goal of subduing vampiric hunger, but then again, weren't all sins just a carnal, inescapable hunger? She found herself bent over the pages, her nose to the ink, asking: *which sin? Gluttony, and its great consumption of self? Wrath, and all its victorious destruction? Lust, and its unyielding temptation?*

It might be more prudent, she decided, to test the rituals on herself first, to shed the sins that bubbled higher and higher in her stomach and up her throat, to purge them before they dared to form as words, as pleas. To rid herself of this unnamed desire before it wrapped around her neck and left marks. Two small, equidistant marks.

What was it, exactly, that she could not resist?

Involuntarily, her mind swam through murky waters to reach her dream state, to the shadow Malfoy would cast over her body if he stood above her, to the way he...the way his—

—teeth sink into her flesh, his tongue laps at the spilt blood with unrestrained fervour, nuzzles the curve of her throat, his satisfied hum vibrates her veins.

Her life on his tongue, her blood, his nourishment.

It was overwhelming, unbecoming, wholly elating; she is lost at the first press of his mouth, flying at the first bite, dizzy at the first touch of his fingertips to the side of her neck—

It was warm in the library, and Hermione's flesh was burning under her jumper. She pulled it over her head, baring her arms and relishing in the air that rushed to greet them. The book fell closed on her lap, her head fell back against the pleated headrest, her eyelids fell shut, and her mind...her mind fell right back into the thick fog of her vivid, absolutely inappropriate, *unstoppable* daydream. Because his *eyes*, they would—

—gleam in that predatory way, as they had in the forest, in the hallway, when he found her flushed or got too close, when she sipped from her wineglass across the long table and kept hold of his gaze.

Silver eyes, like the metal he could never touch, and a crimson-coated mouth. He speaks into her skin, tells her where to go, how to move, and she obeys. His long fingers wrap tightly

around her throat, the palm of his hand upon her trachea.

Her life in his hands, her breath, his power.

She gives it to him willingly; she begs him to take it. Her body knows, just *knows*, to trust him not to hurt her, not really, not in any way she didn't *want*—

Her hands slithered under her shirt, fingertips brushed against her pert nipples, and filled the room with loud, breathy moans. The library sang back to her, let her pleasure bounce from shelf to shelf, let it gather in the shallow alcoves and shadowed corners, let it flicker in the overhanging candle flames.

She could so easily recall his hands on her, the way he'd wound them into her hair and pulled, or wrapped them around her jaw and squeezed. Would he—

—grip her like he'd held the stag; his body at her back, his arm banding around her collar, hauling her *up* and *against*. She offers such little resistance, cannot fight his strength, does not even want to.

Her body at his mercy, her choice, his *command*.

This is intimate. She can feel the evidence of his pleasure pressing into her lower back. His free hand dives into the waistband of her underwear as he pulls mouthfuls from her veins. Will he bite her anywhere else? Her breasts, perhaps, or her—

A cold breath on the back of her neck had Hermione's eyes darting open. Her hand had found its way into her pants, her fingers slick with the proof of her lewd, compulsive imagination. She ripped her hand free, clutching it to her chest as she turned towards the source of the disturbance, unsurprised to find nobody there.

By now, she was used to the manor playing tricks on her, making her question every breeze and every groan of aged, warped wood. She could trust it almost as little as she could trust herself, and she could, if she were so inclined, blame her transgressions on its formidable influence.

With a sigh, she held her hand up to inspect the moisture still clinging to her fingers, scooped from the heat between her thighs, and found the answer to her initial question. Her desire was clear; it had been from the second Malfoy's teeth had brushed against her furious pulse. She wanted nothing more than for him to *bite*.

It was absurd, ridiculous, completely irrational and reckless, yet she'd never been less compelled to question anything; there were no questions, no answers, there was only *want*.

Hermione picked up her wand, summoned a tissue, and wiped her fingers clean.



It was a Thursday morning, the air bitter and heavy with precipitation, when Hermione entered her office in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Benedict was bent over her desk, his chemical bleach almost blinding after so many weeks adjusting to the muted tones of the manor.

He looked up as she entered, his eyes enviably free of dark circles. “You can’t be in—oh, Miss Granger!”

“Morning, Benedict.”

“I wasn’t expecting you back yet, or I would have—”

“I’m still on assignment.” She held up a hand to preempt his apologies, which were unwarranted and certainly unwanted. “I’ve just come to collect the post.”

And she had, it wasn’t a lie—not a full one, anyway. Benedict had arranged her post into perfect, categorised piles, because *of course* he had. His professional life revolved around pleasing her; he’d spent the last year observing her habits, her particularities, and absorbing them.

So, she opened the post, she pretended to read it from her well-loved and genuinely missed chair, she idly listened while Benedict caught her up with department updates, she carefully evaded his subtle questioning about the date of her return, and when it came time to leave, she subtly slipped her personalised letter-opener into her pocket and bid him farewell.



She was to meet Malfoy for dinner in the parlour.

It would be the first time she’d seen him since that night in the forest, when she’d lifted his overcome body into bed and run her fingers through his hair until his breathing evened out. They’d shared more than fear that night; they’d shared trust. She’d known he wouldn’t hurt her, and he’d known she wouldn’t judge him.

It was a shame, really, that she was about to take a match to it all.

She'd dressed nicely: a long, soft chiffon skirt that flowed elegantly as she walked, an ironed shirt tucked neatly, and that same cardigan, with its deeply capacious pockets, to ward off the perpetual chill. It wasn't so much an effort to look nice but instead an effort to look calm, like she'd not been pacing the library with her head in her hands, tripping over her circling feet as she juggled her determination for what she was about to do with the guilt of actually doing it. Was it a disregard of his slowly building trust? *Maybe*. Was it necessary? *Yes*.

Malfoy was already waiting when Femur led her in, occupying his usual space at one head of the long table, his goblet already full of rich red wine, his place set despite his refusal to partake in the meal. He looked up, hollow eyes and hollow cheeks sharpened by the overhanging shadows, warmed only by the faint glow of candlelight. She wondered if the effects of his last feed still lingered, if they *always* lingered—her resolve hardened at the thought.

"What are we having?" She asked, taking her place at the table.

"*You* are having filo pastry."

"With?"

He lifted one weary shoulder. "No idea. I know better than to bother Tibia when she is cooking."

Hermione couldn't help but snicker at the use of the elves' full name, pressing her forearms to the table to lean closer, as if they were not still several placemats apart. "Femur and Tibia... how did those names happen?"

"They were the only two that remained here after the war ended," he explained, leaning back, *away*. "Both were kitchen elves, kept out of sight for years. I never even saw them growing up."

"How can that be possible?"

"We had many elves."

She pursed her lips. "So..."

"*So*," he sighed, "when they refused to leave, I asked their names, and they didn't know."

Hermione bristled, her eyelids fluttering with unmasked shock. "What do you mean?"

"I don't believe they'd ever been given ones."

"That's absurd," she muttered, and he hummed in agreement, long fingers tapping impatiently against the tabletop. "And upon hearing this, you thought it would be a marvellous idea to name them after human bones?"

“No.” He shook his head, a traitorous tilt to the corner of his mouth. “They picked the names themselves.”

“Why *those*?”

Malfoy paused, eyed his wine with longing, and finally answered in a perfect monotone, “I never asked.”

She frowned, wondering how he was capable of being so cavalier, wanting to find her voice to ask and failing, rather miserably, to do so before the food arrived. The letter opener sagged in her pocket with all the atomic mass of oganesson, heating so rapidly from the proximity to her blistering nerves that she feared it would turn molten. She wasn’t sure when she would use it, or how she would decide on the right moment to disturb this perilous peace they had obtained.

He *could* kill her, and he might, once she’d proven herself a traitor of his trust, but—*no*. She knew, deep down, that it had to happen; he was unwell, starving, all sunken eyes and paper-thin skin. It was as if all the life had been drained from him, as he’d drained it from the stag. He’d thrown up so much of the blood, his only lifesource, that she had to wonder how much he had to overindulge just to ensure some of it would be left over after the purge. She thought of him slung over her shoulder, feverish and panting, his long legs dragging as she hauled him through the threadbare manor.

What would he have done if she hadn’t followed him? Curled up on the forest floor and stayed there all night, exposed to the elements, shivering beside a pool of regurgitated blood? Is that what he’d been doing for all these years? Is that what he’d been returning from, that night in the hallway, when he’d looked so *utterly* wrecked, when he’d so *fundamentally* changed her DNA?

Yes, this had to happen.

More than that, she *wanted* it to.

“Is something wrong with your food?”

Hermione found Malfoy’s watchful eyes. “Hmm?”

“You’ve not touched it,” he said, and her gaze dropped to the still-full plate before her, the unsipped wine, and the concerned man on the far end of the table. Concerned for *her*, when *he* looked like *that*. “Are you not hungry?”

Oh, she was, she really, *really* was, but not for filo pastry.

Needing to bolster herself, she reached for the wine and took three large gulps, which did nothing to appease the pull of Malfoy’s brows. Hermione shook her shoulders, limbering up, then pulled the letter opener from her pocket—conspicuously held under the table, where his prying eyes could not reach—and sliced a clean line down the centre of her palm.

Malfoy shot back from the table, kicking his chair away with complete disregard for its antiquity. He was on the other side of the parlour before she could utter a single pained curse, his eyes as wide as headlights, breath at a complete standstill. His burst of speed made her jump, but it did not make her stop. She curled her hand into a fist, blood running between her fingers, and squeezed as hard as she could, doing her very best not to wince.

Not a second later, he was right there; one hand around her bloodied wrist, hauling her out of the chair and onto her feet, holding her blood-soaked fist between their bodies like he meant to scold her.

“What,” he seethed, “the *fuck* are you doing?”

She made no move to fight him, nor to pull away from his vice-like grip. Instead, she uncurled her fingers from her palm and opened her hand in offering, watching his pupils blow wide.

“I trust you,” she whispered, and his hold tightened; it *hurt*, it was *good*. “Trust yourself.”

“Granger...”

“It’s alright, you can have it.” Her other hand, free from both blood and his hold, came up to rest against the side of his face. He looked on the verge of shattering, or melting, or eating her alive—she hoped for all three. It was consuming; her desire, her hunger, and she was sure they did not originate from herself alone. “I can feel how much you want it. Can’t you feel how much I want the same?”

He shook his head, but he couldn’t seem to help bringing her hand closer to his mouth, and she *trusted* him, *she* trusted *him*. She brushed her thumb along his cheek, his jaw, his lovely, hollow face, trying to soothe her sincerity into his pores. When his eyes finally, *finally*, met hers, she could hear the question with them as if he’d screamed it—*can I truly cross this line?*

When she tilted forward to permit him, he ducked his head and licked one long swipe up the centre of her palm, his tongue pressing against the wound she’d placed there, his eyes rolling back into his head at the first taste of her blood. His lips pressed into her skin, on either side of the cut, and he *sucked*.

“*Fuck*,” he groaned.

It was immediately, uncompromisingly, the best feeling in the entire world, perhaps in the entire galaxy. Every ounce of pleasure ever known in all of human existence collected in the palm of her hand, in the curve of his mouth.

Hermione’s head fell back, unwitting, as her lips parted on a shallow moan. The sound goaded him on, his arm banding around her waist and pulling her against him as he guided them to the table, where their forgotten meals sat cooling. It mattered not, because the second he lifted her to perch upon the mahogany, the second her legs wrapped around his waist and she felt the hard proof of his want against the wet core of hers, everything else ceased to exist. It was undeniable; the pleasure, *his* pleasure, hers, *theirs*.

Malfoy released his mouth from her palm and pulled back, looking wild and breathless and... his cheeks were flushed with colour, blood under his skin—her blood—bringing his flesh to life. Hermione could only watch him, eagerly, aching, recklessly horny. When his eyes fell to her lips, she whimpered, and he wasted no further time not kissing her, swallowing the sound. She could taste copper on his tongue, the tang of her own life, and it went straight to her legs. She moaned into his mouth, he grunted into hers, and they kissed, they kissed, they *kissed*. Her tongue traced the points of his teeth, let it draw blood for them to share.

His hands roamed the side of her waist, fingers ducking under her shirt, dancing over her ribs, climbing each like a ladder until he cupped her breasts. Her breath hitched, and he pulled away immediately.

“Sorry,” he rasped, thumb wiping at his lips. “Shit, I’m—”

“*Please* don’t stop.”

She reached for his belt and dragged him closer, struggling to unbuckle him, staring up into his dishevelled, agonised face. A sound tumbled out of him, akin to a growl, or a curse, or the rumble of a volcanic eruption, a deafening supercell, and he pounced again. He tucked himself against her, one hand on the back of her heavy head, and licked up the side of her neck. They both froze, knowing they wanted this, knowing he wanted *her* just like this; alive, beating, biddable, pumping hot blood through her veins. Knowing, above all else, that he would not take it unless she offered it.

“Please,” she said again, a whiny, sideways sound that was not her voice but couldn’t be anyone else’s.

He cupped her jaw, searched her face. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, *god*, yes.”

She palmed the back of his head, not caring for how her blood coated his platinum locks, and guided him to her neck. With a reverberating grunt, he found the spot he wanted; pressed open-mouthed kisses to it, licked it languidly, set his teeth against it. She leaned into him, waiting limply, her blood still spilling down the back of his neck.

Malfoy made a strangled noise when his fangs punctured her skin, and Hermione’s first instinct was to buck, to get away from the sting and soothe it, but she hadn’t even time to flinch before the feeling morphed into something *else*, something liquid and blinding and euphoric.

He sucked at her vein, and her eyes fell closed in ecstasy, relishing in the way her bloodstream carried the sounds of his pleasure. Hermione was no longer a person; she was just heat, made of molten blood and the growing moisture between her legs, more turned on than she’d ever thought it possible to be. Her hips moved without instruction, a low pressure in the base of her spine grew by the second, her mind floated up and out of her body. Malfoy held her close, one palm on her jaw, the other around her writhing hipbones, holding her in place while he ground himself against her, while he took from her everything that he needed—everything she was giving.

When, after what would have been a minute, or ten, or maybe even an hour, he pulled his teeth from her neck and licked his blood-smeared lips, his eyes glassy and so very satisfied, there was no choice but to kiss him, as there was no choice but for him to kiss her back.

“Are you alright?” he mumbled into the corner of her mouth.

He didn’t sound alright himself, and yet, somehow better than she’d ever heard him. *Was she alright?* Yes. *Yes*. Alright wasn’t nearly enough of a word to encompass what she was, what she felt. She was...here, *now*, happily mindless, ripe and ready. Unable to speak, her mouth too dry, her tongue too heavy, she just nodded into his collarbone.

Malfoy shook his head firmly. “I need to hear you say it.”

“*Yes,*” she whined. “Yes, I’m—”

That was enough, it seemed, for his lips met hers again; carnal and esurient and *insisting*. Kissing her, biting her lip, her neck, gasping into the dip of her throat when she dropped her head back for him, running his hands up her trembling thighs when she locked her arms around his neck, returning to knead her breasts when her cries echoed through the parlour.

Maddening, unfathomable, too *good* to possibly be true, all of it.

“*More,*” she pleaded, blood-wet hands clawing at his back, trying anything she could to get closer.

“More?” He held her waist in a blissful, bruising grip. “More of what? This?”

One hand pried itself free of her waist only to sink into her hair, short nails scraping at her scalp and sending shivers down her spine. She circled her hips, feeling his straining erection pressing hard between her thighs, seeking it with ragged, breathless moans and half-formed pleas. When he thrust up against her, knocking her against the lip of the table, her blurry eyes shot wide and latched onto his, finding a silver flash of pride, of satisfaction, of *need*.

“You’re here to tempt me, aren’t you, Usurper?” There was a tear of fabric, a pinch of soft skin, a loud cry from her throat as he tossed her pants aside and pressed his thumb to her already swollen clit. “Your pretty little pulse, your siren’s blood...I never stood a chance.”

Malfoy was not one for preamble, and thank god for it. His fingers plunged into her, two up to the knuckle, curved and pumping without hesitation, his thumb still pressing down into the pinpoint of her rapture. Like she had in the hallway, all those weeks ago, Hermione lost control of her body. Only this time, he didn’t *take* it; he let her relinquish it, and she did.

Words were murmured into her thrumming ears, and she tried to listen, to make sense of them. He held her hips, told her to *be still*, to let him touch her how he wanted to, to give him more of her *cruel little sounds*. She would do anything and everything he asked, as long as he kept going.

His tongue lapped at the puncture wound in her neck, moaning deeply with every pass, setting off a frenzy of sensations throughout her slack body. She was reduced to one-syllable

words and stilted head nods, to exist only within the vastness of this sensation. His long fingers dragged inside, working her up, and up, but did not allow her to reach the crest quite yet, and that was *fine*. Perfect, even. It had never been like this before, it shouldn't be like this now, it *couldn't* be.

Everything was heightened, their pleasure as shared as the air in their lungs.

Sharp teeth dragged along the lines of her jaw, they nipped lightly at her trembling bottom lip, careful—so careful—not to puncture. Her hand bled freely, down her arm, down his back, into his hair when she made to pull him closer, and it was beautiful, seeing him savour every drop. So entrancing, in fact, that she didn't even notice her bra was pushed down until he bent forward and took one pert nipple into his perfect mouth. Her gasp grew into a groan as she arched into him. His palm spanned her ribcage, holding her where he wanted, the perfect angle to lick, to nibble, to suck upon her flesh.

Reluctantly, he pulled his fingers from her, kissing away her weeping protests. "Be good."

She was good, she was so good, she'd never been better in all her years. His motivations became clear when he freed himself from his trousers, glistening with pre-cum that her tongue longed to taste, and lined himself up with her. There was a moment of hesitation, a crease between his brows that told her he was second-guessing everything: how fast they'd gotten here, what they were doing, what it all meant. Unable to bear it, she hooked her ankles behind his back and nudged him, the reminder enough for him to blink out of it, meet her eyes, and slide home.

His chin fell to her shoulder, his breath catching, his body shuddering, and the *stretch* of him, the *heat* of him, it was all *too much*; her cunt fluttered and pulsed, and his laugh was a deep, bone-shaking rumble.

"Don't." His grip on her hips was painfully tight—not tight enough. "You're trying to ruin me."

She nodded, and her lips brushed against the underside of his jaw, pulling tremors from his coiled body.

"I think you might succeed," he added, slowly, right against her ear, and it sent her eyes rolling back.

He snapped his hips against hers, hard and punishing; every thrust was heaven, elysium, nirvana—she couldn't tell the difference, couldn't parse her surroundings, couldn't make sense of anything but the feeling of him inside of her. Blood coated them both, her wound still blessedly open, and it wasn't enough—she wanted to feel *more* of him, *all* of him. Hermione's hands scrambled over the front of his shirt, tearing at his buttons with abandon, pressing her red-stained hands over his bare chest. His body was a solid, beautiful thing, all dips and bevels and tension.

She dug her nails in and laughed at his responding groan.

There was nothing soft about the way he fucked her, nothing gentle about the slam of his body or the bite of the table at the back of her legs, and it was so fucking *good*. When he ducked his head to kiss her neck again, his question unasked but heard clearly, she shivered in anticipation and felt his mouth curve into a smile against the skin of her throat.

“You want it, don’t you?” He bit her lightly. “You want me as deep in your vein as I am in your cunt?”

She was nodding, babbling, incoherent *yesses* and *pleases*.

His fingers curled at the roots of her hair and pulled harshly. “Head back.”

She was about to wail, to tell him she would simply die if he did not bite her again, but it was unnecessary. His fangs sank into her neck slowly, the pinch so much sweeter than the last, and she felt her blood rush to meet the pull of his mouth. Hermione was loose, malleable, lost to the shape and demands of his burning body. She wanted to give him everything, and she wanted him to accept it.

“Stubborn witch,” he murmured, licking at the marks he’d left. “You wanted this to happen when you came here tonight.”

It was an accusation, not a question, but she answered him anyway. “I did.”

“What if it hadn’t worked, huh? Would you have begged?”

She’d beg now. “Please, please, I—”

“Shh, I know.”

Slowly, his hand wrapped around her throat and squeezed lightly, then not so lightly. She grinned at the cut off, at the way her blood rushed to her head, at the press of his thumb to her windpipe. He looked almost as lost as she felt, eyes glazed over with something impossibly desperate and immeasurably pleased. He thrust harder, which she hadn’t thought possible, and dropped his other hand to where their bodies joined, pressing his fingertips to her pulsing clit. Hermione tried to cry out, found herself unable to force a single sound past the press of his palm. Her limbs turned to jelly, arms draped over his shoulders for some kind of stability.

“Is it too much?”

She shook her head and mouthed, “*No*.”

“*No*, no, not for you. You fucking love it.” His hand released her throat and wrapped around her back, stopping her from falling backwards as he fucked her into the mahogany. He was bent over her, hips snapping, mouth at her collarbone. “I’ve got you.”

It didn’t take much, in the end, the feeling was too overwhelming to hold back; he was too worked up, she was too connected to him. They were riding the same wave, and it broke over them both when he wrangled her pliant body and pressed his teeth to her neck one final time. His guttural groan was all she could hear when stars burst behind her eyes. He filled her while she filled him, until his teeth in her body were the only sensation left.

She couldn't say how long they stayed that way, with her back on the table—which he must have cleared at some point without her realising—and his chest pressed tight against hers. He released his mouth from her skin, which felt wrong and horribly vacant, but he didn't let that feeling bloom. Slowly, his lips met hers, prying her mouth open and letting her taste everything they'd shared. The gentle brush of his fingers, freeing her forehead from damp curls, was such a stark contrast to the bruises they'd left on her hips only moments prior. His thumbs swept back and forth under her eyes, wiping away tears she'd unknowingly shed.

Soft praise met her ringing ears, coaxing her mind back into her body, whispered assurances that she was perfect, that she'd done well, that she was *everything*.

"Thank you," he said against her temple, "thank you, thank you."

He chanted it into her hair as he lifted her, a ragdoll in his careful arms, and pulled out of her fully. Grey eyes dropped to watch his spend drip between her legs, gleaming with gratification. Maybe he would have dropped to his knees and pushed it back inside of her, maybe he would have run his tongue along the seam and sent her back into the otherworld, but she was only sitting up by the grace of his strong arms. Never, in all her life, had Hermione felt so...drained. Happy. Blissed out. Free.

Malfoy managed to extract his attention from her cunt and set about cleaning her up, pulling her bra up and her shirt down, gently massaging her palm as the wound sealed under the press of his wand. She blinked at him in a haze, taking stock; he looked *so much* better. More alert, his eyes bright, his skin glowing, his cheeks flushed pink. So very beautiful. When he bent forward to kiss her sticky forehead, he was hot to the touch, like he'd been sitting beside a roaring bonfire.

He curled his arms around her knees and back, lifting her from the table like it was nothing, holding her tightly against his still-heaving chest. Hermione sagged in his hold, all the air in her lungs evacuating in one long exhale. She rested her head against his collar, and she felt every pounding thump of his heart against the side of her ribs.

Malfoy called for the elves, his voice little more than a lyrical, distant echo. She didn't open her eyes to the sound of their apparition, deciding to just nuzzle in closer to the lovely warmth of his body.

"Is Misses Granger alright?" Femur was asking from somewhere below, miles and miles away.

The sound of his calm response jostled her, "Can you prepare the south bedroom? And bring blood replenishing potions?"

"Y-yes, of course, yous is looking..."

"Now, please, if you would."

There was a pop and a slight readjustment of her position, a nose brushing the fallen hair from her face, the gentle sway of his walk; she wasn't sure where he was taking her, but it wasn't the library. It took time to get there, wherever it was, and she didn't mind one bit. In

fact, she was perfectly content to stay here forever, her face buried in the curve of his neck, inhaling the rich scent of him that was now almost indistinguishable from her own. It was like being rocked to sleep, his every step a careful calculation, an active effort not to disturb her too thoroughly.

The room they entered was not the moth-eaten room she'd found after that night in the woods, nor any of the ones she'd stumbled through the night of Theo and Blaise's visit. It was a bedroom, warmly lit by overhead candles, everything built around the tall, intricately carved four-posted bed in the centre, adorned in sheets of emerald satin. It was larger and more elaborate than any bed she'd seen before, made of sturdy, detailed ebony and dulled brass, preserved to the point of being untouched.

This was *not* where Malfoy slept; he would never allow himself such luxury.

He set her down on the edge of the mattress, a sex-drunk giggle bubbling in her throat when she sank into the soft foam. There was a pre-prepared tray beside the bed, holding vials of dark-red liquid and two tall glasses of chilled water. He picked up one of the former and uncorked it, holding it out for her—it was no use; she could hardly even raise her arms.

“Open up,” he said softly, and she obliged.

He poured the liquid into her mouth, brushing her cheek with his other hand. It tasted coppery, somewhat bitter, and Hermione enjoyed it thoroughly. She licked her lips when it was done, which earned a rare and unbidden smirk from the notably unsickly vampire before her. His thumb moved from her cheek to her mouth, pressing against her lower lip, his gaze intensely focused on the way it moved, his lips forming a word that looked suspiciously like ‘*Usurper*’.

“What are we—” she began, the question dying on her tongue when he picked her up again and carried her across the room, into the en suite, and placed her upon the closed toilet instead.

The bathroom was not much different from the one she'd been using, with gold embellishments and ornamental decor. Purples had been swapped for forest greens, shadows swapped for candlelight, and the feeling that settled over her shoulders was comforting; these walls watched too, but with curiosity instead of animosity, with composure instead of panic, offering company instead of confusion.

There were no more words shared while he prepared the bath, which was not quite as impressive as the one in *her* part of the manor, but enticing all the same. Bluebell flames hovered around her shoulders, around the mirrors, around the lip of the bath where Malfoy had his hand dipped, checking the temperature. He poured something that smelled strongly like lavender into the water, and she watched bubbles form from the ripples. When it was ready, he helped her out of her tousled clothing.

It was the first time he was seeing her naked, but she was not shy—how could she be, after everything that had just passed between them? He didn't pretend not to look, nor did he try not to linger, but nothing was demanding in his expression now. With a grip on his outstretched arm, she lowered into the perfect water, a sigh escaping her parted lips as her

limbs relaxed under the diaphanous heat. Malfoy guided her with gentle hands, taking a soft flannel to her body and wiping away the blood, letting it turn the water a pale magenta.

He was a diligent caregiver, each pass of the flannel was thorough and smooth. He cleaned every crease and every dip, taking extra care with her freshly healed hand, placing a chaste kiss to the palm of it once he was done. Her blood, now replenished, seemed to hum in return. When his mouth travelled from her hand to her wrist, she almost asked him to bite her again.

“It’s like I can hear it,” he said.

There was no need to seek clarification; she knew exactly what he was referring to. *Siren’s blood*, he’d called it.

She smiled faintly. “I know.”

He moved to her hair next, lathering shampoo between his hands before working it into her curls. It was...overwhelming. Nobody had ever treated her like this. Nobody had ever taken her body to the brink, only to coax it back so carefully. Every pass of his fingers against her aching scalp was tender and indulgent, a complete opposition to the assertive, aggressive way he’d pulled her head back in the parlour.

When she was deemed sufficiently clean, he helped her out of the bath and towelled her off, only letting his eyes wander to the curls at the apex of her thighs once or twice—maybe thrice. Her clothes were transfigured into something softer, more comfortable, and slipped over her fresh skin with palpable affection. Finally, he brought her to the bed and placed her under the sheets.

“Stay there,” he said, turning for the door.

Hermione’s stomach lurched at the sight of him leaving, but she bit back a protesting scream when he stopped at the threshold and bent down to speak with someone—one of the elves, she had to imagine—before returning to her side. They said nothing, just stared and tried, to no avail, to make sense of...everything. Maybe minutes passed, maybe only seconds, but at some point, Tibbs appeared with a bowl of soup, and Malfoy took it upon himself to feed it to her.

“I am capable of holding my own spoon.”

“Are you?” he asked, one eyebrow arched sceptically. Humour looked *good* on him. She wanted to see it more, all the time, preferably. “You fed me, let me feed you.”

Nourishment for nourishment. That was what she’d wanted, after all. So, she let him bring the soup to her lips, spoonful after spoonful, without a single complaint. It was sort of lovely to be doted on, though she still had far too much pride to admit it. When done, he placed the bowl on the tray and picked up a small pot of balm, the same she used on his silver burns, and she frowned.

“Where did you get that?”

“I stole it.”

She snorted. “You’re devious.”

“Well,” he mused, uncapping the pot, “you would know.”

The balm was smoothed over the healed line on her palm, across the bite marks she hadn’t even noticed on her collar, vanishing every scrape in its wake. When Malfoy pushed her hair over her shoulder and went to rub the balm into her neck, where the small puncture wounds of his teeth remained, she stopped him with a shy shake of her head. Heat rose to her cheeks, and she would not have been able to explain herself if he required it, but he did not. He smirked, something possessive and predatory in the curve of his lips.

“Yeah,” he crooned. “I like those too.”

Impossibly, she flushed harder. He recapped the pot and stood to leave, which was absolutely unthinkable, and sent her hand flying out to catch his wrist. Malfoy peered down at her, quiet restraint back where it was no longer welcome.

“You need to rest,” he told her, as if she were not keenly aware.

“Stay with me.”

He tilted his head apprehensively. “I’m not sure if that’s such a good—”

“I am.”

She would almost see the cogs turning in his head, could almost hear his scrambling considerations, could see the moment something gave, the moment she knew she’d won. He kicked off his shoes and pulled off his shirt, which was surprisingly clean; he must have changed it while she was...trying to find her way back to earth? Malfoy slipped into bed, one strong arm curled around her waist and hauled her closer. Hermione pressed her nose to the dip of his throat, and he hummed.

She wanted to eat the sound.

“Did I take too much?” he whispered. “Did it hurt?”

“It was perfect,” she replied, because *yes*...it *had* hurt, just the right amount, in just the right way.

“I should admonish you.”

“Go on then, if you must.”

“It’s hard to,” he pressed his lips to the crown of her head, “when I also want to thank you.”

She was bone-tired now, melting into him and the heat his freshly-fed body offered, into the memory foam mattress and its soft coverings, into the core of the planet. Sleep called for her, and she had no reservations about greeting it, because she was safe, warm, full-bodied, held.

It felt so natural to be here with him, and it would require a level of foolishness she'd never once exhibited to attempt to convince herself that nothing had changed—everything had. A piece slotted into the right place after a lifetime of squeezing into the wrong one, the very moment he'd sunk his teeth into her. It was different now; better, brighter, warmer.

Her eyelids dropped lower with every blink, until eventually, they remained closed. “Is this a bad time to tell you that I told you so?”

He chuckled, and what a lovely sound it was. “Go to sleep.”

She was, even now, all too happy to follow his orders.

Chapter End Notes

Me: I'm gonna write porn without plot!

Also me: does plot and no porn till chapter 7

It's here to stay now, though.

Now that my other WIP is finished, my teeth are fully in this vamp.

Thank you to my bricked-up babes for being the best beta fish:

[Miagas](#)

[Accio_Funky_Pants](#)

Chapter 8: At midnight drain the stream of life;

Chapter Notes

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

If the careful brush of fingers against her scalp was anything to go by, Malfoy had been awake for a while. She kept her eyes closed, unwilling to risk discovering that the solid body under her cheek was, in fact, purely fabrication. It was surprising that he hadn't slipped out from under her yet, but the rise and fall of his chest, the inhales and exhales of his lungs, didn't seem strained in the slightest; if anything, they were some of the easiest she'd heard him take.

He wasn't warm like he had been when full of her fresh, gladly given blood, but he wasn't quite as cold to the touch as usual either. Somewhere comfortably in the middle, where regular, living bodies liked to operate. Curiosity won out, and she peeled her eyes open to blink down at the long lines of his body. One leg was covered by satin sheets, the other exposed to the unexpected, somewhat discomfiting heat of the room.

Hermione was draped in bedding, the soft fabric soothing against her aching body. She felt *used*, worn out, *blissfully* content.

The curtains were not drawn. Daylight seized the rare opportunity to flood the manor with golden hues, turning every dark corner into an inviting nook. The walls did not loom or listen; they stood tall, at a clear distance, giving them space to simply exist. When Hermione tilted her tired head to peer up, she found Malfoy already looking down at her, his eyes no longer hollow pits of mystery, his cheeks no longer carved from starvation. They even went so far as to round when his lips curled into a subtle smile.

It was such an unrecognisable sight, in such a starkly different place, with such a starkly different man, that she had to wonder if she'd been transported somewhere else, with someone else.

She hadn't.

"Did you sleep at all?" she asked, the first croaked words of the day to break the agreeable silence.

Malfoy dipped his chin once. "More than I have in...years, probably."

"Shit." Her eyes widened, body tensing. "What time is it?"

"Obscenely early."

"Oh, good," she sighed, settling back against him, propping her chin upon his pectoral and the raised skin that had been etched there since their youth. "I'm supposed to be at the facility today."

Silence descended, in which all they seemed able to do was blink at one another. It was not a morning of giggles and besotted nuzzling, but contact was a constant, necessary thing. Even if they'd woken late, she wouldn't have been able to pry herself away from him.

They needed to address *it*. As the stillness stretched, she wondered who would bite first—it should be her, that was clear, but she waited for him anyway.

“Last night,” he finally began. Her stomach instantly twisted with unease, but she did not flinch. “We should have—no, *I* should have...are you on birth control?”

“Oh.” Her lips rolled together in a poor effort to suppress a smile. “We didn't really get into that, huh?”

“I wasn't quite lucid enough to consider it at the time.”

“Me neither,” she said, feeling a flush crawl up her neck. “Yes, I am on birth control.”

He swallowed. “Good.”

“Mhmm.”

Hermione was having a very difficult time looking away from him. He'd been fascinating before, all sharp lines and stern-set brows, but now he was...indescribable. The silver of his eyes was not obscured by purpling shadows, nor were they burning with the immediate aftereffects of a feed. He just looked...good. Normal. *Healthy*. His arm on her waist was a perfect weight, leaving her soft, still, and sanguine.

“What?” he asked when he caught her staring.

“You look better.”

He turned his head to consider his arms, his legs. She felt him stretch beneath her like a cat in the sun. “*I feel* better. I can't remember having this much energy.”

She hummed, drumming her fingers along his thigh. “Is that so? How are you planning on spending it?”

His hand wrapped around her wrist to stop her slow, purposeful ascent. His hold was firm, but when she looked back up at his face, she found the barest hint of amusement.

“Usurper,” he murmured.

Hermione slipped out of his grip with a roll of her eyes. “As you love to remind me.”

“Last night was reckless.”

Never one for preamble. She could hardly be shocked that he'd said it so bluntly, and she had no intention of denying him the same courtesy. She rolled onto her back, pressed her shoulder into his side, and exhaled sharply.

“Yes, it was.”

“I could have killed you.”

“But you didn’t.”

“That’s not—” He cut himself off with a frustrated huff, twisting to his side to face her.
“Granger.”

Slowly, she turned to match him, their faces aligned, close enough that she felt the need to whisper, “I knew you wouldn’t hurt me.”

“You made a guess.”

“An educated one.”

His mouth twitched with downward discontent, and the sight of it made her stomach twist.
“Are you so unconcerned with your own safety?”

“Like I said,” she tried again, feeling petulant, “I knew—”

“I didn’t. I had absolutely no idea how far I’d go.” His voice held an unmistakable undertone of panic. “The worst part is that it felt too fucking good to pay proper attention.”

“That doesn’t sound like the worst part,” she mumbled. He shot her a withering, pained look, and she felt sufficiently reprimanded. “I’m sorry. I should have done it...differently. I know.”

“Yes, you should have.”

There was no malice in his agreement, no real anger; if anything, the feeling radiating from him was relief. Her thundering heartbeat was all the proof he needed to know that he *could* feed safely. Hermione brought her hand to rest against his chest, palm flat against the scar tissue, silently rejoicing when he didn’t pull away.

“Now we know,” she let her eyes drop to his mouth, to the tease of pointed teeth that flashed as his lips parted, “that you aren’t going to lose control.”

“I think coming inside of you without asking about contraception counts as losing control.”

She waved his concern away with a flick of her wrist and a crinkle of her nose. “I think we should do it again.”

“Again?”

“Often, if possible.”

His eyes widened, and she watched them latch onto the side of her neck where his marks remained; two perfect puncture points, still red and raw. His pupils dilated before he tore his gaze away, and maybe it was just her imagination, but for a second it felt as if his fingers curled tighter around her hip.

“I can’t,” he choked.

She frowned, taken aback. “Why not?”

“It’s not fair to you.”

“How isn’t it?” She tilted her head, raised a challenging brow. “I’m hungry, too.”

To prove her point, Hermione tucked her chin and nipped at the skin of his shoulder. Malfoy let out a short, breathless laugh. It was as glorious as music.

“You are...”

“Edible?”

He shook his head, fighting a smile. “Among other things.”

Hermione schooled her face into something more dour, because this mattered to him, even if it didn’t matter so much to her, and there was little joy in basking in an afterglow alone. “If you really don’t want to do it again, we can—”

“I didn’t say that I don’t *want* to.” His eyes snapped to hers, latching and locking, his breath coming fast through his nose. “I just think we need to be cautious...and establish some rules.”

She bit the inside of her cheek. “I’m listening.”

“I’m not going to drink from you every day.”

“Why not?”

“Because my self-restraint is about as thin as your self-preservation.” He pinched her chin between two strong fingers. It was a little rough, a lot affectionate, and utterly, wholly consuming. “If it comes to it, Granger, I’d rather not survive you.”

It felt as if her throat fell into her stomach. “That was rather honest.”

“Is that not what we are being?”

“It is.” She dropped her head forward, resting it against his. “We are.”

“Well, then.”

His other hand uncurled from her hip to splay wide across her waist, his thumb beginning a slow back and forth, and it was as if the entire universe focused on the exact path of his touch. Hermione let her eyes flutter closed, let her thoughts form into wishes; for his hand to travel lower, to cup the curve of her arse and the back of her thighs, to haul her leg over his and pull her closer.

“So,” she breathed, “if you aren’t going to bite me every day, should I assume that means you aren’t going to fuck me, either?”

A whoosh of air escaped his lips, landing upon her too-warm cheeks. He rolled away, pulling his hand free in favour of running it over his face, mumbling a drawn-out curse she could not parse. She smiled, wide and insurpressible, into his beautiful, scarred, blushing skin, because he hadn’t said *no*.



Nico yawned as he placed the folders down in front of her, which she wasted no time in opening, flipping through the pages to find the most recent reports on the vampires they were due to check in with that afternoon. Slowly but surely, the files were filling out.

“Days are getting longer,” he said, rubbing at his eyes.

“It’s too late in the year for that.”

Nico chuckled. “I didn’t mean the solstice, Hermione.”

Reluctantly, she lifted her eyes from the files to find him, and what she found was a mirror of her own exhaustion. She felt it too, that ache in her bones, the unshakeable dread that smothered like smoke when she thought about the enormity of their task and the unlikelihood of their success. It was so different from what she’d felt during the war. Back then, she’d had a clear objective, a clear opposition, clear allies and enemies. Now it felt like she was lost in a maze, one that may have no exit at all, turning back on herself through towering bookshelves and identical alcoves.

“How is it going your end?” he asked.

She let her shoulders drop. “It really is an expansive library.”

“We can arrange for you to have assistance—”

“No,” she cut him off quickly, clearing her throat. “I only mean...with this sort of thing, I’m best left alone. I have a horribly rigid system.”

He waited, thoughtful creases in the corner of his eyes, then said, “I forget.”

“Hmm?”

“That you never got to have a wild, impulsive youth. That you spent yours strategising, or running, or fighting. I suppose in your shoes, anyone *would* prefer to be left alone.”

She scoffed, turning back to the files. "My youth was quite famously wild."

"Of course, but you know what I mean. You weren't out drinking sketchy spirits on the doorstep of pubs you weren't permitted to enter, or letting your mates test their stolen tattoo guns, or smoking herbs in the Hogwarts toilet cubicles—"

"Hold on," she said, frowning deeply. "You let your friends tattoo you with a stolen gun?"

"More than once," he confirmed. Hermione scanned him, trying to decide where it could be hiding. The roughish glint in his eyes made him look younger, like someone she might laugh with over a beer. "All in horribly misadvised, but thankfully hideable places."

In good humour, she grimaced. "I don't think I could ever get one."

"Not a fan of needles?"

"It's not that." Her forearm burned with the phantom sting of Bellatrix's knife. "I just can't imagine anything I would want to have permanently on my body."

"Ah, well, never say never."

Hermione lifted her hand to touch the side of her neck where the glamour held firm, disguising the truth of her depravity; it would have been simpler to use the balm and rid herself of the marks, just as it would have been easier to heal the bruise his hand left around her throat all those weeks ago. Simpler, but also decidedly *wrong*.

Perhaps that was what it felt like to bear the mark of something so lovely that without it, you would be incomplete, be it art, literature, sentiment, or...pleasure.

She took in Nico, with his thick, combed hair and his precisely trimmed beard, his professional attire that was always so perfectly in place; she didn't know him well, but she had known him for a long time and could not imagine a world, a reality, in which he did not look as put together as he did right now.

"A doctor with a secret wild side," she mused, earning a soft chuckle in return.

"It's not secret, it's just history." His expression turned wistful. "I wasn't always this old and dull."

"I think I was," she said. "Ron always tells me I am either tightly wound or completely unhinged."

Nico's eyes crinkled. "Well, whichever it is, we're certainly lucky for it."

She'd always disputed Ron's claims, always considered herself a pragmatic, appraising person who had a penchant for finding reason in the irrational. Now, though, she could hardly deny her recent actions: cutting her hand open in offering, bleeding for a starved vampire, letting him drink from her wound. She could, if she tried hard enough, convince herself it was a calculated choice, that she'd not taken the letter opener to her palm without consideration. Maybe she wasn't tightly wound or unhinged, maybe she was just...something

else. Maybe she knew what needed to be done and did it. Maybe she knew what she wanted and took it.

“Shall we get on with it?” she asked, giving her shoulders a shake.

Nico nodded. “Who’s up first?”

“Rowan.”

“He’s been improving nicely.”

“You’ve seen him?”

“No.” Nico pushed Rowan's file into her hands. “I’ve read the nurse’s reports.”

Hermione mulled over the information on the page, her eyes snagging on a single word. “He’s got a wife.”

“He does.”

“Do you think he’ll see her again?”

“Yes.”

She snorted. “You sound sure.”

“Aren’t you?” Nico asked, tilting his head curiously.

“Vampires are elusive, even born vampires. These people are public figures with well-known families, resigned to a life on the sidelines—”

“We’ll help them,” Nico said firmly, turning her towards the corridor where all the rooms and all the victims within them were waiting. “It won’t be easy, and it won’t be soon, but we’ll *help* them.”

“Wilhemina is on the Wizengamot, do you honestly think they’ll let her return?”

Nico’s moue was not auspicious. “They’ve allowed far worse than a vampire into that chamber.”

“I suppose so,” she said, exhaling a soundless laugh.

“Besides, look who they have in their corner.” He beamed at her. “If anyone knows about defying expectations, surely it is you.”

Walking at his side down the narrow corridor, the linoleum rebounding their heavy footfalls, the walls void of any warmth—in low contrast to the rooms on either side—Hermione found herself covering her forearm with her opposing hand. Her fingers wrapped around the fabric there, just over the place she knew a pale word could be found, if one were to look closely.

The scar had healed with time and extensive applications of healing balms, but it would never quite disappear.

Not long ago, she would not have been welcomed in the Ministry either. She hadn't a single place in the wizarding world at large, but she'd fought for it, kicked and screamed and hexed her way towards it, unrelenting in the face of punishment, even when it came in the form of a wand's cruellest curse.

Maybe Nico was right; maybe she *did* know about defiance.

She didn't answer, though, for they now twisted the handle to Rowan's room and stepped inside, assuming the masks of confident attendants instead of confounded estimators. Rowan was already waiting for them, sitting stock-still at the dining table, his hands clasped tightly on the oak slab, his eyes following their every movement. The barrier of wards kept them from sitting *too* close, but close enough to take the vacant chairs on the other end of the table. It was only when Hermione lowered herself to level with Rowan that she noticed just how *nervous* he was.

Because he *wasn't* stock-still, not at all; his fingernails were pressing into the knuckles of his clasped hands in what appeared to be an effort not to tremble. His legs, which had been obscured from her view when standing, were bouncing rapidly below the table. His head, which was often high and watchful, was kept low. He looked remarkably different to the man she'd seen some weeks ago, standing under fluorescent lights in a destroyed hospital room, staring vacantly into nothing. Now, he didn't seem so mindless. In fact, she would argue that he was almost *too* mindful, *too aware*, *too ashamed*.

It began smoothly; they asked him questions and he gave them answers. He was feeling lucid more often, but not always better. The pain was still consuming, and, at times, he wanted to rip out his own throat, pull out his own tongue, or knock out his own teeth. Three days ago, when the blood he'd been provided did not sate his hunger, he'd bitten into his arm and drank until he fell unconscious. He missed his wife and longed, rather desperately, to see her; they'd only recently been married, and his fears regarding her generally nervous disposition kept him awake at night.

He questioned if seeing him would hurt her, if *he* would hurt her. He questioned if it might have been better for everyone if he'd just died instead.

"I'm not even a person anymore," Rowan choked. "I'm not even human."

Hermione leaned in, and because she couldn't reach out to soothe him, and she couldn't tell him that *no*, he wouldn't hurt his wife, for she was living proof that restraint—and *intimacy*, unlike anything else—was possible, she instead said, "Of course you're still a person, Rowan."

"Actually," Nico cut in, drawing her attention, but he was not looking at her. He was looking at Rowan. The lines of his face, which had crinkled with humour only a few minutes ago, now seemed etched from stone. "In the eyes of the law, that is untrue. Society will see you as nothing more than a creature—"

“Dr Carlsen,” she hissed, but he ignored her.

“It would do well, Mr Armitage, to accept that sooner rather than later.” Nico held Rowan's eyeline, and Hermione felt her mouth fall open. Rowan, however, was utterly transfixed, hanging onto Nico's every word with a white-knuckled grip. “That way, we can focus on the future.”

She watched something unspoken pass between them, feeling a little bit outraged and a lot confused.



Ron's kitchen was severely understocked, which was, if nothing else, a sign that he was spending too much time in the office. Hermione pushed aside the half-eaten jar of pickles to reach the beer bottles. Without needing to look, she held one up over her shoulder for the passing Harry to collect, then tossed one underhanded to Ron, who swore loudly.

“Don't fucking shake it,” he mumbled, wincing when he popped the top. Hermione proceeded to crack her bottle open on the corner of his kitchen counter, biting down a smile at the sound of his agitated, teeth-ground hiss. “I rent.”

“You're also a wizard.”

“*You're* a menace.”

She leaned back against the counter and rolled her eyes. Ron lived in what he'd once dubbed ‘the ultimate bachelor pad’, a name that made Hermione nervous to touch anything that she had not witnessed being disinfected with her own eyes. It was sparsely decorated, the blue-grey ceiling was far too low for his height, and his kitchen drawers were severely lacking in sufficient cutlery.

When he'd first moved in, she and Harry had been roped into helping him set up; a Machiavellian guilt trip that weaponised their long-standing loyalties. She'd spent most of the week trying to find a way to gently inform him that he would never bed a woman if he didn't purchase a headboard, while Harry spent it stressing the importance of adequate ventilation—he and Ginny were in the throes of a battle with bathroom mold at the time, one Hermione found herself still fighting.

Well...whenever she was in her flat, which was not all that often, as of late.

Ron's home was befitting of a single man in the latter half of his twenties, providing a blank enough canvas for him to add personal touches, all of which were his own. That was the most important thing; it was *his own*. No hand-me-downs, no sharing, nothing in here that he did

not find, choose, and purchase for himself. The odd homely trinket lined the shelves, just as she knew a pile of knitted Christmas jumpers was stored in a trunk under his bed, there were a few unopened books that Hermione had gifted over the years before she'd accepted defeat, and a box of new testers that George must have dropped off earlier in the week. But there was no denying this was *his* place.

Harry tipped his head back and yawned loudly, earning sympathetic glances from them both.

"Is James still not sleeping well?" she asked.

"On and off." Harry tilted his head back and forth. "Mostly off."

"And Ginny?"

"One and the same. I try and get up with him first, but it's like she senses him before he even starts crying."

Hermione took a long sip of her beer. It was Budweiser, so it went down with difficulty, but she wasn't one to complain about stolen refreshment. "You should have taken longer paternity leave."

"I tried to tell him, but he wouldn't listen," Ron groaned.

"I listened, and I *would* have, but," he tapped the manila folder on the countertop, "then all this started."

They all eyed the folder with a quiet sense of reluctant intrigue. It was Ron who broke first, chuckling into the lip of his bottle, the sound whistling over the glass.

"Still waiting for it," he said.

Harry frowned, his spectacles slipping further down his nose. "What?"

"One normal year."

His words had them all smiling at their feet, nostalgia washing in with the breeze, coating them in a soft blanket of shared memory. In the better half of two decades, they'd yet to experience that elusive normal year, and it was tempting to imagine where—and who—they might be if they had. When she thought back on everything that happened, of all the things she wouldn't change, of all the things she *would*, her heart panged with the ache of all the possibilities: birthdays at the burrow, piles of paperwork and endless campaigns, promotions, at-home reading, another cat weaving between her ankles, her parents saying her name like they knew it.

Equally, it sang with the knowledge of her reality, which was consumed by challenge and curiosity, by a labyrinth of a manor she'd been tasked with navigating and a vampire whose bite was still on her neck, whose fingertips were still bruised onto her hips.

"Hermione?" Harry asked, rousing her. "Still with us?"

“Sorry.” She shook her head clear. “Yeah. Just...yeah.”

The boys, who could hardly be called such anymore, shared a brief look of concern. Harry broke the tension, sliding the folder along the counter till it bumped the side of her hip, gesturing for her to open it. She wasted no time in spilling the papers across the faux granite. The interrogation of Baysangur Abzorov was the first point of call, her eyes landing squarely on his mugshot in the far corner; it may well have been a muggle image for how little he was moving.

He was young, at only twenty-three, and had a growing buzzcut that exposed his tattooed neck. His eyes were soft, and his skin, though tanned, still had that unmistakable pastel quality that all vampires bore. The adjoining description painted the portrait of a capable young man in fine physical form, who spoke multiple languages and had a grasp on various cultures, who had an otherwise clean criminal record and a formal education. *Not*, she thought, *someone you would expect to be at the helm of such chaos*...which is exactly why she was not an Auror.

His interrogation was lacking any real substance; lines upon lines of unanswered questions, ignored offers of comfort, not a single word from his lips. Until, when asked—during the ninth hour of questioning—what possible motive he could assume, he’d simply replied, “*Maybe we are just hungry.*”

“We?” she asked, turning the paper around for them to read.

Ron leaned in with a low grunt. “Not enough of a slip-up to convict, but enough to keep him detained for now.”

“Who is *we*?”

“Well,” Harry began, messing up the back of his hair, “after Motley’s attack, I think it’s safe to say we are dealing with more than one individual.”

“Actually, it might be a group,” Ron added.

Hermione dropped her attention back to the files, licking the pad of her finger to flip through them, scanning the highlighted lines and red-circled notes. “Say more...”

“There are similarities in the statements we’ve taken from the vampires at the facility.” Harry bent forward and flipped the page for her, tapping the exact part he wanted her to follow. “All of the attacks have occurred in very public, very Muggle places, and always resulted in multiple casualties. All of them happened in the early evenings, when it was dark enough to slip away but bright enough for the scene to be discovered quickly.”

She gave a half-hearted nod. “That’s not a lot to go on.”

“No,” Ron agreed, tapping his bottle, “but that’s not all there is.”

“Don’t drip feed me, Ronald.”

He scoffed. “The memories we’ve extracted from the vampires have been an absolute fucking nightmare to decipher. Most of what they remember after turning is lost to pure bloodlust, it clouds everything. But,” her head shot up, a spark of hope catching in her chest, “we gave it some time, let them recover, then extracted the same memories again. This time, three of them shared identical images of a symbol.”

Hermione looked between them so quickly, so eagerly, that it hurt her bruised, bitten neck. “What symbol?”

Harry flipped the pages in her hands again, turning until they landed on a pencilled image, scribbled hastily by notably unskilled hands. Hermione brought the image closer, narrowing her eyes on the faint artwork; it looked like two layered diamonds, connected by one single line.

“It was hard to see at first, but it's there, deep in their minds, just a flash,” Harry said.

Her frown only deepened. “On what?”

“Skin.”

“Skin? How would it—” She cut herself off, turned back through the pages to land on Baysangur’s mugshot, pressing her finger to the side of his neck and the small, almost imperceivable, but absolutely *there* mark. “It’s a tattoo?”

“Seems like it,” Harry confirmed. “Or a brand.”

“What about Motley’s memories? If he saw it too—”

“Yeah, I know. It’s too soon to extract from him, though. He’s barely lucid.”

Hermione dropped the file back onto the counter in favour of picking up her room-temperature beer, thinking as she took an uncomfortable mouthful. “So, we have to wait.”

Ron shrugged. “Unless you or that good doctor have any tricks up your sleeves, I guess so.”

“Our tests are about observation,” she mumbled, still lost in thought.

Harry and Ron, however, shifted their focus immediately.

“What exactly are you observing?” Harry asked.

“Mostly their progress,” she replied. “We’ve just begun exposure therapy, it’s all...focused on their rehabilitation. The goal is to find new, preferably faster, ways for them to reintegrate.”

Nico’s words to Rowan filtered through her mind, how callously he’d said that Rowan was nothing more than a creature, that he ought to get used to it. Time had only cemented her feelings that it was a counterproductive response, a heedlessly blunt retort to a valid concern, and it *irked* her.

“What’s your benchmark?” Harry asked.

The truth sat on her tongue long enough to dissolve, to melt down her throat where it was safe and unheard, for there was no conceivable way she could stand here and tell them that Malfoy—*Draco Malfoy*—was not only a vampire, but very much at the manor and acting as her begrudging host. That she was, as he’d so often called her, a usurper. She could not tell them that her days were spent wondering after him, that her evenings were spent observing him move about his shadowed parlour with more focus than she should have allotted. That she’d watched him muster a remarkable amount of restraint. That she’d made him *lose it*.

“Total, unwavering self-control,” she answered simply.

Ron hummed into his bottle. “How far off are they?”

“Far.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.” She thought of Elise’s futile clawing at her locked door, the wretched sobs that ripped free of her throat. “Shit.”

For a moment, they all sipped in silence, weighed down by the familiar burden of responsibility. They’d borne it so often; the weight of the world, of those less capable, of those in need, of those who hadn’t yet had their hands forced enough to fight back. Now, it was different. The weight they carried was selective. It came with a job title and an annual income, with accolades and promotions and a notable absence of personally murderous opposition.

Still, her shoulders ached.

When Harry leaned over to lightly pat her back, the three of them released a united breath. It was confirmation, even permission, that they could return to being friends instead of colleagues.

“How are you at the manor?” He asked. “It’s dragging on way longer than I thought it would.”

“It’s a big job, but I’m fine.”

“At least you can get out of there every once in a while.” Ron snorted and tipped his mostly empty bottle her way. “Must be a relief.”

She smiled at him warmly, knocking her bottle against his, and tried not to dwell on the knowledge that ever since she’d left the manor that morning, all she’d wanted to do was return.



She should have known, really, that a friendly lunch with Harry and Ron would run into the evening, that one bottle of beer would turn into ‘just one more’, that the night would stretch thick and dark by the time she stumbled back through the iron doors and into the inhospitable hallway.

Late as it was, and as inebriated as she was, she could not bring herself to regret staying for as long as she had. It was nice, better than nice, to spend her time so ordinarily. They’d moved to Harry’s after a few hours at Ron’s, determined to spend an hour fawning over little James before he went down for the night, equally determined to spend time with Ginny, who’d been exceptionally glad for adult company.

It was lovely to spend time with them, yet when their chatter slowed and Ron took himself home, Harry turned to Hermione and offered her the spare room, and her response had been as instinctual, as immediate, as pulling air into her lungs.

“No, thanks, I should get back.”

Tibbs met her at the entrance, escorting her past the brief candle flames that only lit in passing. The hall extended in its vacancy, the alcoves curled the breeze into something dark and present, and Hermione scanned every corner with fresh interest. Every new flame brought about a new, half-formed hope that *he* would emerge from the darkness, his silhouette swallowing the narrow space like it had that night all those weeks ago—but he didn’t.

“Tibbs?”

The little elf stumbled, peering over her shoulder and up, up, *up* to Hermione. No verbal response came, but she’d expected as much; Tibbs was an elf of very few words, a bit like her master.

“Is he home?”

Again, she was met with shining eyes, made wider by flickering flames, and no other response.

“I mean Malfoy,” she clarified. “Is he here?”

A small inclination of the elf’s head, and Hermione had her answer. She thought about asking for him, calling for him, wondered if he would mind the late hour, if he might even be pleased to see her. Or, perhaps, given her extended absence, she should go to him? Her skin tingled with the anticipation of it, with the memory of his touch and the slow, bewildering

drag of his teeth. She *could* go, and she *wanted* to, but she was not...sober. Her legs wobbled beneath her, and she supposed it was unlikely that he would have an appetite for jelly.

So, when Tibbs pushed open the library doors, Hermione shuffled past her into the cold embrace of her make-shift, temporary home and decided to remain there.

“Goodnight, Tibia,” she murmured.

Tibbs looked shocked at the use of her full name, a pink blush forming on her rounded cheeks before she clicked her little fingers and vanished into a wisp of fog.

Hermione set about removing her clothes, shuddering as a chill swept through the library, weaving through the unending sea of bookshelves and wrapping around each of her slowly exposed limbs. Eyes seemed to follow her, as they always did, though she could not find them in the darkness. When she picked up her oversized sleep-shirt, she paused...because it *was* possible that her paranoia was not unfounded. She thought of the whispers, the breath upon the back of her neck, the human shape that formed in the shadows.

Maybe she *was* being watched.

Maybe she didn't mind.

She dropped the shirt, letting it pool at her feet, and fell into her transfigured bed wearing nothing more than her underwear, not caring at all if the walls were watching. As she slipped into repose, she could almost feel him there, could recall the consuming way his arms had held her.

Softly, she called his name.



The restaurant was predictably empty, aside from their usual table, in their usual corner, occupied by their usual attendees. Robards was busy wrapping up updates on the investigation, but Hermione was not listening; it was all information she'd already garnered from Harry and Ron. Instead, her focus zeroed in on a loose thread in the mauve tablecloth. When Iwan offered to go next, she almost let a curse slip.

“Have you spoken with the Czech Ministry?” Kingsley asked patiently.

Iwan clicked his tongue. “They are unwilling to entertain the possibility of an organisation.”

“Well, they need to be willing. Can you set up a meeting with—”

Hermione peered up, only to catch Nico's wary eyes from across the table. He narrowed on her with visible, palpable concern, his mouth curling around a silent 'Okay?'. She tilted her head, unable to say yes, equally unable to say no. It was difficult to get a read on him after what he'd said to Rowan, and with how at odds it seemed with every conversation she'd had with him.

The meeting came to a close before she could bring herself to pay attention, but she didn't mind; it had been a busy few days, and she was itching to return to the stability of her usual routine, even if it did include more than her fair share of dusting. Kingsley clapped her shoulder as he passed, but her eyes remained on the unmoving Nico, who offered the Minister a placating smile.

"I'm sticking behind," he said. "Miss Granger and I have something to discuss."

Her stomach lurched almost entirely out of her torso, but she made an active effort to conceal it when she dipped her chin to Kingsley, who glanced between them with keen interest.

"Very well, then," he said, turning to leave.

She would be remiss not to notice how the Minister lingered at the threshold of the restaurant, just a singular moment of reluctance, before he turned on his heel and disappeared. Hermione set her sights back upon Nico, who raised an amused brow.

"What do we have to discuss, Dr Carlsen?"

He smirked. "You don't have to call me that."

"You earned the title."

"Alright," he sighed, rolling his lips together to smother a smile. "You just spent the last hour shooting daggers into the side of my head."

She flushed, dropped her eyes to the table and the fraying thread she'd managed to mangle beyond repair, unaware that she'd let her confusion, her growing ire, show so obviously. It became immediately apparent that they were utterly alone in the restaurant, and the feeling that flooded her was not fear; it was humiliation.

"I..."

"If something is bothering you, I would appreciate you being upfront."

"I've been thinking about what you said to Rowan," she said quickly, before the nerve escaped her.

Nico nodded slowly. "I thought that might be it."

"It was very blunt."

"It was very *honest*."

Hermione's hands twisted at her waist. She felt like a schoolgirl again, asking a professor for feedback, desperate to be told she wasn't behind, that her magic was not inferior, that it was, in fact, extraordinary. She'd never had a particularly difficult time pushing back against establishments she disagreed with, but she had *always* found it difficult to argue with someone whose validation she sought.

"I fear it may not be a particularly encouraging thing to hear," she said, keeping her tone magnanimous.

"The truth?"

"You essentially told him to give up."

Nico's brows furrowed. "No, I didn't. I told him to accept what is." He looked her up and down, a slow and deliberate assessment that made her bristle. "It will do no good to refute the facts...and the fact is, he *is* a vampire, and always will be."

"*Society will see you as nothing more than a creature?*" she pitched his words back at him, a rally across the circular, mostly vacant table.

"Miss Granger," he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"If you don't believe in their capability to re-enter society, then what is the point of the facility? Or anything we are doing?"

"To help them function." His voice rose an octave, which seemed to startle him as much as it startled her. He swallowed it back with a small, apologetic smile. "To improve their quality of life, and to return them to their families, as soon as we can, in whatever capacity we can."

Hermione turned her head to the side, her jaw set. "They are prominent, accomplished witches and wizards. Do you expect them to just leave it all behind?"

Nico watched her for a moment, and she felt as if he could see everything. Every rib and every regret, every churn of her stomach and desperate hope, every tremble of her fingers and bite mark on her neck. The lights were low in the restaurant, and the set of his brow was heavy, casting shadows across his usually relaxed face. Here, now, he did not look tired; he looked determined, unwavering, *burdened*.

"I commend you for all you have learned thus far about vampire behaviour, Hermione, I really do. I believe you and I will ensure they are capable of holding positions of power once again, but it is going to take a lot more than what we currently have to *prove* it."

She bit into her lower lip, thinking of Malfoy hiding away in a manor built for growing families, shedding his entire sense of self, letting himself drown in self-doubt and burning hatred, trying to starve his new organism out of him. She didn't want that for him, nor did she want it for the vampires still trapped in the facility; she didn't want it for *anyone*.

"Who do we need to prove it to?" she asked quietly.

Nico's brow twitched in surprise. "Everyone."

“Fine,” she scoffed, shaking her head. “I’ve done that before, I’ll do it again.”

When Nico smiled, it was all teeth, made whiter and brighter by the shadows on his face. She felt them re-coalesce, once again on the same page, in the same book, reciting the same passage.

“And that, Miss Granger, is why I did not call for Bertha.”



Her leather duffle hit the armchair with a resounding thud, which carried throughout the library and returned like a boomerang.

It wasn’t late, but Hermione was exhausted; her morning swim had taken it out of her, then the afternoon had been dedicated to searching the library, which, as usual, resulted in nothing. When she’d reached her limit for how many books she could lift in one day, she’d bundled her body into a windbreaker and made for the facility. Wilhelmina didn’t finish the blood she was given for dinner—an act of restraint that seemed to pain her terribly—but she managed not to lash out when the nurses came to take it away.

It was progress.

It was *proof*.

Hermione had been beside herself to record it in the file.

When the work day was over, she had ventured to a soulless flat where nobody waited for her. She’d fallen through the floo, dead on her feet, and hardly spared a glance at the overpriced sofa she never sat on, the picture frames that still housed the stock photos they came with, and the clean, empty ceramic bowls no cat had eaten from in months.

Her objective had been simple and direct: get in, get fresh clothes, get out.

The bedroom was just as sterile as the rest of the flat; crisp bedsheets that had never softened against her skin, pillowcases that didn’t smell like her shampoo, empty bedside tables that she couldn’t imagine filling. The only real sign of life was the worn, slightly torn Muggle photograph that sat on the room’s only shelf, depicting a family she’d once had, made of parents who’d once loved her.

It was almost funny how quickly a transfigured bed in a hostile library had become her preference.

One more pause came while she rooted around in her scarcely stocked wardrobe, when her fingers brushed over the bundle of silk she'd almost entirely forgotten about. A nightgown of dark fabric and enticing lace, a slit down the side where her thigh would be. It had been purchased on a whim years ago, when she'd thought a one-turned-three nightstand might be going somewhere. It hadn't. She couldn't even remember his name. The nightgown was unceremoniously shoved into the back of her wardrobe and hadn't been touched since; she wasn't even sure why she'd brought it with her now.

Except, she *was* sure. She knew *exactly* why it made it into her duffel. She hadn't seen Malfoy in almost two days, and while that was not out of the ordinary, it felt different after the night they'd shared. Now, he'd been inside her, in more ways than one; his fingers, his cock, his teeth. He was in her blood, and her blood was in him.

She wanted him to see her in this nightgown. She wanted him. She wanted *him* to want *her*.

So, she slipped into the nightgown upon her return to the library, and she did not call for Femur or Tibbs before entering the long, winding, pitch-black hallways. Candles lit her way, her wand sat ready on her hip, but she was not stopped by anyone—not vampire, not elf—as she moved deeper, further, higher into the manor. Hermione went south in search of the room they'd shared, scanning her faintly lit surroundings until she recognised where she was, running her fingers along familiar stone arches and wooden carvings, glancing up at known coffered ceilings.

Eventually, as if lured by a distant call, Hermione found herself at the mouth of the bedroom.

She stepped inside, smiling when the last of the day's light filtered in through the undrawn windows, dancing across the fresh satin sheets. It was as if nobody had entered since. She could still smell him here—could smell *them*. She could still feel the warm bubbles over her skin, the press of his body against hers, the gentle rise and fall of his sleeping chest. Slowly, she stepped forward and ran her hand over the bedsheets, pressing down to release a faint waft of lavender.

“Granger.”

Hermione gasped, spinning on her heel towards the doorway to find Malfoy filling the open frame. He stared at her, looking more than a little haggard, but not quite the same as before. There was still colour in his cheeks, though, admittedly, it had dimmed since their morning together. This was more like stress, or strain, or possibly enervation. She pressed a palm to her chest and heaved a dry laugh.

“You’ve got to get better at announcing yourself,” she said. He ducked his head to apologise, and she squinted at him. “You don’t look well, do you need—”

“You haven't been around much since...” He cleared his throat. “I checked the library earlier, but you weren’t there.”

She found herself at a loss for words. It was absurd; that he'd noticed, that he'd been looking for her—did he just need to feed? No. *No*...it wasn't that.

Her lips parted on a whisper, “It’s been busy at the facility.”

“I see,” he said calmly. “I thought perhaps you regretted it.”

“Regretted?” Her eyes widened with alarm. “Oh god, no. Not at all! The opposite!”

Malfoy’s head tilted, his eyes darkening in that predatory way that had her heart thumping hard against her ribs. “The opposite?”

“Yes, I...”

Missed you, she wanted to say, and she *had* missed him. She hadn’t realised it until right this moment, but god, *yes*, she’d missed him. It didn’t matter that she couldn’t say it, for he seemed to hear it anyway. In the beat of her heart, in her sharp inhale of breath, in whatever language they spoke. It was enough to pull a roguish smirk from him.

“Yeah?” he asked. She nodded, watching his mouth twitch. “Me too.”

Her heart grew wings, fluttered up and into her throat and lodged there. Suddenly, he was just too far away. Hermione went to him wordlessly, rose to her toes, and pressed her lips to his. It was gentle at first. His hands came to cup the back of her head, her arms lifted to drape over his shoulders, and they took it slowly, none of the fight of their previous encounter.

The peace didn’t last long, stirring into passion before she could make heads or tails of it, a flame feeding off the oxygen they shared. He crowded her, pressed her against the wood-panelled wall, his lips on her earlobe, his splayed palm dipping into the slit of her nightdress, grasping and bunching the silk between his fingers.

“You knew exactly what you were doing with this thing,” he said, low and perfectly, dangerously promising, tugging on the dress until one strap slid from her shoulder, only to be replaced by his open mouth.

“Yes,” she breathed, not inclined to lie to him.

He licked up the side of her throat, urging her head back against the wall with a soft thud, his hips adjusting and slotting between her unwittingly widening thighs. He was beautifully, wonderfully hard already. The first press of his length against her cunt had her squirming, which seemed to be exactly what he wanted.

“Clearly,” he murmured, “it worked.”

Her body trembled with need when he trailed hot, wet kisses along the dip of her neck, and when he pulled back his lips to run his sharp teeth over her rapid pulse, she whimpered, going wholly limp. He held her up with a hand around her neck, the sound of his low chuckle hitting every vertebra in her spine; it was nothing but an exhale of air, yet she felt it over every inch of her skin.

He shook his head. “You’re so fucking—”

“What?”

His hand dropped to cup her over her underwear, applying intense, unexpected pressure. She cried out, and he chased the moan with one of his own, cupping her jaw to ensure she could not turn away and hide, to ensure she had to look into his wild, silver eyes.

“*Pliant*,” he finished, then bent forward and took her lips between his teeth. She tasted copper, felt the distinct warmth of fresh blood, and so did he; his pupils blew wide, his kisses became bruising, he licked the blood from her mouth with ravenous intent, and she was *so* loose, so *very* at his mercy. He groaned into her ear, “You’d let me do anything to you, wouldn’t you?”

Hermione closed her eyes, felt herself nodding as she tipped her head back, felt his vicious grin pull against the line of her jaw, felt his thumb push into her windpipe. She wanted him to bite there, right over the cartilage, right over her pulse, but he did not.

“No.” His hand on her jaw tightened. “Look at me.”

Unable and unwilling to resist his command, she opened her eyes, tucked her chin to lock onto his gaze, and tried not to whimper when his mouth curled high.

“Good girl.”

In one swift move, her underwear was pulled aside, and his thumb was dragging deliciously over her clit, and she’d never been so wet, so turned on. When he pushed a finger inside her, they both shuddered. She fell forward, burying her face into his shoulder, and—*god*, she could come like this, she really could. It shouldn’t be possible, but he was so *hard*, and she was so *disoriented*.

His fingers pumped in and out with a relentless, consistent pace. It was *not* gentle, and it was *not* soothing, but it was *everything* she wanted. Her nails dug into his shoulders, into the fabric of his robes. She wanted them off, she wanted him hot and bare and beating against her. It was a miracle, really, that when he scraped his teeth on her throat again, she had the cognition to shake her head.

“No,” she whined. “Don’t...don’t bite yet.”

He froze, pulled out of her immediately and stepped back, ignoring her cry of protest. She’d been pinned up against the wall and fucked by his long, rough fingers, yet it was Malfoy who looked torn asunder; his eyes wide and searching, his cock straining against the fabric of his trousers, a harsh line of worry forming on his forehead.

“Did I hurt you?”

She blinked. “What?”

“You want to stop—”

“No, I said don’t bite me *yet*.” She reached for him with a breathless laugh to pull him closer. He seemed confused, and there was something remarkably satisfying about it. With her palms to his chest, she took a moment to feel his heartbeat, finding it thundering; alive, *living*—

she'd told him as much, hadn't she? "I'll be useless when you do, and I don't want to be useless right now."

"What do you—*fuck*."

Hermione lowered to her knees, her hands already scrambling to unbuckle his belt. Her eyes remained on his face, watching as his own grew wider, so huge and dark that she wanted to laugh, and she might have, were she not so fucking *hungry*. She freed his length from his trousers, held his perfect, straining cock in her shaking hand. The tip was already glistening, a promise that it would not take her long to get what she wanted; her tongue darted out to lick her lips in anticipation, and his curse was a sharp hiss.

When she pressed a kiss to the underside of his head, his hands shot into her hair and twisted it around his fingers, gripping tight. The pull of her scalp made her hum, encouraged her to open her mouth and take as much of him as she could; he smelled like soap, tasted like salt, felt like heaven. His head fell back, the bob of his throat all the more visible for it, and his hands began guiding her along his length. She loved it, loved how deep he pushed into her throat, loved how he trusted her to take it, loved the tears that sprang to her eyes when his hips snapped forward, loved how his lips were parted when he looked back down at her, exposing his sharp incisors.

"Fucking...unbelievable," he groaned, wrapping his hand under her jaw, keeping it loose—*pliant*. "You're enjoying this?"

She smiled around him, feeling buoyant, lost to the maelstrom, wanting and *wanting* and loving every second, hoping he could see that yes, *yes*, she was enjoying this. One thrust of his hips had her choking back a gag, and it was a beautiful feeling; spit mixing with blood on her lip, staining his skin, making her hot and desperately wanton.

"You have the most perfect," he thrust again, breaking on a grunt, "*evil* mouth."

With her hands gripping the front of his thigh, she relaxed, letting him have her, take her, use her as he saw fit. His cock was hot and pulsing on her tongue, and she knew he wasn't long for it. Knowing, somehow, without even needing to ask, that he needed just *one more* thing to get there, she presented her wrist to him. He grabbed it tightly, pinned it to the wall above her head, panting hard.

"What?" he asked.

She pulled her mouth from him, kissed the crease of his pelvis, watched his mouth fall open on a silent word. "*Now* you can bite me."

His groan was loud enough to shake her skull. "Merciless witch."

He bent over and sank his fangs into her wrist, pulling at the vein until her blood spilt onto his tongue. Thinking fast, she took him into her mouth again before her mind and body gave out, before her once coiled muscles went entirely limp, her jaw slack and open for him. He fucked her mouth hard, his eyes rolling back at the same time as hers; it was too good, too consuming, and she just couldn't—

“I can’t,” he moaned into her vein.

When his thighs began to shake, he tried to pull away, but she held on tighter, took him deeper, thrilled by the gasp that escaped his bloodstained lips. With his teeth in her wrist, he found release, hot pulses of pleasure that worked down her throat. It wasn’t a taste she’d enjoyed before, it wasn’t even an *act* she’d enjoyed before, but she *loved* it now, all of it. She swallowed, letting her eyes flutter closed, enjoying every lingering twitch of his cock and every caress of his thumb over her open wrist.

Then she was on her feet, in his arms, against the wall, and he was kissing her, and *kissing* her. He tasted like blood and sweat and *him*—she wanted more.

“Turn around,” he ordered.

She could hardly move, so he did it for her, pressing her chest against the wall and caging her in with the expanse of his burning body. It was just like the hallway, all those nights ago, yet entirely different. Her nightdress was bunched in his hands, pushed up over her hips as he went to his knees. The wall panels bit into the side of her face, into the flesh of her palms, but she could not bring herself to care. At the sound of torn fabric, she flinched.

“I liked this gown.”

“So did I,” he said solemnly. “I’m going to buy you one hundred of them.”

“Don’t be ridiculous—*oh!*”

He spread her legs wide and licked up the centre of her cunt, hands on her arse, moaning loudly at the first taste of her. Her gasp echoed off the wall, condensation from her heaving breath wet against her cheek. Malfoy was unabashed in his pursuit of her pleasure, licking until her legs trembled, pressing his tongue to her clit with perfect, unfettered desire. Her nails scratched at the panelling, leaving her mark on his manor the way he left his mark on her, and it felt like she was seconds away from buckling over.

“Fucking knew it would be sweet,” he mumbled. She felt his fangs tease the side of her clit, and it was enough to send her wild; she fell forward, held up by the good grace of his strength, and writhed as he lapped at her without any of the restraint he usually displayed. “Oh, Granger, you’re dripping.”

She was babbling, whimpering, saying nothing and everything all at once. When he pulled back to sink his fangs into the back of her thigh, sucking hard, she snapped. It wasn’t white light that pulled her under, no, her orgasm came in dark and crashing waves, blocking out the sun and the stars, leaving her floating in a universe in which nothing existed but him, his teeth, and the bliss they offered.

He was off his knees and pressed against her, biting down hard at the back of her neck, stretching her orgasm into something unnatural, too incredibly, *impossibly* good. He turned her with guiding hands, wrapped her in a fierce embrace when she fell into his chest. Then she was lifted, her feet dangling from the ground as he carried her across the room, laying her carefully upon the satin sheets. When he stood back to undress himself, she dug deep for the

energy to shift onto her elbows and watch. She wasn't sure if the lightheaded feeling was from blood loss or the sight of his mouth coated with her blood and release, all of it ameliorated.

He licked his lips and shrugged out of his clothes, humming with satisfaction at the taste. There was no possible way for him to be hard again so soon, but he was.

"No refractory period for vampires?" she asked shakily.

He shook his head with inhuman slowness. "I don't think you have any idea what your blood does to me."

"I might," she muttered, eyeing his reaching cock.

He stripped her of her nightgown next, tearing it away in two nearly clean halves without even a hint of shame, leaving the pair of them bare to the cold air. He paused, and she followed suit; each of them taking a moment to absorb the sight of each other, to map their bodies and all their bevels, to exist in the absurdity of the moment. Her lips parted on a word she didn't get the chance to speak, for he was on her in an instant, kissing it from her mouth, pressing it back into the line of her jaw, the curve of her neck, the dip of her collarbone. When his tongue brushed against the peak of her nipple, she arched into him with a gasp, and his hand splayed over her back to hold her closer.

His forehead settled against her chest, teeth nibbling, a contented sigh escaping his wicked mouth. "You're not *real*."

He wasn't really talking to her, but she felt the need to remind him that she *was* real all the same, reaching down to tug on his soft hair and urge him on. As if able to hear her plea, he bit hard into her breast, the suction intense over her nipple, and the rush of her blood had her clenching around nothing. A broken, desperate sound slipped from her, and his mouth curled upwards in return.

"Okay," he said, licking at his most recent mark to clean it. "Okay."

His cock was at her entrance, but only for a split second, not long enough to fully prepare, before he pushed deep inside and held still, letting her stretch and writhe to accommodate him. The world slowed to a stop, then began to spin in reverse—or, perhaps, it had been going in the wrong direction all along and had finally been corrected.

"Please," she moaned. "*Please*."

"I need you to use full sentences."

"Harder."

He pinched her other nipple between his long fingers, rolling the bud as he thrust into her again. "Biting or fucking?"

"*Both*," she wept.

“Good.”

He pressed her down with one hand, setting his face into the crook of her throat as his teeth latched onto her pulse, and fucked her into the mattress with ruthless abandon. Her mind spun with the irrefutable pleasure of it all, with how demanding it felt, his hands on her body and his teeth in her neck. He fucked her like he hoped she would break—she hoped so too, she hoped that her body would hold the imprint of him for the rest of time. It was relentless, every slam of his hips rocked her body higher up the bed, higher into the atmosphere, her only tethers were the teeth in her neck and the ragged moans he buried with them.

She came apart without warning, maybe she screamed, maybe she clawed at his back, maybe she begged—there was no way of knowing. Vaguely, she was aware that he was filling her, too, the warmth and the rightness of it sending shivers down her burning spine. Her body pulsed around him, wanting to keep him right there, all of him, but her mind was adrift. Above the clouds, the only sound she heard was the slow, stricken chant of her name.

Hermione, Hermione, Hermione.



Malfoy set the bowl on the bedside table. Hermione leaned back against the pile of fluffy down pillows, feeling fed and happy and clean, thanks to the shower Malfoy had all but carried her into. He'd scrubbed her skin with gentle passes of cloth, kissed the marks he'd left behind, and hadn't allowed her to lift so much as a finger. Her hair was combed through, each curl separated, which was a skill she hadn't imagined he would possess, but turned out he was very good at it. Her blood was replenished, her stomach appeased, her bite marks healed—apart from one.

When he'd finished smoothing the balm into the back of her neck, his eyes had fallen to the bite mark on her throat. He'd pressed a thumb into it, eyes dark and focused, then skipped straight over it to rub the balm into her breast. She didn't mind, in fact, it only saved her the difficulty of having to ask for them to remain.

It should have felt patronising, all this post-coituous coddling he seemed determined to pepper her with, but when he slipped into the warm, welcoming bed beside her, looking healthier than she'd seen him in...well, probably since fourth year, there was nothing but joy to be found in his presence. Which is why she had to say it, to reveal her bitter, rotten truth before she indulged in any more pleasures. Something had clicked between them, and she didn't want to keep lying to him.

“Malfoy?”

It was almost imperceptible, the subtle curl of his mouth. “Granger.”

“I lied to you.”

“What about?” he asked, curling his hand around her waist, watching his thumb dance over her ribs, enraptured.

“Finding a cure,” she said, so low it was a miracle he could hear her. “I don’t...there was never any plan to—”

“I know.”

She shook her head, firmer now. “No, I mean—wait, what?”

“Do you truly think me an idiot?” He pulled her closer, buried his nose in the crown of her head. “Of course there isn’t going to be a cure for Vampirism.”

Hermione frowned into his chest, the tension slowly unspooling from her own. “You don’t sound particularly angry about it.”

“Should I?”

“Probably.”

He shrugged. “I was never under any illusion.”

“But you let me stay anyway?”

His chuckle was a low rumble in her ear, and she wanted to climb inside the sound, to curl up in the warmth of it and live there. “You *demand*ed it, Usurper.”

“I don’t understand.” She wiggled out of his hold and leaned back, looking up at his face, which was flushed and utterly worn out. Except this time, his fatigue did not appear tortured. It was the sated, triumphant expression of a man who’d just run a marathon, won a prize, and scaled a mountain all in the same day. “Why allow me to stay here, why let me into your parlour to observe you, if you knew there was never going to be a cure at the end of it?”

His eyes roamed her face with serious intent, so mercurial, and it was impossible to look away. When, finally, the corners of his mouth lifted with a bittersweet smile. “Why did you come back here yourself, instead of letting the Ministry send someone else?”

“Because I...” she trailed off, blinking rapidly. “It’s my job. I have a responsibility to the victims.”

Malfoy was shaking his head, mild and amused, and she’d never felt so horribly, wonderfully transparent in all her life. She sighed, her lungs deflating in perplexing defeat, and let her head rest against the side of his arm.

“I don’t *know*,” she admitted quietly. “It was just a feeling.”

At that, his chin tipped down to nod once, and his fingers rose to brush the curls from her eyes, to tuck them ever-so-tenderly behind her ear. He didn't need to speak again; the small twist that curled the edges of his mouth seemed to mirror her every thought, every feeling, until she knew with absolute certainty that their answers were one and the same.

Chapter End Notes

Just couldn't help but add a tiny bit of plot between the porn. Sorry.

Also, I will always be a sucker for the Golden Trio existing together as tired adults...let me have this.

Thank you to my naughty, naughty omega for beta, who wrote 'BITE IT OFF!' in the doc when Draco put his fangs to Hermy's clit:

[Miagas](#)

See ya next time, freaks.

Chapter 9: Yet loathe the banquet which perforce

Chapter Notes

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

Despite the split demands for her attention, Hermione's excavation prevailed. She moved through the cobwebbed, time-warped shelves at a rapid pace, checked and recorded each title, ran her chilled fingertips along every bound spine; always searching, never securing.

Malfoy joined her often—voluntarily, which she could not yet quite believe—and never complained when she put him to work. For someone who seemed to get off on giving commands, he was all too content to receive them. With his help, the endless search sped up, shelves were cleared in record time, stacks were categorised and moved, until one day it didn't seem so endless after all. It was with an ache in her spine and a churn in her gut that Hermione looked up one afternoon to find that they were, undoubtedly, over halfway through the vastness of the library. It was a bittersweet realisation, her feelings warring; she wanted to be done almost as much as she wanted to continue forever.

Malfoy's presence was both an advantage and a distraction. Sometimes, they would power through until the late afternoon; other times, he would bend her over between the bookshelves to sink his teeth into her vein and his cock into her cunt. Either way, he always, always, took care of her in the evening; running her baths of lavender bubbles and no longer denying himself the pleasure of slipping into the water behind her, the copper tub cradling instead of separating them.

"I am quite adept at washing my own hair," she'd sigh as he worked the conditioner through the ends of her curls.

The soft curve of his mouth could be felt against her shoulder, as could the playful brush of his sharp incisors. "You mean to take this from me, too, Usurper?"

The nickname no longer riled her up the way it had only a few short weeks prior. Now it seemed somewhat affectionate, an inside joke between two people who were beginning to understand each other. Perhaps she'd roll her eyes and inform him that she'd given him far more than she'd taken. Then again, perhaps the water was warm, his mouth smooth against her skin, his nails delicious against her scalp. Perhaps she'd lean back against his chest and let her eyes flutter shut instead.

True to his word, he did not feed from her every day, but every time he did, it resulted in unthinkably good sex. The acts seemed to be intrinsically linked, though she knew from her reading that feeding itself was not typically considered a sexual act—*intimate*, of course, but not sexual. Yet, the second his fangs broke her skin, she was lost to the waves of her own lust.

When she asked him about it, his reply came with an unconcerned shrug.

"I'm not inclined to question it."

But she *was*, so she looked. When her arms and feet ached, when she could climb and crawl and sort no longer, she could curl into one of the library's deep, wing-back armchairs, select a book from her '*could be useful*' pile and scour the pages for all mention of vampires.

She read about great parties and annual orgies between consenting creatures and humans alike, about hot-blooded volunteers who would give themselves over for feeding, about the establishment of communal blood centres and delivery services. She read until her eyelids lowered and her head lolled to the side, until sleep wrapped its warm hands around her neck and pulled her under.

She could awake moments later in Malfoy's arms, rocked by the gentle wave of his movements as he carried her to a room with satin sheets.

Before long, a routine formed: Hermione would open her eyes to the south bedroom and the sleeping, healthy form of Draco Malfoy before slipping out of his hold undetected. She would visit the pool and swim until her shoulders burned, then return to the manor and resume her *search*. She would eat the food the Tibbs and Femur made—the offerings significantly more varied now that she was allowed to use a knife; her spilt blood merely another course—while she *searched*. Malfoy would find her, she would find him, or they would find each other, and together they would *search*. He would feed, they would fuck, and when her blood was replenished and her skin was healed, she would return to the library, and she would *search*.

Her heart had never felt so full; her hands had never felt so empty.



Hermione was precariously balancing on the top rung of a very tall ladder when the pop of Femur's apparition caused her foot to slip. Air rushed past her head, a hurricane in her ears, flashes of her body—broken, bloodied, and sprawled out on the unfeeling slabs of the library floor—flashed in her moon-wide eyes.

Femur, and all his diligent elf magic, halted her velocity with a mere click of his fingers. He set her gently on the ground with mild, but nonetheless *unsmotherable* irritation. The ordeal left her speechless enough that she didn't question him when he demanded she follow, nor when he turned the opposite direction from the parlour and led her down a different hallway.

She'd been down it before, while lurking in the dark after a long shower, with cotton between her thighs and a thundering heart. The door without dust, the midnight glow seeping through the tinted windows, the uncovered furnishings and twisted pillars, the square, corded rug and quarter-turned staircase; all of it was familiar as she trailed behind Femur in purposeful silence. They marched on under coffered ceilings and past the untouched organ until finally,

his little legs brought them to a stop at the foot of a door, made of garden carvings and left ajar.

Her mind circled itself, wondering why on earth Malfoy would summon her here instead of the parlour or the south bedroom, why he would not just come to the library if it was urgent, as he had done almost every day that week, why he would bother with the theatrics of—

Each question floated away on the sound of a carried laugh.

Hermione wasted no further time entering the room with a plastered-on welcoming smile. Theo and Blaise were seated upon the same loveseat as before, turning their heads like peeking meerkats when she entered. This time, Malfoy was not stationed on the far side of the room, desperately clutching the threads of his self-imposed isolation. No, tonight he'd placed the armchair at a reasonable distance from his lifelong friends. At the sight of his effort, her heart stretched into the sky.

"Has it already been a month?" She asked, a little breathless.

"No," Theo cried, beaming and clapping his hands together with palpable, youthful glee. Blaise, however, remained collected at his side, but she would have been remiss not to note his pleased, relaxed posture. "He called for us early, if you can believe it. Don't say anything, but I've a sneaking suspicion that he loves us."

She raised her gaze to the man in the armchair, whose eyes had yet to leave her. "Is that so?"

He shrugged, but there was no mistaking the subtle curl of his mouth. Theo didn't miss it either, blowing out a low whistle before turning to her with a pantomimed whisper of, "What *the fuck* have you done to him?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, batting her eyelashes.

"He looks like a *person*."

"Oh, well, I didn't do anything—"

Blaise snorted. "Let's not pretend there isn't a giant, blushing elephant in the room."

"I don't think it's any of your business," Malfoy warned.

"As your friend, and more importantly, as someone who has maintained a secret supply of chimp blood for years, it is *very much* my business."

"Hear, hear!" Theo concurred.

"So," Blaise pointed limply between Malfoy, who was rigid in his armchair, and Hermione, who was rigid on her feet, "you're drinking her blood now?"

Malfoy said nothing, the pulse in his jaw offering the only response, along with the sensation of freshly fanned flames that crawled up her neck and nestled into her cheeks. The manor was objectively chilly, and yet she felt as though she were self-immolating.

Theo leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his brows knitting tight. “Consensually, I hope?”

“*Theo*.” Malfoy’s voice was a rumble she felt in each of her stiffened vertebrae.

Theo paid his friend no mind, looking at her with a patient expression. “Hermione?”

“You needn’t answer him,” Malfoy snapped.

She was embarrassed, of course, but only because she hadn’t expected to be confronted with a demand for explanations quite yet. It was still unclear what the development meant, especially not in the long-term—if that was even an option—and she wasn’t prepared to have that conversation with Theodore Nott before she had it with Malfoy. She didn’t really know Theo, nor Blaise, and she hadn’t yet informed her *own* lifelong friends that she had any company at this manor at all, let alone vampiric company, let alone vampiric company that she actively encouraged to feed from her.

On the other hand, she did not want her flush to be misconstrued as embarrassment of the act itself, especially not by Malfoy. She would, apparently, go to great lengths to avoid him thinking that she was having second thoughts about the forming shape of their relationship, whatever it may be. What they were doing was not wrong, and she would not hide; being nourished was nothing to be ashamed of, and he needed to know that. So, she took a long, steadying breath and met Theo’s eye.

“It was my idea, actually.”

She heard the creak of fabric as Malfoy’s fingers curled around the arms of his chair. Sparing a glance his way informed her that his grey eyes had gone wide and his not-so-pale lips had parted. Theo and Blaise shared an inconspicuous, far-too-knowing look, and she watched Theo’s evil mouth curl higher.

“Really?” he drawled.

“Yes.” She lifted her chin. “It’s...healthier.”

“Clearly,” Blaise muttered.

Malfoy cleared his throat. “Alright, enough.”

“Listen, we’re just pleased to see you looking so alive,” Theo said with a grin that showed just a few too many teeth.

“You’re only pleased to have something new to gossip about,” said Malfoy, rolling his eyes.

“No offence, mate, but we don’t just sit around talking about you all day.”

“Had me fooled.”

“What about him?” Theo was looking at Hermione again now. She let herself fall back into a vacant chair, trying to keep up with them. “Does he lament about us every morning, noon, and night?”

Malfoy shot her a glare that told her, under no uncertain terms, that he did not wish for her to entertain Theo's ribbing. She, however, thoroughly enjoyed pressing his buttons.

"Constantly," she said, trying not to laugh when Malfoy's stare hardened. "Difficult to get him to shut up."

Blaise hummed. "I'm sure you've found a way..."

"*Blaise—*"

"We don't care which bird you're draining, prick."

There was a real bite to his words; a genuine hurt between friends who'd been kept at arm's length, paired with the warmth that could only be offered by friends who'd seen you at your worst and turned up anyway, chimp's blood in hand.

"I care," Theo sniped playfully, reaching over to pat the top of her hand. She rolled her lips together, determined to cage her growing amusement. "How is it?"

"The..."

"Biting, fangs, blood sucking, you know." His eyes sparkled with mischief. "What does it feel like? I imagine it would be—"

"Theo," Malfoy sighed, but it was the following sound that had all three of their heads turning towards him in one, unified movement. A chuckle, deep and true, escaping without prudence. "Don't harass her."

Theo gaped, Blaise smiled into the rim of his glass, and Hermione felt like she was swallowing lead.

"Alright," Theo began, to the sound of Malfoy's knowing groan, "*that* was weird."

"There does appear to be something odd happening to your mouth," Blaise agreed.

"Do shut up, both of you."

But they didn't; they continued to taunt and chaff each other, every jab landing with a distinct softness. Hermione's chest panged for Harry and Ron; she wanted them to be here too, to laugh and joke and invite them into the oddities of her current life, to know what they thought of it, of *her*. Watching Malfoy try his hardest not to let on quite how happy he was for their company reminded her of the many nights she'd spent withholding her laughs at Ron's poorly delivered jokes, or the many eye-rolls she'd thrown Harry's way in their teenage common room. She couldn't remember ever seeing Malfoy act like this with Crabbe and Goyle; then again, she could not imagine Theo or Blaise allowing Malfoy to boss them around the same way he had so many others.

The thought of him even attempting it had a low chortle tumbling from her lips.

"What's so funny, Golden Girl?" Theo asked.

She lifted one shoulder. "It's just...you've all been friends a while, then? Since first year?"

"Long before that, unfortunately," Theo corrected, Blaise nodding solemnly at his side. "That blonde prat was chasing us around these halls as soon as we could walk."

"That's not quite how I remember it," Malfoy mumbled.

"Yeah, you wouldn't, would you?"

The conversation delved into further bickering, followed by retellings of stories from their childhood, which were posh and proper and wrapped with wealth in ways her own could not compare to. She'd been fortunate, growing up with two well-off parents who'd managed to acquire the rare combination of well-paying jobs and a flexible schedule, but it all paled beside the ornate display of this manor, to the natural way they spoke of etiquette lessons and language tutors. There was a charm to it, an undeniable boyhood that shone through every offered story, a deep affection with which they spoke about stealing from the apple orchard, playing hide and seek in the gardens, or running from the house elves.

"They never did catch us in the south passage," Blaise sighed.

Hermione's interest piqued. "The south passage?"

"Oh, Granger." Theo's lopsided smile was indulgent. "There's a whole system of passageways behind these walls."

Malfoy went still as stone in his chair, and a small question started to sprout in the back of Hermione's mind; one she'd been avoiding for a while, one she likely already knew the answer to, and had simply pretended not to.

"Are they a secret?"

Theo grinned. "Most things here are."

"And they lead...where, exactly?"

"Wherever you want to go," he answered. "There's more than one way in and out of every room in this—"

"Theodore."

Malfoy's tone was cutting enough to make Theo frown, serious enough to make him stop, and guilty enough to confirm her suspicions. She sat back in her chair, mulling it over in contemplative silence, aware of Malfoy's cautious gaze boring into the side of her head.

The walls *were* watching, after all.

Feeling bolstered and foolishly defiant, she twisted her head to meet Malfoy's eye, and he knew right then and there that she'd caught him. His grip on his chair tightened impossibly until she could see the threads of fabric splitting under his fingers.

Theo and Blaise remained at the manor only until their drinks were done; then, perhaps sensing the increasing tension in the room, they bid their farewells and made to leave. Malfoy did not see them out as he had before, calling instead for Femur to escort them, ignoring Theo's whined protest that a chaperone was not necessary. Hermione stood to hug them both, not flinching this time when Theo planted a kiss on her rounded cheek. Through it all, her eyes stayed on Malfoy, and his stayed on her.

Finally alone, in a grand room meant to host a hundred, she turned her chair to face his and lowered back into it. Malfoy did not move from his, nor did he blink; the pair of them facing off in their corner of the room, the overhead chandeliers casting their vacant faces in an orange glow and morphing shadows. In the end, it was Hermione who spoke first, as she knew it would be.

"You've been watching me."

It was not a question, certainly not something for him to try and dispute. *Honesty*, that's what they had given each other, and she would be disappointed if he opted to present as anything other than candid now. Luckily, he did not; he swallowed thickly, appeared momentarily nervous, and let his eyes drop to his lap—she thought he might have even blushed.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You observed me, I observed you."

She nodded, accepting, but not truly understanding. "*Why?*"

His eyes lifted to the high ceiling as he drummed his fingers along his thigh, like he was weighing up the lie on his tongue and decided he hated the taste. When he met her eye again, she was struck by the intensity of it, by all the colours to be found within it.

"Because I wanted you," he said, unwavering. "I wanted you from the moment you stepped through the door. It is *maddening*...the scent of your blood, the sound of it..." Absently, she reached up to touch her neck. "I'm sorry."

"Are you?" Hermione watched him carefully, remembering the many breaths she'd felt drift across the back of her neck, the many eyes she'd felt follow her movements through the library, the figures in the shadows that could only be him, the sound of turning pages she'd never touched, the echoed rumble of groans she'd never made, the crimson-coated dreams that—she gasped, covered her lips with her fingertips. "When I was in the bath..."

He closed his eyes tightly and exhaled a low, "Fuck."

"I dreamt I was choking on...that I..." She shook her head in disbelief. "It was *you*, wasn't it? You were there?"

"The water made your blood so warm," he murmured.

“I’ve been having dreams,” she said, heart in her throat. “They feel so real, and you are there...you’re always there, and—”

“I have them too,” he said, sounding strained.

“That day in the bath was the first time I felt it. Your...”

“Sickness?”

“*Hunger.*” She frowned at him. “You were starving.”

“I was,” he said quietly, knuckles bleaching around the armrests. “You didn’t help. I had to feed immediately, otherwise I might have—”

“Gone for me?”

Guilt flashed in his eyes like passing stars. “I’m not sure.”

“You wouldn’t have.”

“I might have, you don’t know—”

“But I do,” she cut in. “You had me bleeding under your teeth only a few hours later, and you didn’t bite me.”

He grimaced. “I’d already fed by then. Only a little, but it was...enough.”

The memory of him in the woods was still so clear; she saw it play out every time she blinked, the back of her eyelids projecting visions of his heaving shoulders, the way his hands had clawed at the leaf-covered earth as he violently vomited. Was that what he’d done that night? Was that why he’d looked so dishevelled, so inhuman, when he’d appeared at the end of that shadowed hallway? How many hours had he spent in the dew, curled in on himself, trying to hold in a meal his body sought to reject?

“Was it a stag?”

“A doe,” he said. “It was reckless to hunt with you in such proximity, but it seemed like a good idea to have a supply on hand. I was dragging it through the hallway—”

“When Will spotted you.”

He nodded calmly, in direct opposition to her rapid heartbeat; he surely knew it, could surely hear it, but she didn’t mind, and from the way his shoulders lowered from his ears, neither did he.

“He was a nosy little prick,” he grumbled.

She tisked. “Don’t blame him for doing his job.”

“I don’t, it was my fault. After you returned, I ensured my feedings were strictly confined to the forest,” there was a lucid spark in his eyes, “but you followed me out there anyway.”

“Don’t be a hypocrite. *You* followed *me* around for days inside the bloody walls. I thought I was going mad,” she said, and he held his palms up in surrender. “Surely, that makes us even.”

“Not even close. I watched you intimately,” he argued, looking slightly anguished—she could not tell if it was with guilt or desire. “You should hate me.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Hmm, maybe I should.”

Before he could say another word, she pushed up from the chair and walked, so very slowly, across the Versailles flooring. He widened his legs as she approached, making room for her to step into his space, and she did, placing her hands on his shoulders, his long fingers wrapping around her wrists to keep her there. A sigh escaped his lips, grey eyes turning glossy as they peered up at her, yet the intensity was still there, the unfettered power that hummed under his skin. His pupils swallowed irises, his fangs slipped free, sharp and wanton. He was the perfect mix of needy and knowing, and she relished how formidable she felt, knowing it was her palms he shuddered under.

“I don’t, though,” she whispered.

“Good.”

He was up in a flash, lifting and guiding her legs to hook around his waist, his hands splaying wide under the curve of her arse. She kissed him, unrestrained, tongue meeting his in a dizzying waltz that had a breathless moan emitting from the back of her throat. He moved them, and she didn’t care where, not until he lowered her to the loveseat and pressed his large, commanding body over hers. He hadn’t fed in a while, and the coolness of his skin served as a relief against her blistering flesh. His perfect mouth ran along the line of her jaw, lips curling back to let the sharp points of his teeth scrape at her sensitive skin, pulling a full-body shiver from her. When she reached for his shirt, desperate to feel more of him, he clasped both of her hands in one of his and held them back, giving a slow, animalistic shake of his head.

“You’re not mad that I’ve been watching?” he asked roughly.

“No...”

“No...do you *like* it?” She nodded, and his mouth twitched. “Then let me watch.”

His grip still firm, he leisurely guided her hands to her inner thighs and let go. Her eyes widened in understanding; she knew exactly what he wanted, what he was demanding, and with him sitting there on his knees, his eyes dark and craving, there was nothing on earth that could compel her to deny him. She sat up, peeled her shirt off with deliberately lingering motions, biting back a smile at the sound of his hitched breath.

Hermione left her plain black bra on display—it was nothing showy, certainly nothing seductive, but he growled a low curse at the sight of it all the same. The sound was not unfamiliar; she'd heard it before in the library, echoing and reverberating through the old wooden beams, and now, finally, she could place it. The knowledge gave her pause, gave her *power*, and she smiled.

“Keep going,” he ordered.

She shifted to shed her jeans next, sliding them down the length of her legs and kicking them away, not caring at all for where they landed. It was odd, being so exposed while he remained so covered, being bared to the biting cold while he retained warmth. Yet, she felt mighty; he was right there, this magnificent, dark creature, on his knees before her, his hands curled and his chest puffing wide. He *wanted* her, and that filled her with enough warmth to oust even the manor's bitter chill.

Her pants came off next, and when she was finally bare, her core already clenching with anticipation, she sat back and spread her legs for him to see. Immediately, his head dropped forward on a ragged exhale.

“You're so...”

“Wet?” she breathed, pressing the tips of her fingers to the liquid heat. “I am. For you.”

Malfoy swallowed, and it was audible, intent and focused and unabashed. The first brush of her clit had her gasping, her back arching, her thighs tensing, and she loved every second of his stricken desire, the way he hissed under his breath, the way his hands raised as if to touch her before he forced them back down. Her fingers danced, and her pulse kept tempo. She closed her eyes and dropped her head against the cushions, not caring for how her arousal would ruin the upholstery.

“Keep your eyes open,” he commanded.

Far be it from her to resist him, she pried her eyes open to find him wearing a pleased expression—god, maybe it was wrong, maybe it meant there was something archaic and passe within her, but she loved knowing he was pleased with her, loved doing as he asked, loved feeling like she'd done a good job. He muttered words of beautiful, brutal praise. A broken soliloquy about her wet, perfect, *swollen* cunt. When his eyes lifted to meet hers, they were lost to the shadows, dense matter swallowing light, black holes that pulled her closer.

“Two fingers.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “Two?”

Lazily, his lips curled into a louche smirk. “You can take more than that.”

“I know,” she whined.

Not a second later, she hooked two fingers inside herself, keeping her thumb pressing down on her almost-pulsing clit, and dragged them in and out. At first, each pump was soft, a

gentle stretch to her soaked cunt, then she curled her fingers and let them find the pinpoint of her pleasure, moaning deeply when she reached it. It was impossible to know if her pleasure was coming from her hand or the wild look on his face; it was like it had been in the hallway, in the forest, when she'd cut her hand...and yet, nothing at all like it.

Just as total, just as consuming, but somehow entirely different.

"Faster," he ordered, and she obeyed, pressing in harder. "So good. Such a good listener. Always were, weren't you?"

There wasn't much in it; she could feel herself reaching the peak, her orgasm building hot and fast. Her thighs clenched, her jaw fell slack, and she was so close, so nearly—

"Stop."

Hermione blew out a frustrated laugh, which sounded decidedly more like a whimper, but did as she was told. Malfoy's returning chuckle felt especially cruel and especially brilliant.

"Take your fingers out." She did, the wet sound a sinful, irrefutable thing. "Lick them clean."

Without hesitation, she opened her mouth and pressed her glistening fingers upon her tongue; it was a bitter taste, but there was a warring sweetness. Finally, Malfoy leaned closer and let his hands curl around her ankles, holding her open for his assessment.

"How do you taste?" he asked, hardly more than a whisper.

She moaned around her fingers, sucking them clean, smiling around the digits.

"Good," she said. Malfoy swallowed in return, his eyes dropping to her collar, and she knew that look, felt the need for it building at the base of her spine, in the dip of her throat. Her pulse hammered in her neck, and she used her freshly cleaned fingers to brush her hair back from her shoulder, exposing the area she knew he needed. "Are you going to bite me now?"

It looked painful for him to respond, but heroically, he managed.

"No." His hands travelled up her calves, over her knees, down her shaking thighs, and pushed her legs wider. "That's not what this is about."

Hermione let out a keening sound, a cry for something unnamed, unthinkable, and she wasn't the slightest bit ashamed. If it wasn't about feeding, then that made this about *them*—she wasn't sure what it truly meant, but she wanted it.

"Aren't you hungry?"

His mouth parted, breath hot against her flesh. "Ravenous."

The first press of his tongue to her core had a bolt of electricity shooting up her spine. He swirled his tongue over her clit, his low groan drowned by one of her own. He made quick work of it, and she was so close already; all it took was a few rough laps to push her over the edge. She cried out, coming so violently that her vision blurred, gripping his hair harder than

she should have, writhing against his mouth, losing herself in the midnight gleam of his eyes; flecks of silver stars acting as her tether.

When she settled, breath still coming in long, drawn-out inhales, he let go of her legs and leaned back on his heels. She could see a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth and wondered if it was hers or his, but then he licked his lips, hummed happily, and she decided she didn't care.

"Bliss," he murmured.

Hermione threw her arm over her eyes and laughed loudly into the frigid air. She felt his forehead come to rest against her knee, felt his shoulders shake with his own quiet, unpractised laughter.

Bliss, she thought.



The water was fresh that morning, the first break of the surface belonging to her, every rolling wave bringing her further to consciousness. Her body felt different as she pushed through the water; aching and used, somehow stronger despite the frequent draining and replenishing of her vital fluid. She swam with renewed purpose, letting her limbs move on instinct, trusting them now that she knew just how capable they were.

Malfoy was a diligent lover, fucking and feeding her with equal care. She could feel the effects of it in every raw muscle. Yet, she moved forward, arms stretching out to push the water aside, to pull her body through, as her mind rolled like the ripples left in her wake.

She thought about the vampires at the facility, who'd been making significant strides in recent days; the newer vampires finally beginning to show signs the older ones had long ago passed—denying blood, leaving blood behind, getting a semi-reasonable amount of sleep, being capable of holding two-way conversations, unshielded interactions with the nursing staff or with Hermione and Nico when they performed their rounds. Progress was slow, but she reminded herself that it *was* still progress.

Most of her time was still dedicated to the deviously dilapidated manor, searching and sorting through the library with increasing impatience. She wanted to know, to be sure, that her endeavour was not, as Malfoy had suggested, utterly pointless. Beyond that, she was anxious for what would come next. What would happen if she found it? What would happen if she didn't, and there was no reason to stay?

It had only been a short few weeks, yet she could not imagine Malfoy going back to draining stags in the moonlit forest, creeping through the overgrowth in the dead of night, cold and alone and sick in his isolation. Neither could she imagine herself allowing such a regression; it wasn't just about him, it was about her, too. She wanted this, wanted him, wanted to keep feeling the way she did now. The aches and pains in her body were a welcome reminder of her vitality. Waking up with her cheek against his chest, the steady thump of his heart loud in her ear, was a precious reminder of his.

The line was blurring between them, and she wanted to see how distorted, how indistinguishable, it would get...but how?

What would Harry and Ron say? Would their disapproval matter? No—Malfoy wasn't even the same species that he'd been at school, let alone the same *person*. Besides, for as much as she valued their good opinions, they were not her own. They cared about her, and so they would deal with it. *With what?* A small, unwelcome voice probed. *What do you want to tell them?*

A sit-down meal, hosted in the candlelit parlour of a neglected manor. Malfoy sits at the head of the table, Hermione at the other end, and Ron and Harry between them. The tension is palpable, can be tasted in the air each time she opens her mouth to speak. Words escape her until finally they don't. She tells them the whole truth, every blood-soaked part of it, and watches them gape in horror.

Ron flips his plate, Harry draws his wand, Malfoy bares his fangs, and Hermione...she shouts so loudly that her voice cracks, the emotion too thick, too prevalent, to set aside. It's enough to stun them, to strike shame into their guts, to wrestle them back into their dining chairs. Questions follow, as do answers, and after a while, the shock wears off. She talks, they listen, and by the end of the night, they can admit that she seems happy. That is all they'd ever really wanted for her, after all.

They return a week later and engage in a tense but civil reintroduction with Malfoy. There are apologies for childhood misdeeds, tentative discussions about old ideals and current politics, and from it all, a seed begins to grow.

One day, in the distant future, she will take Malfoy for a Sunday at The Burrow, her hand in his, her heart too. Harry will hand over James to Malfoy, who will hook the boy on his hip and speak in secrets. Hermione will watch, a new desire brewing at the sight of him. Ron will challenge him to a game of chess, and Hermione will offer unsolicited advice that Malfoy will refuse to heed. The sun will shine through the window, catching on the jewel adorning her finger. In hushed tones, far from the gathering crowd, she will loop her arms around the shoulders of her oldest friends and thank them.

Hermione shakes off the inappropriate, impossible thought; she was getting ahead of herself. With a kick off the wall, she began another lap, letting her head dip under the water and

shifting from a breaststroke into a front crawl, exertion pulsing through her extremities. It was good; the pain left little room for anything else.

Yet, with what little space her mind still had to question, it found a way. Would her ties to Malfoy affect her job? Did she care? Did she want to live in the library of his manor forever? No, that would be ridiculous and uncomfortable. The library was too spacious, too uncompromising. The south bedroom, however...

With time and attention, the manor is resurrected. Still made of the same old lines she'd come to appreciate, still the same alcoves and coffered ceilings, but the light seeps through the uncovered windows, painted glass litters the rooms with hues of magenta, of sapphire, of gold. They set up permanent residence in the south bedroom; never a question as to whether they shall rest together, just an understanding that they always, always will. Her things are there, as are his. She wakes to his body wrapped around hers, sighs when his sleepy hands roam over her breasts, goes slack as his early need presses into her.

They fix the garden, watch the petals unfurl the same way they bloom for each other, water and nurture the grounds to life again. Hermione dedicates herself to skills she couldn't have known would be a part of her future. Tibia teaches her to cook, Femur helps her clean, together, they turn the library into a welcoming place—it's teeth sheathed. Cats sleep on velvet armchairs, fires roar in gated hearths, the soft pitter-patter of tiny feet echoes through the sunkissed hallways.

Hermione pushed hard off the tiled wall, the impact collecting in the cartilage of her knees. Her laps came faster, sloppier, and her thoughts followed suit. What might Malfoy say about all this if she just asked him? Candour is what they shared, honestly unburdened by the fear of shame. Perhaps it would be safe, perhaps it would even be encouraged, for her to voice these thoughts. He might not even run away; he might stay with her and clasp her hands between his, sharing his own visions for the future. Would she be a part of them? Would he... want the same things she did?

Her heart raced with the possibilities, the water danced across her back, and her mind sank further into its enveloping embrace.

A smile follows her confession, a flash of glinting fangs, a bending of his spine, a gentle kiss below the ear. His lips, curled and caressing, confirm that yes, yes, it is the two of them now.

Hermione swam back and forth and back again until she could swim no longer. Only when her body physically refused to move another inch did she relent to its demands. Exhausted, she rinsed herself off and re-dressed, leaving behind the Muggle sports centre with shuffled,

painful steps in search of the apparition point. Once there, she thought of home and turned on her heel, the familiar fold of the world pulling her through the eye of a needle.

She tried not to dwell on the fact that she'd asked for *home* and landed at the foot of the manor.



“I can’t believe these have been here the whole time,” she huffed, squeezing between two snapped halves of a garden bench.

After a morning of relentless scouring in vain, Hermione had swung her boot into the emptied bookshelf, flinching when the wood bit back with splintered missiles. When she’d sworn loudly enough for the library to return it, Malfoy had appeared seemingly out of thin air. He’d stepped up to her, gingerly lifting his hand to trace the furrowed lines of her forehead and smooth them out.

When she’d asked him how he’d arrived so unseen, he’d merely tilted his chin towards the walls.

That’s how she found herself here, now, tripping over her feet to keep up with Malfoy’s long strides, unable to walk beside him in the unlit, overpacked, dust-collected passageways that—if Theo were to be believed—ran throughout the whole manor. The walls were bare stone, carved crudely and unsoftened by touch. Their footsteps parroted, echoing down long, narrow passages she could not see the end of; there were no candles to light their way, no flames to dance across the shadows and reveal their secrets, only the blue light of their dimly lit wands.

Malfoy held his like it was a weighted, foreign object, and she wondered if, after such a complete biological overhaul, he even still considered himself a Wizard. It had been, without question, his highest point of pride—and superiority—in his youth, in *their* youth. Perhaps his metamorphosis into creaturehood had not only stripped him of his family and his arrogance, but also his connection to magic. She wanted to ask, to pry off the scab of his wounds and see how violently they still bled, but this inky, howling passageway was not the place for it.

The walls were narrow, the curved ceiling lower than what she’d become accustomed to, her robes caught on discarded furnishings and vacant crested picture frames. All she could do was fixate on Malfoy before her and match his steps. His presence was so...undeniable, their proximity so consuming, even here. When Hermione tripped over her feet, his wide palm stretched across her stomach to steady her. She looked up to thank him, the words dying on her tongue when she noticed how brilliantly his eyes still shone, even in shadows.

Memories of their morning together flooded her mind; his teeth in her shoulder, pulling mouthful after mouthful of hot blood while he fucked her from behind, one arm around her torso, one around her neck, relentless in his pursuit of their shared appetites.

Malfoy ducked his head to level with her, mouth twisting like he could hear her every thought, feel every wave of desire as if it were his own. “You still with me, Granger?”

“Yes.” She blinked rapidly. “Sorry.”

He did not let go of her as they continued walking, one hand reaching behind to hold her wrist, a low grunt of warning whenever a stray chair leg would catch his foot. She was too fixated on the expanse of his back, on the hot, earthy smell of him, to pay much attention to their constricted surroundings. He seemed so spry compared to how he’d been only a handful of weeks prior, and she could only chalk it down to his radical change in diet. It begged the question, however...

“When I worked on the emergency ward, our senior healer was a vegan,” she began. Malfoy tossed a passing glance over his shoulder, one inquisitive brow arching, subtle humour playing in the corners of his eyes. “Hadn’t touched dairy for eight years. Then, one day, we were coming off a fourteen-hour shift—”

“Those *exist*?”

“Of course they do.” She frowned, he grimaced, and she resisted the overwhelming urge to roll her eyes. “Anyway, the point is, it was a *hard* night. We’d encountered several failures with routine procedures and a particularly stubborn bone curse. Everyone was dead on their feet, so we stopped for a pot of tea in the staff room before we clocked off. Just needed a minute to decompress, you know? He was so out of it that he picked up *my* mug and drank the whole thing before realising it wasn’t oat milk.”

“Right...”

“He had a terrible stomach ache for days, irregular bowel movements, cramps...it was a whole ordeal.”

Malfoy nodded sharply. “Vivid.”

“Yes,” she mused, “it was.”

His movement halted abruptly, the echo of his footsteps fading as they carried down the disilluminated passage. When he turned to her, they ended up chest-to-chest, and she made no move to step back.

“Was there a point to that story?” he patiently asked.

Hermione narrowed her eyes, unsure if his obliviousness was willful. “I’m asking if you’ve had a stomach ache or irregular bowel movements.”

Malfoy’s expression was unreadable, but then it cracked, his hand letting go of her wrist to press across his eyes, a slow exhale that could have been mistaken for a laugh blowing out of

his parted, twisted lips. “Are you supposed to be the milk in this scenario?”

“I thought it was a fairly clear anecdote.”

“Merlin and Mother Morgana,” he sighed, shaking his head in disbelief, like he knew how ridiculous it all sounded. “You are not *milk*, you are...wagyu steak.”

She bit down on her bottom lip, determined not to laugh at him, at herself. His chest rattled against hers with the same smothered amusement, and the feeling went straight to her stomach, to the base of her spine; hot and liquid and luxurious.

“That shouldn’t turn me on,” she whispered.

“No, it shouldn’t.”

“I’m essentially your dinner.”

His gaze dropped to her mouth. “And lunch, if I’m lucky.”

“I’ve never considered my own nutritional value before now,” she said, breathless.

“You have all kinds of value,” he replied, turning away before she could do something unadvisable, like drop to her knees and beg to taste him in this confined space. When he spoke again, there was a thick sincerity in his tone; an honest search for the truth. “Are you scared?”

“No.” He was not looking, but she smiled anyway. “I’m thrilled.”

His returning hum was low, lost to the recaught echo of their footsteps on stone. They turned corners, avoided sharp edges, breathed in an unhealthy amount of dust; eventually, she had to cover her nose and mouth with the palm of her hand. Noticing, Malfoy fished a handkerchief from his pocket and passed it back to her, and she might have mocked him for having a handkerchief at all if she were not overwhelmingly grateful for it.

They passed broken spires and splintered wood, all posing hazards that had her reminiscing about watching *Casualty* with her mother on weeknights, the promise of infection sitting on the sharpened tip of every snapped chair leg. It was, she decided, not an appropriate place for young, soft-skinned children to be running amok.

“This cannot have been safe.”

“Hmm?”

“For you to run through as children.”

“It wasn’t,” he admitted, throwing her a sad, contrite smile. “My mother used to clip us around the ears for it.”

His voice broke at the mention of his mother, and he turned his head to the side. Not fast enough, though, for she could see the emotion he blinked back, could remember every word

he'd given her after their night in the forest; his trembling admission, his stricken retelling. Her hands itched to reach out and touch him, but she did not, somehow *knowing* that the comfort he needed was not physical—not yet.

“You don’t like talking about her?”

His throat worked. “I don’t have a right to.”

“Of course you do, she was your mother.”

Something hardened in his face, in his tone, in the entire length of his body. “She was also my victim.”

“No, that’s—that wasn’t your—” She released a frustrated sound, forced it through gritted teeth, because she was such a *fucking hypocrite*, was she not, when she could barely even *think* of her own parents without wallowing in guilt? The one silver lining, she acquiesced, was that if she could not *deny*, she could at least *relate*. “It’s not the same, not really, but...I know how you feel.”

He looked back at her then, and his shoulders did not lower, but his expression softened. “You do?”

“Yes, I—” Hermione cleared her throat, determined to remain honest, to be brave; he had shared, it was only fair that she extend the same vulnerability. “I obliterated my parents during the war. Essentially robbed them of the lives and the family they’d worked so hard to build, made them leave their jobs and their friends and the home they’d only just paid off the mortgage for, then sent them to live out the rest of their days in Australia.”

For a minute, there was only silence. Even the hollow whistle of the wind fell quiet in the face of her confession, but Malfoy—straight-faced, repressed Malfoy—inhaled slowly and let his waterlines fill with glimmering tears; glassy and unshed.

“I didn’t know you did that,” he whispered.

“Why would you?”

“I didn’t ask.”

She reached for his hand, holding it between both of hers, the time for touch having arrived, and asked again, gentler now, “Why would you?”

Malfoy dipped his chin. “I’m sorry that you had to do that.”

“And I’m sorry for what happened to you *and* your mother.”

They looked at each other through the penumbra, silent assurances that they were seen in the dark, understood in it, accepted in it, beloved despite it. Then he pulled her close, buried his face in her neck and breathed slowly, laboured inhaled and exhaled that danced across her skin. Her arms banded around his waist and locked there, unwilling to pry herself free of his commanding shape. They held each other in the dusty, dim passageway; his face in her

throat, his palm cupping the back of her head. When he raised his head to speak, it was only a low murmur against her temple.

“For so long...I’ve been more creature than man. It felt like I died that day with her.” His lips drifted to her cheekbones, trailing half-kisses on the peaks, and her eyes fluttered closed of their own volition. “But with you, I feel more alive than ever before.”

She sank into him, sighing as his mouth brushed along the line of her jaw, smiling at the shudder the sound pulled from him. “That’s because you are finally well fed.”

“Hmm.” The vibration of his voice could be felt in her lungs. “In more ways than one.”

Slowly, his fingers curled into her hair and tugged, tipping her head back and giving her no choice but to meet his eye. His lips brushed lightly against hers; not filthy enough to be a kiss, not modest enough to be anything else.

Hermione’s breath hitched when his hand lifted to her throat, thumb pressing directly on her windpipe, tilting her back further. She surrendered to it, relished in the knowledge that he could so easily kill her, but never would—the utter contentment to relinquish control made her smile. When he bent forward to press a chaste kiss to where his thumb had just been, she let out a soft moan.

“That’s just cruel,” he chuckled.

“What—”

He swallowed the question with a kiss, stealing it from her tongue with a brush of his own, biting it from her mouth with the sharp prick of his fangs. She loved it, *loved* it, wanted more of it, to take everything he had to give her. Malfoy pushed her backwards, holding her head when her back met the rough wall with a hard slam. She laughed as dust descended over their shoulders, burying her face into his shoulder to cough, which is when she saw it.

His wand, still lit, now half-tucked into his back pocket, coated the opposing wall in hues of blue. Hermione felt her heart rocket into her throat, for the disturbed dust had revealed the unmistakable outline of a door.

“Wait,” she gasped. “Stop.”

Malfoy released her and stepped back instantly, his face a portrait of worry, before he followed her line of sight and stiffened. Brushing past him, she made straight for the door, and she was perfectly willing to throw her weight into it until it gave way, but a strong hand wrapped around her bicep and pulled her to a stop. The look Malfoy shot her was warning at best and furious at worst. He ensured she was slotted securely behind him before he stepped up to the door.

It was rusted shut, but it meant nothing to Malfoy, whose inhuman strength was a blessed relief; it didn’t even take him more than three seconds to rip it open. They recoiled in unison, coughing and waving their hands to clear the dust from their throats, Hermione pressing his handkerchief to her mouth and feeling grateful for his absurd, Victorian upbringing. The

room was small, better described as a storage cupboard, and almost completely vacant, except for the trunk sitting in the centre of the floor.

Hermione dropped the handkerchief and knelt, greedy, futile hands trying to pry the lid open. Dust kicked up with every rattle, tearing chesty coughs from her throat. Malfoy's hands were on her shoulders right away, lifting her to her feet with startling ease.

"Alright," he grunted, "let's get you out of here."

She reached for the trunk again. "But this could—"

"It's coming with us."

Hermione relaxed, leading the way back through the long passageway while Malfoy dragged the trunk along the stone floor behind them. Motivated by potential discovery, her feet moved at double-time, hopping over hazards without so much as a second thought, her wand bright in front of her face. When they emerged in the library—the abundance of space a welcome relief—she didn't hesitate to turn her wand on the trunk.

"Alohamora," she said clearly, her excitement wilting when the lock didn't budge. She cleared her throat and tried again, "*Alohamora*."

Malfoy clicked his tongue in a fond scorn, then rolled his sleeves to his elbows, sucked in a deep breath, and tore the lid clean off with one hand. Hermione gaped, glancing between him and the nearly-shattered trunk in astonishment.

"That looked antique," she said mildly.

"Probably was." He gestured for her to look closer. "Go on then, Usurper, invade."

There was no need to tell her twice; Hermione dropped to the floor and dove in, thrill igniting her blood into something volcanic at the sight of books, all ancient, all leather-bound, all knife-carved. She checked and piled them, just as she'd been doing every day for the last few weeks. Some were in English, most were not, and right in the middle of the second stack, she found something that left her hands trembling.

A book, covered in geometric diamond shapes connected by lines; a thick tome that weighed like a brick. She couldn't breathe, not for long, stretched moments as she turned the book over and read the spine—the gold leaf had worn away, leaving behind only its beveling. Hermione jumped to her feet, startling her watchful companion, and hurried to the nearest candle to inspect the spine under better lighting. It was right there, as she'd suspected, as she'd hoped: *Casele Cechilor Vampiri*.

Unsteady fingers flipped through the pages, as thin and translucent as a layer of onion skin. It was all in Czech, so she tapped her wand to the pages and giggled with unrelenting glee when the words translated into ones she recognised: *blood, sire, vampyre*. Every page was dense, every word handwritten; she wanted to know what kind of quill they'd used to pen this, what materials the ink was made from. Her head spun, she felt dizzy, unmoored, unbound by

gravity. When she faltered, stumbling back from the book and right into the front of Malfoy's broad chest, his hands caught on her hips.

"Hermione," he asked softly, and—*oh*, wasn't that a lovely sound? "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she said, voice laced with barely restrained jubilation. "I... that's it."

Malfoy's eyes snapped to the book. "That's it?"

"That's *it*," she confirmed, grin splitting wide.

She turned on her heel to throw her arms around his neck, laughing almost maniacally, and kissed him. Because she was happy, because she was accomplished, because he called her Hermione, because she *wanted* to, because she, too, had never felt quite so alive.

It was just a moment, a flicker in time that would pass like a star across the midnight sky, but it felt like one that could last forever if she let it, and she just might.

Chapter End Notes

Do I think this chapter is good? Not especially. Do I care? Not especially. We are here to BITE and have FUN!

Thank you to Miagas, who had rich pickings for things to call my cooter in the doc this time, for being the best guy around:

[Miagas](#)

Chapter 10: Must feed thy livid living corse:

Chapter Notes

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

The days, which oscillated between a slow crawl and a breathless sprint depending on whether she was scouring a malicious manor or discovering all the ways she could drive its master to the brink, now seemed to pass without much notice. Hermione skipped her morning swims, skipped breakfast altogether, in favour of burying her nose in the blessedly located book. Morning bled into afternoon, afternoon into evening, without her once thinking to look up. Days, nights, all lost to the onion-skin thin pages and the history they held. Meals forgotten, clothing unchanged, the bitter bite of the manor's chill unnoticed while her eyes scanned the curved, almost indecipherable penmanship.

Malfoy was, as always, a diligent caretaker; when she skipped meals, he brought them to her and ensured she ate them; when her body grew heavy in the deep-backed armchair, he carried her to bed; when she hadn't moved in hours, he ran her a bath and helped her into it. Hermione would have, in any other circumstance, lavished in his unwavering attention, were her own not so diluted by the wealth of knowledge to be found within the leather binding.

It wasn't until that morning, so early that the moon still held court in the breaking twilight and shadows still coated her satin-wrapped body and the birds had not begun their song, that the shift of Malfoy's body had finally pulled her from her hyper-focus.

Her eyes opened slowly, sleep collecting in her canthus, to find his pale, disarming form peeling free from the bed they'd begun to share nightly. Hermione reached for him, immediately cold and void in his absence. He stood in naked splendour and bathed in faint light from an unbruised sky.

"Where are you going?" she asked, her voice cracking with its first words of the day—maybe multiple days, she couldn't be sure.

Malfoy stilled, exhaled slowly, and looked over his shoulder. Her gaze narrowed on the purpled circles around his stormy eyes, the muted fragility of his skin; he'd not looked so hollow in weeks, certainly not since—

She sat up.

"You need to feed," she said. His nod was subtle, almost guilty, and her chest shook with it. "Were you going out to hunt?"

At the sight of his dipped chin, Hermione brought her knees to her chest and let her forehead meet them, a culpable whine emitting from her parted lips. He did not move, neither towards her nor away, and her self-disdain grew tenfold.

"It's been days, hasn't it?" she groaned. "Why didn't you remind me?"

His lip curled. “You’ve given me plenty already, and I didn’t want to disturb—”

“No, Malfoy.”

She shuffled up the bed, letting the sheets drop to her lap, exposing herself to match him. She clasped her hand around his wrist, but he pulled free instinctively. It stung in a way that could not be masked, and she blinked back the shock of his recoil, tried to swallow the cut to her pride, to spare him of any further guilt. He saw it anyway; his face softened as he reached out to brush his fingertips along her cheekbone, feather-light and close to trembling.

“Sorry, it’s been a while. I’m on edge,” he murmured. “I didn’t trust myself to stay here with you...to touch you for another second without—”

“It doesn’t have to be without.” Hermione sat tall and tilted her head back, letting her hair slip over her shoulders to expose her throat. “You can have it. I want you to have it. All you ever have to do is ask.”

It was as if he’d been waiting to hear those words his whole life, instead of just a few days. In lieu of answering, he moved with haste and pushed her back against the mattress, pinning her there with the delicious weight of his body; he was cold, in the way he had been weeks ago. She should have noticed.

This would happen again; there was no doubt about it. She was too neurotic, and he was too embroiled in self-loathing. They were too new at this, too frightened to disturb it. With time, they would learn, would have spent so long observing each other that he would simply know when she was out of her mind, as she would know when he’d retreated into his.

Carefully, she traced the lines of his tight jaw, soothing it open. “Isn’t this nicer than the woods?”

He hummed—not quite a laugh—and buried the sound into her neck, leaving hot kisses against the curve. All he vied for, she did too. She’d missed him, missed this, felt so foolish for allowing herself to be so swept away. Against her skin, his lips moved, and it wasn’t speech, wasn’t anything she was meant to hear; the word was only meant to be felt.

Please.

“Yes,” she breathed.

There was peace in the puncture of her skin, in the sinking of his teeth into her waiting vein. Here, with him, is where she belonged. She didn’t know for how long, but definitely for right now. He drank slowly, heating his body with every lazy pull. When his strength returned, he pried his mouth away to roll her over, slip his arms around her stomach and pull her back flush to his chest.

Hermione wasn’t sure when his cock slipped inside, but she did know her cunt was already pulsing by the time it did. He bit down again, into the nape of her neck, and fucked her with deliberate slowness.

There was something soft about it, something grateful, and she smiled into the surrounding satin, wanting him to have everything, always.



There was no reason to remain at the manor now that the book had been located, but she bent over backwards to think of a worthy excuse.

“It’s very fragile. I fear it would be unwise to remove it from the library,” she told Malfoy, as if they weren’t both keenly aware that stasis charms existed. “I’ll soon move my things out, if you want, then I’ll just come back to—”

“I do not want,” he replied, quick and mild, with subdued bemusement.

“Oh...what do you—”

“I want you to stay,” he stepped in close, brushed his thumb along the line of her throat, eyes lowered, “for as long as *you* want.”

If he were any other person, she might have thought he was being polite, but Malfoy did not mince his words, nor did he say things he did not mean. He wanted her here, at least for now, so she simply said, “Alright.”

Aware of her penchant for absorption, she resolved to check in with him again soon to see if he needed the life in her veins. Her body thrummed with anticipation at the thought. For now, however, she remained concentrated on the texts.

The book was delicate, made more so by age and lack of handling; the ink had faded over time, but Hermione made use of her magic to restore as much as she could. While the gold leaf had long-ago chipped away, the leather still held the indents of the author's name: *L. Ciobanu*. Upon further research, she found the name to be of Romanian descent, meaning *Shepherd*. Ciobanu appeared to be a descendant of one of the original covens, sparing no details of the rich history of his house.

The old vampiric colonies were, as Professor Lidwig had suggested, once ascended to become the ruling class during the early 1300s in Czechia. Their rule was long and dashed in scarlet, forming one of the first Ministries in international history. To say they ruled with an iron fist would be a severe understatement; vampire attacks and turnings were not just common, they were expected in certain areas, at certain times, for certain folks. Their tyranny and rule-by-fear methods eventually resulted in widespread condemnation and, with the help of a wizard-fronted coup, led to the houses being ousted from the country. Limping and unrooted, the colonies ventured off in search of a new home, eventually setting their sights on

the caves of Transylvania. They hid there until the events of the 1473 World Cup, when their presence became known once more.

The book was not just a comprehensive collection of early vampire history, though; it also served as an explanation for their base natures, and Hermione could not get enough.

First, she read about sire bonds, which were—for want of better wording—entrenched in power dynamics, control, and violence. The great sires of vampiric history were known for making armies of fresh, blood-drunk vampires and bending them to their will. She couldn't help but wonder if this was why Lucius was turned, if this was why Malfoy was turned. Who sired Lucius? Was Baysangur Anzorov's intention to form an army, just not of his own? Perhaps he, too, was acting under the influence of a sire?

Next, her focus shifted to the rituals described in the old texts. Much like her previous research, rituals seemed to be a well-documented part of creature history, not just vampiric, though Ciobanu's focus was exactly what she'd needed to narrow her vision. Each house seemed to be marked by its own symbol, each carried a history of its own rituals. The Ciobanu Coven was, unsurprisingly, the only one given any great detail. Most of their rituals included a great deal of pain and sacrifice, designed for various purposes: coercion, submission, and severance.

It was the final one that sent Hermione curling over the book protectively, that had her calling for her quill and ink pot, that had her hands shaking as she turned the near-translucent pages. The ritual was meant to sever the bonds between vampires and their sires, allowing them to act entirely of their own free will. Naturally, her mind wandered to the vampires still locked in a state-of-the-art facility, and she questioned if it would be possible to free them not just physically, but mentally. Once they discovered the identity of their sire—or *sires*—they may be able to unshackle them from the bind.

There was still the issue of convincing the Wizengamot that the violent tests would not produce violent ends, which was a task in itself.

Finally, Hermione settled into the velvet chaise in the centre of the library and read about blood bonds. They were not new to her, but the depth provided by this first-hand account was invaluable; Ciobanu offered detailed reports on connected parties—sometimes couples, sometimes more than. The overwhelming conclusion was that once a bonded pair had shared blood, it would be impossible to be sated by any other. Whereas the act of drinking blood was intimate but not inherently sexual, blood bonds were different; they went deeper, formed unpryable emotional attachments.

Peering up from the page, for what was likely the first time in hours, Hermione found Malfoy settled into a nearby armchair, reading a fiction book. He was often found by her side these days, ever since she'd cut a line in her palm and held it out in offering. His skin was flushed, his body restored and powerful, his breathing tempered and measured. Her blood thickened at the sight of him, which only resolved to water her suspicions on the bond they shared. The day would come for her to explore those thoughts, this intrinsic pull to him that was, even now, impossible to ignore. She would set it in the sunlight and watch it grow into something fully-formed. For now, while everything was so new, so unknown and precarious, she didn't dare.

When his eyes lifted from his book to catch her staring, he didn't ask why, and she wondered if it was because he did not want to know or if he was just finally content under her observation.



Finding L. Cionabu's book was what she imagined winning the Euro Millions Jackpot felt like. It was physical, historical proof that with proper care and planned guidance, vampires could integrate with *every* aspect of a functioning society, including the political ladder. With this in mind, she found herself almost skipping through the Ministry to reach Kingsley's office for their weekly meeting.

Nico was beyond pleased when it came time for her to present her findings, much to Iwan's disgruntlement. She talked without interruption, handing out her freshly organised notes to everyone at the table, revelling in their appreciative, approving nods. When her presentation was over, and the table was rendered speechless, Kingsley cleared his throat and did what he did best: delegated the necessary tasks to pitch their findings to not only the Wizengamot, but the various stakeholders and Ministry donors. Hermione felt...*excited*, proud, accomplished, on the verge of something defining; her legs bounced under the table, her fingers tapped against her thighs.

She wanted to get home and keep reading.

Nico, however, had other plans. As the task force filtered out of the office, he pulled her aside and asked her to hang back and wait for a clear lift. She obliged, recognising the look in his eyes, the glinting thrill of discovery. Once alone, he wasted no time asking to see the book, and she wasted none offering it to him. He held it in his hands like it was a longsword; checked the weight, the balance, the integrity of the pages, brushed his fingertips along the carved leather and the missing embellishments, brought the pages to his nose and inhaled the decomposing lignin. When he flipped through the pages, his excitement dimmed.

"Gemino?" he asked.

"Yeah, sorry, I couldn't quite get it right. The text is handwritten and the binding is so... *uniquely* antique," she explained with a slight grimace. He looked disheartened, and she didn't like it. This was a momentous occasion, an academic success, a culmination of hours, days, weeks of dedicated searching...he was supposed to be gratified. "The original is so fragile, I didn't want to remove it from the manor, but you could always come there and—"

"I don't think that would be appropriate."

Hermione frowned; he was right, of course, but *he* wasn't supposed to know that. It wouldn't be impossible; she would only need to warn Malfoy in advance. He'd managed to convince the world at large that the manor was deserted, so it would be simple enough for him to shuffle into one of the hidden passageways and hide. As long as he didn't drag a half-drained stag through the hallways, she would have no issues convincing Nico that she'd been alone all this time.

"The owner of that estate and I do not get along," he explained. "I do not imagine he would be particularly pleased to know I ventured onto his property without permission."

"Lucius Malfoy is deceased."

Nico met her eye, a solid, unshakeable stare. "Not Lucius."

Her head was surely spinning atop her neck. As the lift lurched backwards, firing them into the heart of the Ministry, passing floors and departments that all blurred into one, she stumbled for her footing. Did Nico and Malfoy...*know* each other?

"But he is not there," she said.

"*His* presence is not an issue. It is *mine*."

The lift stopped with a sudden jolt, and Hermione had to grip the rail to avoid toppling directly into Nico's side. They stumbled out, his pace steadily even, hers tripped and hurried, as they made their way through the bustling atrium. The line for the floo was long and arduous, for she could not ask Nico for more information without letting on that she had a vested interest in the matter, and she could not ask Malfoy until she found him.

The second her feet hit the familiar stone slabs of the library floor, she was marching, pushing open doors with determination, following the instinctual trail that always seemed to lead her straight to him. He was in the centre of the parlour, sat on the edge of the curved sofa and bent over a chessboard, a rule book open beside him. The curtains were drawn, as they always were, and the chill was biting, as it always was. He looked up as she entered, and she watched a small, almost imperceptible smile form in the corners of his beautiful, un-kissed mouth. It was disarming, only adding to her blooming confusion.

Whatever story her expression told was enough to worry him, for he stood before her in less than a second, scanning her with meticulous silver eyes, his looming body an immediate balm.

"What is it?"

She braced herself. "Do you know a Dr Nico Carlsen?"

He paused, furrowed his shapely brows, tilted his head in a slow, animalistic consideration. His voice was low, merely a murmur, when he replied, "I don't think so, no."

"Well, he claims to know you." She brushed past him, desperate to carve enough space to allow her thoughts to grow. Unsure of what else to do with her hands, she moved a red pawn

to take a white rook, ignoring his displeased grunt. “He made it sound as though you had a rather tumultuous relationship.”

“I was a Death Eater, and son to another. I made plenty of enemies during the war.” His mouth curled devilishly, not with humour, but with...regret? Disgust? “I cannot claim to remember them all.”

Hermione nodded, worrying her lip hard enough that it stung. Malfoy moved to the opposite side of the chessboard and set his knight to D5, trapping her bishop. If she were paying attention, she could have easily taken another pawn, but she was decidedly *not* paying attention; her mind caught in the riptide of her tumbling thoughts. The book, the vampires, the rituals, Nico, Malfoy...who was not *just* a recluse, but an enemy of her inner circle.

Would she have to choose between him and those she loved? Between him and her career? She didn't *want* to—

“Granger, sit down.”

She was pulled into his lap before her tongue could form a protest, her body folding easily against his. Malfoy's fingers were in her hair, brushing it back from her forehead, just like he did when they bathed together. Her eyes fluttered closed, her nose found the crook of his neck, and she pressed herself into him until his scent overwhelmed. There was no reality, no universe, in which she could imagine cleaving herself away from him forever—not even if she had to.

“You're frowning,” he accused.

“Sorry.”

“No, I—” His exhale was sharp, frustrated. “I am not a mind reader. You'll need to actually voice your thoughts.”

“Another myth dismissed,” she sighed. “I'll add it to my notes.”

“*Usurper.*”

“Do you think you'll ever get back out there?”

He stiffened beneath her, body pulling taut, but there was solace to be found in the fact that he did not release her, nor did he rise from the sofa and walk away, as he so often had in the beginning. “I've started to think about it.”

She leaned back, a spark of naive hope catching in her chest, only to be snuffed out at the obvious reluctance in his schooled expression. He ran his thumbs over her ribs; *forgive me*, they said with every stroke.

“I know now that I am capable of control.” His eyes dropped to her throat, and she swallowed. “But crowds are still too variable.”

“I just...” She shook her head, held him tighter. “I wish we could go to Harry’s for dinner, or bicker in the supermarket aisles about how much rice to buy, or go for a walk in the park.”

It was, perhaps, a cruel admission to make, but they’d promised to be honest. He stared at her for a long moment, not bothering to conceal his emotions, letting them swim freely in the stars of his eyes; worry, guilt, fear. She hated herself for putting them there, hated that her internal conflict did not subside at the sight of his own.

As if he could hear her, as if he could feel it too, he pulled her down to him and kissed her deeply enough to drown it out. She kissed him back, fervently and with all she had, catching iron devotion on his tongue, and tried to savour the taste.



Every turned page brought about fresh comprehension, a new understanding of old society and the function of those original vampire covens, of their history and deep-rooted connections across continental Europe. Hermione was *enthralled*, could not get *enough*, could not pull herself away from the deep waters of knowledge the pages offered.

One evening, in the bitter night’s air, she set up a walkthrough of the severance ritual and paced the steps; powdered silver in the emblem of the house (not knowing any other, she used the Malfoy insignia) mixed with vampiric matter (in this case, Malfoy’s collected saliva) to be forged by flame. If she were truly attempting the ritual, an offer of bodily sacrifice would be required, but it was merely a walkthrough, and Malfoy was surely watching from the shadows to ensure she attempted no such thing. Instead, she circled the silver, read aloud the incantation in butchered Czech.

“*Přeříznout lano,*” she whispered. “*Moji mysl je moje. Moje tělo je moje. Jsem osvobozen.*”

The words slipped from her lips on repeat, the pronunciation growing better, more confident, with every pass of her tongue. There was little point to it, for there was no target. Malfoy had no living sire, and she knew of no active vampiric houses, but the act brought her some level of comfort anyway—of control.

Eyes watched her every move, tracked her every shallow step. *Real* eyes, she knew now, not the *walls*, but *Malfoy*. Suddenly, the manor took on a new quality; it didn’t feel judgmental or cold, but protective and warm. It wasn’t just watching, it was delighting. The lingering breath on the back of her neck was not creeping, it was caressing. The shadows that stretched over the high shelves and warped in the alcoves did not hold secrets, they held promises, and she had to fight the urge to step into them. It was softer now, the bevelled carvings and stone walls kept her safe, sheltered from the howling winds and icy rain.

She knew this place, and it welcomed her; no longer a labyrinth designed to spin her out and spite her, but a home.

The final incantation died on a slow exhale, and Hermione waved her wand to scoop the silver back into the jar, where it could not harm any nearby vampires. Then she set off for the south bedroom, knowing the exact route to take, a shiver shooting down her spine and a smile curling her mouth when the candles flickered to life a few paces behind.



After a strenuous week of preparation, the task force presented its findings to the Wizengamot in the auditorium. Chalkboards with predicted figures and timelines littered the floor, which felt more like a stage. Each of them had an opportunity to say their piece and display their contributions to an unexpectedly attentive audience. It didn't take long at all to receive an outcome; the Wizengamot called them back less than an hour later and approved the first stage of a bill that would focus on providing care for newly turned vampires. The sense of relief washed over the auditorium like a crashing wave, and Hermione almost wept with the joy of it.

Bertha, the head of Hermione's department, along with St Mungo's board of directors, arranged a fundraiser for the bill. *A gala*, she'd said, with a live band and the unspoken expectation for dancing. Hermione's effervescence fizzled at the mere implication, but her attendance was not up for discussion.

As she waved through the growing crowd of jubilant peers and superiors, all engaging in celebrations of their own, Nico caught her arm. He pulled her into a cordial hug as they shared exclamations of disbelief and congratulations. When he pulled back, she took a moment to study him; perfectly styled hair, perfectly trimmed beard, perfectly ironed shirt, perfectly pleated trousers and perfectly shined shoes. She wondered if the effort was as exhausting as it looked.

He inhaled deeply, basking in the moment, but something changed on his face at whatever aroma he found, furrowed brows dimming the shine in his eyes. Before she could ask, he shook it off, plastered an impossibly wide smile that had her questioning if she'd imagined any other expression.

"You must be looking forward to getting back to work," he said, patting her shoulder. "And getting *out* of that manor, of course."

Hermione forced herself to smile, but it was hollow, void of any relief, because while he'd been right about her enthusiasm to return to her designated post, he'd been entirely wrong about her desire to leave the manor, nor its inhabitants.

“There is much to be done,” she reminded him. “We still don’t know who is behind all of this.”

“It was never our job to find that out, let Robards and his lackeys worry about it.” Nico nodded towards the surrounding celebrations, peers slapping each other's backs, hands clasped in too-firm shakes, bright smiles distracting from purple eye bags. “We’ve got our own work cut out for us.”

“Yes, we do.”

Nico sighed, leaning back against the emerald wall, and pushed his hand through his hair. It fell, rather enviably, straight back into place. “I assume I’ll see you at this god forsaken event Bertha is arranging?”

She raised an amused brow. “Not a fan of balls?”

“Schmoozing is bad for my digestion.”

Hermione laughed, the sound breaking Nico’s scowl. “I’m inclined to agree with you.”

“Really? I thought you were a regular sight at these things.”

“Par for the course of being Harry Potter’s friend.”

Nico scoffed. “I think it’s safe to say you’re a lot more than *that*.”

“Maybe,” she said, shrugging.

His returning groan was falsely exasperated, laced with humour. When he let his head roll along the tiled wall to look at her, he was biting back a smile. “Will you be bringing anyone?”

There was nothing uncomfortable about the question, nor the way he asked it. Nothing desiring or salacious. Hermione immediately thought about Malfoy, pictured him in a tailored suit with a vest and a pocket watch, and felt her knees grow weak. She knew he would never join; it had only been a few days prior that he’d pulled her to his lap and admitted his apprehension about crowds, and a Ministry event was not the best place to reintroduce himself to society. If she were on his arm, all attention would be on them, on his teeth, his pale skin, the freshly fed flush on his cheeks.

She wished, desperately, that it didn’t matter.

“Not sure yet,” she settled on. “What about you?”

“Nah.”

“Should I save you a dance?”

He laughed. “As long as you don’t mind me stepping on your feet.”

“I’m no better.” She turned to the crowd again, let the low murmur of overlapping conversations flood the space between them, and watched them plan and promise dances of their own. “What a violent pair we’ll make.”

Nico’s answer was coy, amused, all-knowing. “Indeed, we will.”



“You’ve pinned your hair up.”

Malfoy lingered in the arched doorway of the south bedroom, which now housed all of her belongings. She was almost finished squeezing herself into the boning of her evening gown. A crimson red dress that gave her the illusion of a cinched waist, the skirts flaring in dream-like pleats that were light enough to sway with the movement of her body, and heavy enough to hold their form. Gigot sleeves and a low scooped neckline brought attention to the soft rise of her chest, the silk fabric catching the light in a way that made her look—at the right angle, with the right body cream—positively radiant.

Hermione may not love balls, but she loved feeling beautiful, and Malfoy’s heavy expression threatened that precious confidence. Her hands dropped from the buttons at the back of her dress, where they’d been fruitlessly scrambling, to shyly smooth her skirts.

“Does it look bad?” she asked, disappointed that she required the validation. “I rented it.”

“Bad?” he rasped. “No, it doesn’t look *bad*, you look...”

Oh, he *did* like it. His eyes flared with momentary heat, and her doubts turned into something molten, pooling low in her stomach and staying there. Malfoy seemed unable to form words, but he didn’t need to; she understood. It was as though his feelings were her own. Lust, *sure*, hunger, *certainly*, but there was something else, something deeper and lovelier.

Hermione felt her cheeks heat as she turned her back to him. “I can’t reach the buttons.”

He didn’t even hesitate, stepping closer and kneeling to secure her into the garment, preparing the trail of her spine with lingering kisses. Her eyes fluttered closed at the contact of his mouth, the scrape of his teeth against her sensitive flesh. Once she was buttoned, his hands found purchase on her hips and gripped hard, his forehead resting in the curve of her lower back as he grumbled something deep and unheard.

“What was that?” she asked, breathless.

“I’ve just become aware of how many eyes will be on you tonight, and I’m not sure that I like it.”

She chuckled, turned in his grip to cup his face between her hands. Malfoy peered up at her, resting his chin on her stomach, letting his eyelids droop and his fangs peek when she brushed his hair back. Possessiveness was not something she usually found attractive—the opposite, if anything—but there was something undeniable about his need to hoard her. *Like dragons upon gold*, the Professor had said, and how right he had been.

“If they look, it’ll only be to laugh,” she assured. “I can’t dance to save my life.”

“That’s not true. I remember the Yule Ball.”

His hands wrapped around the back of her thighs to pull her closer, palms over soft silk and intricate lace, sending her heart rate into the stratosphere. His smile told her that it did not go unnoticed.

“I had Viktor to thank for that. He *can* dance.”

“So can I.”

She laughed, but his face remained unflappably serious. “Wait, really? I don’t remember...”

“You were not aware of me as I was of you that night,” he replied smoothly, the edge of his mouth ticking upwards.

He rose to his full height, and she followed him with a frown. His hand took hers, tugging her towards the door, muttering a low command of, “Come with me.”

As was so often the case, she was more than happy to oblige his request. He led her through the hallways she recognised, until diverging to one she did not, taking rights where she always took lefts. Deeper, downwards, heading past iron-locked rooms and more sheet-covered furnishings, past short-lived candlelight and drawn windows, until they reached the ground floor of the great, looming estate. The floors turned from hardwood to marble, checkered patterns of black and white that heightened the sound of her clicking heels. Finally, when the ceilings stretched high and the walls stretched wide, Malfoy stopped before a door and pushed it open.

“Oh my...” she gasped.

Inside was a ballroom, cobwebbed and long abandoned, but still magnificent. The floor was vast, the walls were more mirror than stone, the chandeliers were elaborate, twisted and gnarled like winter branches, holding delicate candles so high that the light barely touched them. The windows were uncovered, evening light filtering in through stained glass and coating the room in hues of blue and scarlet. The ceiling, so far beyond her reach, was made of tiled mosaics and held up by spiralling beams.

Soft music swelled from somewhere in the shadows, where a gramophone was hidden. The melody brought warmth to the room.

“This is...”

She turned, unable to finish her thoughts, and found him waiting with an outstretched arm. In the tinted light, he looked more like a vampire than ever before.

With a shake of her head and a light, almost hysterical laugh, she went to him and let him wrap her in his arms, let him adjust their bodies just so, let him begin leading her in a slow waltz across the checkered marble. At first, it was all wrong; she was too in her head, too determined to match him, to keep pace. She looked in the mirror to check her posture and found herself dancing alone, back arched impossibly. The sight made her trip and stumble into his very real, very there chest, but he held her firm, spinning her around the room with graceful ease.

“Relax,” he murmured in her ear. “Let me lead.”

Her eyes met his, soil and sky colliding. His irises were so bright now, so captivating, that she could not force herself to look away, even as they twirled under molten-metal light. Her shoulders eased, her posture relaxed, soaking into his strong hold and allowing him to take control. She’d given him power over her body before—more times than she could count, now—and he’d never steered her wrong.

From there, everything fell into place. She was soaring, spinning, high above the clouds, riding the wind and the ballooning feeling in her chest that could only be love. It was clear now, as clear as the night was dark, that the affection she harboured could be called nothing else. Perhaps the realisation was clear on her face, for he slowed them to a stop and dipped her, bent her spine over his firm forearm, pressed his lips to the base of her throat. Despite the chill, her flesh was scorching, her body trembling, her desire wound up enough to beg.

“*Please.*”

“Please what?” His teeth caught on her skin, and she whimpered. “Do you want me to bite you?”

“*Yes, please, please.*”

He hauled her upright and fell to his knees, skirts bunched in hurried hands, lifting them to expose her legs and then—

“Oh my *god*,” she moaned as his teeth sank into her inner thigh.

The press of her own palm muffled her cries, her other hand holding him closer, urging him to bite deeper, to take more, as much as he wanted, as much as she had. When her legs shook, he hooked one over his shoulder and pulled harder, her lifeblood flowing with enthusiasm to greet his teeth, leaving her feeling like an overstretched elastic. He lifted her then, both legs over his shoulders, her feet off the ground as he stood tall, unwilling to stop his feast.

She yelped in surprise, shooting forward to grip the back of his collar. “Malfoy!”

“Shut your pretty mouth and let me eat,” he growled, gravelly and hot against her already blistering skin.

With a shift of his hands and a rip of her underwear, his tongue dove into her cunt, licking slowly and pulling a broken cry from her throat. Hermione blinked at the mirror and found herself flying, her skirts folded up to expose her body, blood dripping down her thighs and shins, her core wet and pulsing with building, unfathomable pressure.

When Malfoy, who was nowhere to be found in the reflection, pulled back his lips and pressed his sharp teeth into her cunt, drawing blood from the very point of her pleasure, she found herself dragged into the undercurrent with violent suddenness.

She came, and came, her orgasm lingering beyond its welcome until she was limp, *weak*, a trembling mess of rapturous, glorious pain. Malfoy hummed against her heat, holding her still and lapping at the last few drops before slowly, carefully, lowering her. He pressed kisses to her pliant mouth, blood mixed with release, copper on her tongue, all of it maddeningly good.

There was no way to be sure how or when it happened, but he managed to bring them both down to the cold marble floor. His body fit nicely under hers, large hands holding her to his hard cock with a bruising grip, grinding himself against her sore, bitten cunt. Her head dropped forward on a broken cry, and the look he gave her was anguished, dazzled, so unfettered she wanted to cry.

“You’re perfect, aren’t you?” Fingers wrapped around her jaw, forcing her to hold his gaze. “Tell me.”

“Yes,” she wept. “Yes...I’m perfect.”

It was an ephemeral cry, one she wouldn’t believe in an hour, wouldn’t even be able to bring herself to say, but right now, nothing had ever felt more true. How could she be anything but perfect when his cock slid into her so easily? When he stretched her so beautifully? Blood, sweat, all of it shared, all of it wonderful. His hand tightened around her chin as he turned her head to the mirror, ensuring she bore witness to the throes of her own pleasure.

“Tell yourself,” he hissed.

That, it seemed, was too much. She tried to turn her head, but he wouldn’t allow it. “I can’t —”

“Say it.”

“I’m *perfect*.”

“Good girl.” Malfoy let go of her jaw to stroke her face, soothing strokes that grounded her as he lifted his hips to thrust. “Can’t you see it? Can’t you see how entirely I am at your fucking mercy?”

“Yes,” she gasped, clutching his shirt, because she *could* see it, could *feel* it.

“It’s all yours, Usurper. Everything here, everything I am.” He pulled her down onto his length roughly, sweat beading at his temple, teeth gritted. “You can take it all.”

And she did.

She rode him, clawed at him, held him down with the press of her hands and the weight of her body, swallowed his whimpers and rejoiced in his moans, made him beg for it, shake for it, only to tell him no. Finally, *finally*, when she had him hanging by nothing more than a final tether, she grabbed his wrist and placed his hand around her throat, grinning down at his slackened face.

“Now,” she commanded, and he did as he was told.

His hand squeezed around her windpipe, the instinctual alarm sending her closer to oblivion. He broke; fucked her brutally, hissed curses to the mosaic ceiling, pushed his hips up when she pushed down. It was a perfect battle that sent her diving over the edge, coming around his cock while he pressed his teeth into her wrist and drew rich, luscious blood from her veins. He came with her, shuddering, surging pulses filling her so wonderfully that her eyes glazed over.

She gave it all to him, and he gave it back.

When her vision returned, Hermione found herself flush to his heaving chest, held by the band of his arms, and decided it was the only place in the world she wanted to be.

Minutes, or maybe an hour later, maybe late enough that she’d missed the gala altogether, their breathing had synced and their minds returned. He summoned towels to clean her, balm to rub into her skin, and blood to replenish what she’d given. Affirmations met her ears in delicate whispers, gratitude and honour in every offered word. When he moved to fix her hair, gentle hands twirling curls back into place, she found the strength to ask.

“Will you come with me tonight?”

He paused, she waited, knowing the answer and dreading it still, then he bent forward to place a chaste kiss on the back of her neck. It was an apology, a regretful refusal, and she wasn’t surprised, wasn’t hurt by it, but the weight landed heavily in her stomach and did not budge.

When she looked up to see her reflection, he was nowhere to be found, and she wondered if this was what a life with him would be: kept in the shadows, lit only by passing candles, alone in the mirror.

Chapter End Notes

I am aware that over half of this chapter is just 'Hermione reads a book', but I hope the clit biting while she looks like she's levitating made up for it.

Grab your ballroom shoes for the next chapter, folks, we're going waltzing.

Thank you to my omega omega omega, who is not only the best beta a girl could ask for, but also is the reason for the clit bite (everything I write is for her, you see):

[Miagas](#)

(Also, if the translations are off, I blame Google.)

Chapter 11: Thy victims ere they yet expire shall know the demon for their sire,

Chapter Notes

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

True to their promise, Harry and Ron were waiting at the oversized entrance to the town hall, which was even grander and more ceremonial than the manor; an imposing Victorian structure made of sandstone that had been blackened by well over a century of air pollution, with tall, iron-pointed spires. A tall clock tower stood proud from the centre, inscripted walls housing a carillon of twenty-three blessedly silent bells, its steady hands reminding her to make haste.

It was beautiful, there was no denying, but all she could see was the safety of her friends. Harry and Ron were adorned in fine dress robes, their cloaks pinned with matching D.M.L.E insignia broaches. On Harry's arm, Ginny stood tall in a sinfully structured black dress, her flaming hair smoothed back from her smoky eyes. She was *magnificent*, but beyond that, she appeared delighted.

"You look..." Hermione began as she approached, appraising the witch.

"If you say tired, underdressed, or *anything* but fucking *dynamite*, I'll break your nose," Ginny warned.

"Wouldn't dare." Hermione looked between them. "Who's got James?"

"His grandmother. She's probably got him milk drunk and worked him into a frenzy."

"That'll be fun for you guys later."

"Ah, no," Harry laughed. "He's staying at The Burrow tonight."

Ron snorted. "Mum nearly cried when they dropped him off. Dad, too...for other reasons."

"Is it his first night away?" Hermione asked.

Harry and Ginny caught each other's eye; a knowing look between two new, nervous parents who were grateful for this time together, for the promise of what the night could bring, but who would be just as grateful when James returned in the morning.

"I needed it," Ginny murmured.

Harry's eyes heated, an infernal shine that Hermione had to turn away from, could not stomach the sight of. She was no prude, nor was she naive to the biology of baby-making; she knew they fucked, she *hoped* they had the opportunity to fuck tonight—god knows they'd earned it—but she'd known them for too long, too closely, to think of them as sexual entities. Ron, who saw them both as siblings, did far less to disguise his visceral disgust.

“Hermione,” he whispered, leaning closer, “don’t leave me alone with them for even a second.”

She blinked back at him innocently. “I can’t make any promises.”

It was an established feeling, the two of them conspiring while Harry’s focus was elsewhere. They’d been the pair at his side, the two tag-alongs who refused to leave him, bound together by their shared loyalty to him and to each other. Hermione’s eyes drifted between the three of them, so tall and full-framed, and for a maudlin second, they were fourteen years old; drowning in ill-fitted dress robes, awkward and gangling and unbefitting of the Yule Ball. Their lives may not have been those of typical teenagers, but their bodies were, for their feet had dragged, their heads had hung, their spines had curved, and their shoulders had hunched—particularly Ron’s, who’d always been the most aware of himself.

She cast her mind back to that night, trying to recall how Malfoy had looked. The memory was blurred, too influenced by all she knew of him now. He likely hadn’t been as tall in reality, but he almost certainly had been wearing tailored robes, and perhaps he hadn’t twirled Pansy under his arm with such grace, but she was sure he’d never stepped on her toes mid-waltz, and his eyes had never tracked her with the intensity she could summon now, but they had watched her, hadn’t they?

They were not fourteen, though, not anymore. The men standing before her now were just that: men, adults, professionals, *parents*. Ginny was not Ron’s little sister; she was a woman of her own right, carrying herself with a confidence Hermione had never managed to muster, even with an additional year of life. None of them were swamped by their garments now, having grown into them as they had their own skin. And *Malfoy*, though not here, had experienced the most metamorphosis of all. Boy to man, human to vampire, guarded to... whatever he was now, whenever he was with her.

Harry and Ron walked ahead as they entered through the ogival arches, grumbling about how Calatrava would steal the best entrees if they didn’t get there first, but Ginny hung behind, her steps falling in time with Hermione’s.

“You really do look hot,” Hermione said, scanning her friend from smoothed hair to painted toes.

“I know.” Ginny ran her hands down her dress, letting them glide over the curves of her post-partum body; years of physical prowess and the creation of life shaped her in the most wondrous of ways. “So do you, by the way. That dress is...”

“Gaudy?”

Ginny laughed, red lips pulled back over pristine teeth. “Fucking pornographic.”

“It’s a floor-length down.”

“With a low neckline and boned corset waist. Don’t be thick.”

“Not many people accuse me of being thick,” Hermione mused.

“Well,” Ginny smirked, “maybe they should, considering you’re unable to apply a simple, third-year glamour.”

Her steps halted abruptly, her hand flying to clasp the side of her neck where Malfoy’s fang marks remained...because she was so stupid, so desperate for the feeling his incisors offered, that she’d not been able to bring herself to remove them completely.

“It’s okay if you aren’t ready to share who’s giving you hickeys just yet. I’ll get it out of you eventually,” Ginny sighed. “It’s like being in the dorms all over again.”

“It isn’t like being in the dorms at all.”

“No, it isn’t...but let a girl reimagine her childhood without rebuttal.” Ginny winked, and Hermione could hardly deny her. Their stolen girlhood was an ever-present, breathing beast, and one they so rarely got to indulge in.

Relieved that Ginny appeared unaware of the true origins of her poorly hidden marks, unsure of how she would react were Hermione to admit that they were not hickeys but, in fact, bite marks from a reclusive vampire who haunted their youth as he now haunted the walls of his manor, she excused herself for the nearest bathroom. As she fled, she could feel Ginny’s coy, smoke-rimmed stare.



The upside of being fashionably late was that the bathroom, tucked away in the far corridor of the furthest hallway, was a vacant echo chamber of tile and fluorescent lights. Hermione leaned against the sink counter and stared herself down in the mirror, eyes catching on the now exposed marks on the side of her neck. Slowly, she uncurled her fingers from the marble and let them drift over the fast-healing wounds.

It was reckless. The door was unlocked; anyone could enter at any moment and send her into a panicked, unmaskable scramble for her wand. At the same time...the possibility felt like half of the thrill.

Her fingertips stop at the equidistant marks, lingering over the surging pulse beneath them. In a moment of hazed, broken lucidity, she curls her fingers into the marks and reopens them, hissing as her nails push past her flesh. It hurts in a way that it never does with Malfoy; his teeth offering a salvation her hands cannot.

Thick rivulets of blood trickle down her neck, over the column of her throat, gathering in the dip of her clavicle and spilling between the peaks of her breasts. The ichor was natural and

restoring, the free-flowing elixir of life itself. Her heart aches at the sight of it, swelling painfully with the need to preserve it, with the guilt of wasting it, for it was, most importantly, the substance of Malfoy's vitality.

She pulls her nails from the wound and collects the wet, crimson tracks with her fingers, holding them up under the harsh overhead lights. The blood dances over her knuckles, a warm, dense ink—the same shade as her dress, she realises with subtle pride. Unbidden, she brings her fingers to her lips and licks them clean, savouring the taste of copper on her tongue.

Her eyes glinted in the mirror, and Hermione came back to herself with a start. Her hand dropped back to the counter uncoated, her neck unpunctured, her mind unmoored. With a shake of her head, she reattached her glamour.



The banquet room had been transformed into a spectacular reception area, tables and chairs tucked to the sides to make room for the central stage, upon which a group of cellists played a jaunty tune. There were seven large arched windows on either side of the room, the evening's natural glow permeating through the courtyards and through the glass to brighten the terracotta dados. The roof, rib-vaulted and divided into panels, each bearing the arms of various Ministries across continental Europe, was hidden by a charmed sky. Gold medallions surrounded the overhanging light fixtures, whose candles flickered like stars against the darkness; if Hermione tilted her head back, she could picture herself back on the forest floor, staring up at the winter sky while dew seeped through the silk of her skirts.

She made her way through the crowd, passing portraits of previous Ministers and couples locked in a Viennese waltz—some taking it rather seriously, some less so, some merely swaying while they conversed. Harry was on the far end of the room, swallowed by a group of Aurors who were no doubt keen to speak with him as a hero, instead of their superior. Before she could reach him, Hermione found herself at the mercy of Benedict's keen grip.

"You must return," he pleaded, sidestepping a waiter carrying a platter of champagne flutes. "Your replacement is, if you'll pardon me for saying, absolutely *incapable* of filing alphabetically. I am losing the will to live, Ma'am—*Miss*."

She assured him, with hardly a glance spared his way, that her return was indeed imminent. The confirmation settled him enough that she could pry herself free, only to be trapped by a smaller group of attending vampires. The rare sight of them had her stomach warring between joy and discomfort. There were only four—one turned and three born—but they kept together, moving as a unit through the cold shoulders of the crowd. The turned vampire

expressed his relief at the bill, for he'd longed for such care when he was reborn, whereas the born vampires just seemed happy to be invited.

"Feels like change," one of them, an older woman with a salt-and-pepper braid in her hair, said absently. "If not for my lifetime, then at least for my daughters."

She shook limp hands, agreed to meetings that would never come to pass, accepted two separate flutes of champagne within a span of ten minutes, and eventually found herself lodged between a small gathering of government officials, all of whom expressed fear and distrust about their proposed programme, their harboured prejudice coating every word in thick poison. Iwan was with them, nodding along like the brown nose she'd always suspected him to be.

"There will have to be sanctions, of course," he said.

"Sanctions?" Hermione echoed, her brows shooting to her hairline. "Are they not sanctioned enough for you at this present time, Iwan?"

"I just mean..." His face was positively cherubic, a beacon glowing brighter with every passing second that she refused to save him, to even spare him from her glower.

He turned his attention to the politicians instead, laughing haughtily, sounding like he had a mouth full of coins. The rest of them joined in without hesitation. Her anger flared like a blowtorch; these people, with all their power and authority, were attending an event designed to promote funding for empathetic care and understanding of newly turned vampires, yet they remained so decidedly closed-minded. Her thoughts drifted to the vampires in Romania, to the segregation Charlie confirmed was still prevalent. It was not an isolated issue but a global one. What she was seeing now, before her very eyes, was as good as it got.

For now.

That rage failed to dissipate when she reached the Aurors, all of whom immediately turned her way to express their concerns that passing the bill would only encourage further turning events, that it would downplay the severity of the previous attacks.

"But it is the sire who is at fault," she argued. "Not the newly turned vampires."

"And if the sire *is* a newly turned vampire?" a wizard with a deeply pockmarked face asked.

Her grip tightened around the crystal stem of her empty flute. "All the more reason to provide adequate care and—"

"You mean to coddle the perpetrator?"

"What perpetrator?" she snapped. "You seem incapable of locating—"

Harry hooked his arm through hers and turned her around, leading her away from the group with uncompromising purpose, Ginny closing in on her other side. She hardly saw them past the faint mist of red in her eyes; she was seething, spitting mad.

“I don’t think that’s what Kingsley meant when he asked you to come and rub shoulders,” Harry muttered, catching sight of Ron at the free bar and adjusting course.

“Those insolent, *insufferable*, arrogant—”

“I know.”

Ron met them halfway, taking one look at Hermione’s gritted teeth and pushing his drink towards her. She didn’t ask what it was, she just drank it, and all of them knew better than to point out how the ice shook in her hands.

“God, this is fucking unbearable,” Ron huffed, sweeping an arm out to the overcrowded room. “Who should we set on fire first?”

“Calatrava,” Harry and Ginny said in unison.

“No complaints from me, he demolished the capanés before I could try them.” Ron nodded, pleased with the plan. “Hermione?”

Were she not boiling from the inside out, she might have been able to answer, to name each and every face she saw and mark them for arson. It proved to be an impossible task, as her jaw seemed unable to pry itself open. The road ahead was longer and far more winding than she’d previously anticipated, and it would take more than a bill, more than a fucking *ball*, to change minds that were so deeply rooted in polluted soil.

This was why Malfoy did not wish to join her. It wasn’t just that he didn’t trust himself in crowds, it was that he didn’t trust *the crowd*, and how could she blame him? He was right to hide, safer in the shadows of his desolate manor—but she could change that, she *would* change that. It was no longer just her job, it was her life, his life, the life she longed to share with him. Setting individuals alight was not enough, they would have to burn down the entire system and rebuild it.

Resolved, she knocked back the rest of Ron’s drink.



“Is it time?”

Hermione turned from her hiding spot, deep in the far corner of the banquet room, concealed by gossamer drapes. Harry, Ginny and Ron had ventured off to pose with the senior Aurors for the Daily Prophet’s event photographer, and Hermione, not feeling nearly sprightly enough to smile for a camera, sulked away.

Nico stood at her side, his hand outstretched, a sly smile curling the edge of his mouth. She looked at his upturned palm and snorted; an unbecoming sound for the gown she still wore.

“And here I was, thinking the worst of the night was over,” she said, with a laboured sigh.

Nico clicked his tongue. “Not even close.”

After a few seconds more of purposeful hesitation, Hermione stepped out from her sheer armour and took his hand, letting him lead her towards the dancefloor, where couples were still twirling in a staggering lack of synchronicity. He turned to her as they reached the opening, resting his hand on the boning of her corset, careful not to hold her where it would not be appropriate. It was nothing at all like how Malfoy had held her earlier, flush to his chest, with his fingers on her hips—none of that heat simmered as Nico began guiding her in a slow, clumsy circle.

It’s a little awkward, more than a little messy. Onlookers winced when she tripped over his foot, surrounding dancers tutted when he spun her to the left instead of right, but it mattered not. For the first time since arriving at this god-forsaken town hall, Hermione was having fun. She laughed, full-bodied, when she noticed Nico watching their feet with diligent focus. He laughed when he heard her counting steps under her breath.

When they turned around the central stage, Hermione looked over Nico’s shoulder and caught Ginny’s eye. A silent conversation, known and understood only by women, passed between the twisting bodies. *Do you need saving from that man?* Ginny’s eyebrow asked. *This one’s fine*, the tilt of Hermione’s head responded.

“This has been a success, don’t you think?” Nico cut through her thoughts, his palm pressing into her shoulder to move them in a new turn.

“I do not think that at all.”

His smirk dipped, a mild frown forming between his shapely brows. “Why not? People showed up, and money is flowing almost as freely as the liquor.”

“Maybe so, but these people...” She shook her head. “Their misguided perceptions and ingrained prejudices are—”

“That cannot come as a surprise to you, of all people.”

Quickly, he twisted her wrist, turning her left forearm up under the twinkling lights. The scar there was faint, almost imperceptible, would never be noticed if its location was not already known. These days, Hermione didn’t think about it much, hardly ever outside of fretful sleep. The balm she’d spent years perfecting had gone a long way to heal the memory. That didn’t mean it was gone—it would *never* be gone—but it lived on the sidelines of her mind until brought forward in times like these. She could still vividly remember how long it took people to look her in the eye after the war, how she was sure to find either pity, disdain, or admiration in their own.

No, she was not surprised by the collective lack of understanding shown by these dignitaries for creatures other than their own, for they had considered her an othered creature once—a thief, a deceiver, a *mudblood*. She'd known better then, and she knew better now; her blood was not muddled, it was precious. The only difference was that now, as she stood amongst peers who would have seen her killed not a decade earlier, she was not the only one who knew it.

"I'm not surprised," she said, her tone measured. "I'm angry."

Nico looked pleased with her answer. "Try to enjoy this, Hermione. It's all turned out rather well."

"Did it?" She leaned back from his hold as they span, stepping on the tip of his shoes, too caught up in his words to pay any mind to his feet. "Innocent people have died, lives have been irrevocably changed, people are *suffering*."

"That is true," he agreed, nodding slowly. "But there is also the matter of the...bigger picture."

"What do you mean?"

"If all this pain and death can lead to something better...a greater good for all—"

"*Greater good?* Dr Carlsen," she pulled them both to a standstill, the music continuing without them, couples twirling in blissful ignorance, "there is no *greater good* that can come of such tragedy."

Nico let her go, their arms slowly lowering in tandem, leaving them standing before each other in the centre of the dancefloor, disconnected from their surroundings, even more so from each other.

"Now, Miss Granger," he began patiently, "you know that is not true."

With a quick, shallow bow of his head, he left her alone on the tiled mosaic floor, her feet stuck still, her mind spinning without them. She watched him go, trying to find the parts of him she recognised; was he a friend, a colleague, a project partner, someone who wanted what she wanted? Or was he with them—the big cats, the ones who played people like pawns, who revelled in bloodshed as long as it was for their preferred cause? People had died, families had been torn apart, lives had been ruined, and he'd so easily made it sound like a sacrifice instead of a crime.

The murmurs of the crowd died in her ears, drowned by the ringing of distant alarm bells, located entirely within her own skull. She was missing something here, something important, something she'd previously overlooked, and it made no sense, but—

A warm, loving, familiar arm wrapped around her waist and turned her, nothing tentative in the strength and command it displayed. Instinctively, Hermione lifted her hands to shove whoever had thought to get so close, only to come face to face with Draco Malfoy. She faltered, her lips parting on a sharp, silent inhale as she took him in. He wore dress robes in

beautiful emeralds and blacks, sharp stitching and tailored lines extenuating his formidable stature. His face was tilted down to her, all high cheekbones and cutting lines, so polished and brilliant and...here.

Her hands curled around the lapels of his robes, pressing to check, and check again, that he was real. "What are you *doing* here?"

"Stealing a dance, I hope," he replied smoothly.

"You're...here." She felt out of breath. "You're *here*."

With a small, barely there smile, but a smile nonetheless, he ran his hands down the length of her arms and took her own, lifting them into position, just as he'd done earlier that evening in the privacy of his empty, shadowed ballroom. "Come on, you can't have forgotten it all in merely a few hours."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you?" He hauled her closer, one palm lowering to the small of her back, until they were pressed together. "I've heard you are supposed to be clever."

When he stepped forward, she stepped back, slotting against him with full-body relief. It was easier than it had been with Nico, like they were two magnets, designed with the sole purpose of fitting together; he pushed, she went, he pulled, she came, following his every unspoken order. Everyone in the room was watching, she could feel their eyes clinging to every step, every movement of their lips. Harry, Ron, Ginny, Kingsley, Iwan, the Aurors and government officials, Bertha, Benedict...Nico. All of them.

It mattered not, because she could see no further than the man guiding her in an effortless waltz. He looked good—he also looked like a vampire. There were no glammers on his teeth, no attempt had been made to hide who—or *what*—he was. If anyone here had ever wondered where the heir to the Malfoy fortune had been hiding after the war, they had their answer.

Hermione was overwhelmed, completely untethered, scrambling to comprehend his appearance, his arms around her body, or the proud gleam in his storm-cloud eyes. When he spun her into him, like yarn around a bobbin, she cupped one palm to the side of his face, and he turned his head to press a light kiss on her wrist before spinning her out again.

"This is absurd," she breathed, light laughter spilling from her lips.

"I know." He dragged her closer, flush against his chest, where she could feel his thundering heart—where he could feel hers to match. She had to crane her neck to keep hold of his eyes, for his chin was held high. There was tension in his shoulders; a sign that his composure, his confidence, was as much a mask as the one he'd once worn to scare her off, but he was *here* anyway, with *her*, dancing.

She blinked back tears and asked so quietly that it was a miracle he heard over the billowing cello, "Why?"

“Because I can’t keep you in the shadows, but I can follow you out of them.” His gaze cut her wide open, only to fill her with warmth. When he bent down to murmur in her ear, she felt her feet lift as though they were floating. “I’ll follow you anywhere, Usurper.”

Everything in her bubbled and warmed, her blood fizzled, sang, thick and rich and slow to flow. She smiled, a wide grin that made the apples of her cheeks ache, because she *understood*—it was as much of a love confession as any she could offer him. Her reply sat heavy on her tongue, unformed words that melted into salty tears, swallowed down to preserve the moment. How could she possibly tell him that she would never long to go anywhere he could not follow?

Hermione went to her toes, wrapped her arms around his neck, disregarding ballroom etiquette or proper positioning, deciding that if she could not yet tell the world she was choosing him, that she wanted him, exactly as he was now, then she would simply show it.

“You know what I think?” She eventually managed, voice thick.

He sighed, patient and indulgent. “Tell me.”

“I think you saw me dancing with Nico and found yourself overcome with jealousy.”

“That so?”

“Mhmm, you can try to deny it, but I see through your ruse.”

For a second, and only a second—but a blinding second indeed—his mouth split into a toothy, lopsided smile. “Is this my supposed mortal enemy?”

“That’s a lot more dramatic than what I said.”

“Sworn nemesis?”

She pinched the back of his neck lightly. “When did you obtain a sense of humour?”

He shrugged. “Around the same time you stormed back into my house with your overstuffed suitcases.”

“Spin me to the left,” she ordered with a roll of her eyes, and he obliged without question, his earthy scent filling her nose. “See the man standing over there, beside the woman in the lime dress?”

“Ghastly colour.”

“I agree, but keep looking. He’s tall, has dark hair that’s always stupidly quaffed and a big beard—”

Malfoy froze, his playful expression turning stricken, eyes widening to twin moons. Alarmed, Hermione looked over her shoulder to find Nico already watching them, not an ounce of shock on his face, but no smile either, which was just as peculiar. Even moments ago, when

they'd clashed on the dancefloor, he'd managed a coy twist of his mouth. She turned back to Malfoy, who seemed unable to look at her.

"That's Dr Carlsen," she said, frowning when he failed to respond—to *move*. "Malfoy?"

"No it isn't."

She blinked. "What?"

With that, he moved so fast she couldn't prepare, holding her by the wrist and pulling her along as he strode for the exit, hurrying under the overhead archways without looking back. She resisted, trying to remove herself from his grip without causing a scene; it wouldn't do well to fight him in the midst of an event designed to assure people that vampires were not, in fact, natural brutes.

"Malfoy," she hissed under her breath. "What the *fuck* are you—"

"Not here."

"What? You can't just—"

"*Not here.*"

Neither his tone nor his grip brokered any room for arguments. So she loosened, letting him pull her through the watching crowd and the sea of wide eyes tracking them. As she passed her friends, she offered them a placid smile and a small lift of her shoulders, hoping they would take it for the promise it was that she would, when possible, catch them up. Harry and Ron just stared in return, jaws slack and hands gripped tight around their glasses. Ginny, however, looked far too smug for Hermione's liking.

Eventually, they passed the swarming bodies and broke into the courtyard, the night's air hitting her like an open palm. Malfoy, with his long legs and longer strides, seemed unaware that she'd had to break into a jog to keep up with him, unconvinced that he would stop dragging her away even if she fell.

"Fuck," he muttered, looking for the gates. "We need to get a taxi, or...if you apparate, I can run. It'll be quicker and—"

She ripped out of his grip while he was occupied and they were alone, rubbing at her wrist to soothe the sting. He whirled on her, silver eyes bright and wild with something she could not place, but sent her heart plummeting into her stomach all the same.

"Explain yourself," she demanded.

"We have to go."

"No, you—" Hermione pressed her hand over her eyes, exhaled a sharp, frustrated laugh, felt her heart start to dissolve in acid. "I'm not going anywhere until you explain why you just hauled me out of there."

His mouth opened, the answer right there on his tongue, ripe and ready for her to pluck, but he stalled. When his lips sealed again, when she watched his throat work to swallow the truth, her temper soared.

“This is a *work* event, Malfoy. I *have* to be here, and you don’t get to just whisk me away because you and Dr Carlsen aren’t best friends—”

“That’s not his name.”

She stopped short. “Pardon?”

Malfoy was breathing heavily, his skin pale and sickly under the twilight sky, and suddenly she felt it too, with the full force of a sledgehammer, a resonating transmission through whatever string tied them together; panic, dread, *fear*. When he raised his hand to point at the town hall looming behind her, she noticed a tremble in his finger.

“I don’t know who Dr Nico Carlsen is, but that man is *not* him.”



Hermione arrived at the manor first, having taken his advice to apparate straight to the parlour and await his arrival. She paced the room, heels sinking into the circular handwoven rug, passing empty alcoves and pedestals holding vases she could only assume had once been chosen by Narcissa. The sconces were lit with dim, high-up flames, offering neither warmth nor visual clarity.

The doors finally opened to reveal a panting Malfoy. He really had run, and quickly, to get here only minutes after she did. The second he spotted her, time seemed to stand still; nothing existed but the space between them.

“Talk,” she said, breaking the silence.

His throat worked. “I’m not sure where to start.”

Irritation licked at her skin like curling flames, and she turned to pull some hairpins free, alleviating at least some of the physical tension. She watched his hands twitch at his sides, but wisely, he did not make to move any closer.

“Who is he?”

This time, his answer was immediate. “Nicolae Carl-Ciobanu.”

“*Who?*”

“He...” Malfoy looked to the side, eyes locking on something visible only to him: a memory, a feeling, a secret. “He was my father's sire.”

Hermione stumbled back, brows knitting deeply, her heels catching in the silk of her skirts. “No.”

“Yes.”

“He’s a vampire?” she asked, mostly to herself. “But his—he doesn’t *look*—”

“He’s half wizard, Granger,” Malfoy explained. “Glamours exist. You’re wearing one on your neck right now.”

“That’s—but he—” She shook her head rapidly, every atom coated in a wax seal of denial. At some point, the back of her knees met the curved, velvet sofa, and she found herself seated on the cushion, hardly aware that she’d moved at all. “He can’t be.”

“He *can* be. He *is*.”

“He doesn’t even look old enough to—” Her head snapped up to where Malfoy stood, looking on the verge of collapse. “Wait, what did you say his name was?”

“Nicolae Carl—”

“Ciobanu?”

Bile rose in the back of her throat, and she saw his eyes narrow on her sickened face before they shot wide. She was on her feet in an instant, making for the parlour door and the darkened hallway that would lead her to the library, but Malfoy was faster. He beat her there, scooping her into his arms and holding her tight to his chest, moving with inhuman speed through the manor. Unsure of what else to do, or how to make sense of the nonsensical, Hermione pressed her nose to his throat and inhaled the scent of his flesh, letting it ground her back to earth.

For that one moment, nothing mattered; not Nico, not what anyone had said at the gala, not how heavy her body felt in her dress. All she knew was the feeling of his arms and the warmth of his body, so sturdy, so close.

When he carried her through the iron doors of the library and set her feet on stone slabs that were now as known to her as the back of her own hand, they found Femur already there, making up her still-transfigured bed.

“Misses had arrived earlier than expected, Femur was just fixing the bed,” the elf said, collecting the old sheets in his little arms.

Hermione opened her mouth to thank him, to ask if he often made her bed without her notice—when she’d been sleeping here every night, she’d simply scourgified the sheets, always wondering where the fresh scent came from—and if he knew that she slept here no longer, if this chore was a request Malfoy had made of him directly. All those questions died upon

arrival when her gaze caught on the open book sitting on the table, kept safe under a stasis charm.

She marched for it, shoes clicking on the stone, echoed by Malfoy's trailing footsteps. Despite that he'd just proven how fast he could move, he elected to linger back, to let her reach the book first, to wait while she ran her fingertips along the aged leather binding and the carvings still indented within it, over the name she'd read so many times of late.

Over the geographic symbols—two overlapping diamonds connected by a line. The same she'd seen inked onto Baysangur Abzorov's neck.

All in horribly misadvised, but thankfully hideable places.

"L. Ciobanu," she whispered, choking back a bitter laugh. "They are related. His ancestor wrote this book. He must have known it was here the whole time, he—"

She stopped on a hitched breath, standing up straighter, aware that Malfoy was watching with predatory focus, somehow intensely cautious and endlessly curious at once. Her thoughts and theories bounced through the library like a squash ball until one hit her, a sharp projectile that made her wince from impact.

"Granger?"

"Give me a minute."

Hermione stumbled to her pile of '*could be useful*' books and the inked index she kept beside it. She scanned her notes for what she wanted, stopping at the section for history and society. Minutes, or maybe seconds later, several books were strewn across the table, her foot resting on one chair as she climbed over them to find the sections she required, her hand coming down to slap an open page detailing the families of the Sacred Twenty-Eight.

"Shepherd," she mumbled, tapping the name. "Oh, you've got to be fucking—"

"Granger."

"Wait."

She half crawled over the table to reach the other book, which was based solely on the exclusive collective, finding the name Shepherd in the index and flipping to the relevant pages. She traced their lineage back, and back, and *back*, flipping through page after page and account after account of battles and victories and businesses that generated wealth beyond her wildest imagination. The family was not originally from the United Kingdom, having moved around Europe several times: The Netherlands from Belgium, Belgium from Hungary, Hungary from Belarus, Belarus from *Romania*.

She sucked in a slow breath.

Romania from Czechia.

Nico wasn't *just* a vampire, not *just* a sire...he was a member of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, a descendant of the first vampiric houses, of the original Czech covens. Nico's bloodline spelt the *origins* of pure-blood ideology. Had he changed his name from Shepherd to distance himself? Changed it back to the original translation and hidden in plain sight? Did he even know—*stupid*, she scorned, *of course he knows, stupid, stupid*.

The book fell from her hands, dropping to the floor along with her knees. The expected impact never arrived, though, as Malfoy's arms wrapped around her and held her up, carrying her to the large, deep-set armchair where she'd spent so many recent days and nights reading, searching for an answer, a person, that had been right under her nose this whole time.

"Your turn to talk," Malfoy said once she was seated.

"It's him," she gasped. "He's *the* sire, he's behind the attacks."

"How do you know?"

"What other explanation could there be for his deception? He said—he said it all turned out rather well, that it was for the greater good of...oh my *god*."

Malfoy lowered to his knees before her, palms playing wide on her thighs to keep them from shaking, his eyes boring into hers. "What can I do?"

"Nothing, I need to talk to him."

"No."

She recoiled like she'd been stung. "No? Malfoy, this is an important, life-or-death situation —"

"Exactly."

Terror—his, not hers—hit her like a crashing wave, dragging her under and filling her lungs with salt. It was not fear of Nico, but fear for her. Knowing this, feeling this, she steadied herself with a slow breath and held his anguished face between her hands before attempting to speak again.

"We can't involve the D.M.L.E until we have proof, but Harry and Ron will keep me safe."

His mouth pulled downwards. "Forgive me, but I have vivid memories of them being pretty fucking useless at keeping you safe, in this very manor, in fact—"

"Well, if *someone* hadn't taken their wands—"

"I cannot sit idly by and watch you—"

"Then don't." His next protest caught behind his teeth, and she held his face firmer. "Stay close by. You've got physical advantages that none of us do, speed and strength that could come in handy, if required."

He seemed to consider it, his shoulders easing just an inch. “Let me speak with him first.”

“No.” On this, she would not budge. “It has to be me. I may not know him like I thought I did, but I do know that he won’t entertain it any other way.”

“I will not allow you to—”

She laughed, the sound a little bit rueful, and his jaw clenched between her palms.

“Allow me? Oh, Draco...” His eyes softened at the sound of his name, and she stroked her thumbs over the peaks of his cheekbones. “You know better than that.”

He did know. Everything they’d done before now had been an exchange of power. He may give orders, but she chose whether she followed them or not. He only had what she gave him, and she could, if she so wished, take it away at any time. That was the nature of the trust they shared; she might oblige him, but none of her choices have ever been reliant on his approval, nor his *allowance*.

Malfoy dipped his chin, a flicker of shame alighting in his eyes—recognition, acceptance, an understanding of this new exchange.

“I’ll not be doing anything without a plan,” she assured him softly. “And...a protean charm.”

He grunted. “That’s not nearly enough.”

“It’ll do just fine. Besides, I’ve done far more dangerous things with far less.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“No.”

He signed, looking up to the shadowed ceiling. “I don’t love it, and I can’t stop you...”

“But you can follow me,” she whispered.

It was what he’d said, after all, back at the gala when he spun her around the dancefloor. It felt like an entire lifetime ago, instead of merely an hour, and oh—how she longed to be back there now, twirling under faux starlight, delighting in the blossom of love unfurling in her chest.

“I can,” he said thickly.

It goes unsaid, but she hears it all the same: *I’ll follow you anywhere*.

She wasn’t sure about her plan, even less so about its success, and she didn’t have the heart to worry Malfoy any further by admitting to it. Though if her suspicions about their connection were indeed correct, he likely already knew.

Still, he sat aside while she wrote a lengthy request to Harry and Ron, inviting them over to plan in person the following morning, once the alcohol—and the shock—had left their

systems. Still, he did not complain when she wanted to study the lineage of the Shepherd (née Ciobanu) family. It was only when the night wore thin, the boning of her dress bent into her ribs, and the heels of her shoes left her feet raw, that he took her to the south bedroom, which felt like *theirs*, and left the freshly made bed unused in the library.

It was a choice, she realised; he always ensured she had the choice to sleep alone.

She chose him.

Later, when her hair was fully unpinned and the ribbons of her dress pooled like coiled serpents along the floor, when her teeth were brushed and her nubile body covered with a soft cotton t-shirt, she slipped into the satin sheets and curled into his waiting warmth. He held her close, tight, his nose in her hair, his fangs against her shoulder when he bent to leave a kiss there, keeping her wrapped around him like she might disappear if he didn't.

His breathing evened into a melodic rhythm, his breath danced across her skin much like the filtering moonlight through the uncovered window. Meanwhile, Hermione lay awake, her eyes to the ceiling, her mind stuck on what Nico—or Nicolae—had said to Rowan Armitage.

Society will see you as nothing more than a creature, he'd said. It would do well, he'd said, to accept that sooner rather than later, that way, we can focus on the future.

She wondered, there in the moonlight, what future he was focused on.

Chapter End Notes

uh ohhhhhhh

Look, Nico is fuckable, I don't make the rules.

Thank you to the girliepop of the century and her enormous fanny for betaing:

[Miagas](#)

Chapter 12: As cursing thee, thou cursing them,

Chapter Notes

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

Her friends—her steadfast, tried, dependable friends—were the two people in this world who always felt larger than life to Hermione. Both celebrated members of their school house, Quidditch champions, heroes of the wizarding world, and highly respected Aurors with established rank. Yet the manor dwarfed even them, shrinking them down to ants beneath its great stone boot. They walked through the shelves like they were twelve years old, huddled under a garment of concealment, traipsing through the restricted section.

She half expected Mrs Norris to scurry past her ankles at any moment.

The library was not hers, but she still felt a nervous responsibility to host them, to lead them through the vast room and provide a tour. Incongruously, and despite the weeks of unease these looming walls had offered, she wanted them to like it. Alas, they did nothing to disguise their discontent, heads whirling in every direction as if they could feel the walls watching. She could hardly blame them, for she knew their suspicions were correct; Malfoy might not have been standing beside her, but there was no doubt of his presence. She knew his eyes tracked her every movement, that his ears caught on her every word, and she didn't mind at all.

“So,” Ron said, attempting to smother the shake in his voice with a puffed chest, “this is where you’ve been staying.”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“And you haven’t been here alone?”

Hermione hesitated before deciding it would be quicker and considerably less painful to just come out and say it. “No.”

Harry pointed to her small, freshly made, transfigured bed in the centre of the room. “You’ve been sleeping in here?”

It looked comfortable enough, but when Harry’s vivid eyes peeled away from the bed to scan the library with clear contempt, she realised that it wasn’t the best visual. Her teeth pressed into her bottom lip, leaving worried indents in their wake. It wasn’t shame that had her considering a lie, but the anticipation of their non-acceptance.

“Not recently.”

Both men turned to her before their gazes drifted to each other, a look of mild horror passing between them.

“Fucking hell,” Ron mumbled, running a hand over his jaw.

Protectiveness, or perhaps impatience, like a match within her. “Listen, I understand this is a bit of a shock—”

“I’ll say,” Harry cut in.

“Just try to remember that you are working with extremely limited information—”

“If you’re asking,” Ron said, false humour on his disbelieving tongue, “I think we’d both admit to being a bit bothered by—”

“But I am *not* asking, Ronald,” she snapped, stopping them both short. “I do not *need* to ask. I make my own choices. The only choice *you* have is whether you want to live with them or not.”

A standoff, not unlike those in her father's old western films, seemed to be occurring between the sparse seating of the expansive library. Undeterred, she lifted her chin, which only pulled a breathless laugh from Harry.

“What do you think we’re going to do?” he asked, softer now. “Cut you off like bickering teenagers?”

She had thought exactly that, whether she’d known it or not, which felt rather silly now he’d said the words aloud. Her proud chin lowered in an admission of seeping shame, heat rose to the apples of her cheeks, and her dearest, oldest friends looked at her with befuddled pity.

“No, Hermione.” Harry deflated, pulling at the ends of his wild hair. “You’re just going to have to give us a few minutes to process all of this.”

“It’s a lot,” she acquiesced.

“It’s a *lot*,” Ron echoed. “So...you think Nico Carlsen is the sire?”

She nodded once, sharply. “I believe so.”

“And Malfoy is...”

“Also a vampire.”

“Fuck me,” Harry mumbled, shaking his head. “And you want to meet with Nico?”

She rolled her lips together, preparing herself for the day's first true battle. “I do.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Alone?”

“You’ll be there as backup.”

Ron stepped closer. “I don’t like that.”

“Neither do I.”

The voice, which had not come from the huddle they'd formed in the stone heart of the library, had the three of them whirling towards the ornate, iron doors, which had been left ajar. Malfoy stood in the crack of light that broke through the heavy curtains, looking haunted—though, to her friends, who'd not seen him since the frailty of his trial, he must have looked *haunting*. They didn't know that his face, flushed and soft, was a marked improvement from the hollow shell of sunken skin she'd first met upon arrival. To them, Malfoy's presence was not a balm; it was a threat. He loomed larger and broader than in their memory, stronger than their imagination, capable of violence they could not comprehend.

At school, he'd stood apart from the crowd, but only because of how desperately he'd tried to. Now, he was genuinely, unquestionably *other*.

"Right, well," Ron cleared his throat, "I never thought I'd be siding with that git, but it's three to one."

"It's not a vote," she argued.

Ron raised a challenging brow. "Maybe it should be."

"We don't have time to argue."

"This should be handled by Kingsley and the D.M.L.E, and you know it."

"On what grounds?" she asked, louder than she meant to, her words rebounding through the shelves with intent. "We have no proof of anything yet."

Harry tilted his head in consideration. "We have enough suspicion to open an investigation into Nico—"

"And give him time to flee?"

"Hermione," Harry sighed, parentally patient. "There is a structure to these sorts of things."

"One that hasn't worked." She turned from the three of them, blowing the curls from her eyes with a frustrated exhale. "Look, Nico requested me specifically for this project, he...wanted me for something. I know it. Trust me."

All the looks she'd shared with the doctor, all the little victories and monumental setbacks, all the sparks of curiosity and cups of coffee, the disagreements and determination, was it all a farce? A plot? Had she allowed him to manoeuvre her onto his shoulder and play her like a fiddle?

And that, Miss Granger, is why I did not call for Bertha.

"It has to be me," she affirmed, turning back to them. "Just me."

Harry tipped his head to the high ceilings and sighed before rolling his head to look at the two other men in the room. On any other occasion, it might have even warmed her heart to see the three of them—perhaps the three people who meant the most to her—sharing a glance

that could be construed as *knowing*. Their combined exasperation with her had banded them together, somewhat.

Harry's shoulders sagged. "I assume you've at least got some sort of plan in mind."

"Some sort, yes."

He gestured for her to continue, so she did, telling them about her intentions to write to Nico and request to meet, to let him decide on the location—though her instincts, which had served her well for so many years, were near-certain of where he would pick. She considered luring him under the guise of work, but there would be no point; he'd watched Malfoy pull her out of the gala, and he was not a fool.

When Hermione pulled a silver sickle from her pocket and set it on the table between them, Harry and Ron pulled out coins of their own, turning their smiles into their shoulders.

"This takes me back," Ron said, much to Malfoy's quiet confusion.

They'd been children the last time she'd placed a coin down before them like this; fifth-years hiding in hidden rooms and preparing for a battle they should have never been expected to fight, alerting each other to the presence of people like Draco Malfoy. The gust of grief and nostalgia almost knocked her clean off her feet.

"If anything in yours changes, you'll know to move," she said, charming them with an ease she wished was not so practised.

They would, she informed them, be stationed far enough away to go undetected, but close enough to reach her if anything were to go awry. Harry seemed marginally comforted by that knowledge, launching headfirst into a list of wards they would set up around the area to ensure any attempts Nico made at escape would be thwarted.

"Vampires can't apparate, so don't worry about adding that to the wards," she said.

Subtly, twin gazes flickered to Malfoy, who tucked his chin in confirmation.

"Shit," Ron breathed.

"But they are fast," she amended. "Strong, too, so be cautious."

Harry scribbled his notes into an overstuffed pocketbook. "Got it. What about you?"

"Leave the wards open enough for *me* to apparate out, if I need to." She shrugged. "Or get Malfoy to run in and get me, if *he* needs to."

"This is very reckless," Harry warned.

"Surely we're used to that by now."

He could not argue with that; their friendship, indestructibly welded, had been forged in the fires of war. Between the three of them, maybe even the four of them, they'd made enough

reckless decisions for a thousand lifetimes, and that was the only reason they were still standing. Sometimes a situation would call for contemplation, other times it called for bravery—it was fortuitous indeed that Hermione was capable of both.

With the plan, which was hardly more than an unfleshed skeleton, in motion, she penned a letter to Nico under the eyes of two senior Aurors and one surly, agonisingly voiceless vampire. Harry left as the owl took flight, with much preparation to be done in order to be ready for Nico's reply, but Ron seemed considerably less inclined to turn on his heel and fold into the world.

He was still there when Tibbs arrived with a bowl of porridge for Hermione, and she saw how his eyes lingered on it, drifting between her breakfast and an empty-handed Malfoy.

“Ron?”

“What about him?” he asked cautiously.

She blinked, her spoon falling into the oats. “What?”

“What will *he* eat?”

Immediately, her skin pebbled and hardened, her spine snapped straight, and her pulse surged with indignation. “That’s none of your business.”

“I think it is.”

Malfoy, with all the slowness of a prowling leopard, curled his lip to reveal two gleaming fangs. “You’re a nosey little fucker, Weasley.”

Ron drew up taller, stepping towards Malfoy—who, to his credit, refused to rise to the bait—with ice in his eyes. He did not look away from Malfoy’s unflinching stare, but when he spoke, it was only to Hermione, “I don’t feel comfortable leaving you here with him.”

She scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve been here with him for weeks.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t know about it then.”

“You knowing about it now changes nothing,” she pointed out, returning to her porridge, no longer concerned about an impending brawl. Tibbs had coated the oats in fresh blueberries.

“I don’t trust him not to—”

“Well, I do.” She spoke around a mouthful. “Can you save it until after we’ve confronted Dr Carlsen, at least?”

Ron looked her way then, a plea in the sapphire of his eyes, and she knew they were going to be just fine—they always were—but for now, the feeling swirling low in her stomach told her Malfoy’s sedimentary exterior was on the verge of cracking, and that meant he had to leave.

“Hermione...”

“Ron.” She offered a placating smile. “I’ll write to you when we have a time and a place confirmed. Until then, I want to be here.”

His returning frown was deep, pulling the tired lines of his freckled face together. It was Malfoy who spoke next in firm, commanding tones that wavered for not a second, that left no room for contention, but above all else, carried an earnestness that was impossible to deny.

“I’m not going to harm her,” he said, looking directly at Ron. “But if I ever do, you have permission to kill me.”

A protest was hot on her tongue, right beside mockery of his dramatics, but she swallowed both back when Ron’s expression softened. Whatever he’d seen in Malfoy’s face, or heard in his voice, had done enough to convince him that the promise was genuine. He’d meant it, every word; he wouldn’t fight back. Ron knew it, Hermione knew it too, the surety sitting in her stomach like lead.

Ron merely offered her a look over his shoulder, one final nod of acceptance, before he disappeared from the library, leaving nothing but cold air in his wake.



Despite her stomach’s strong, growling objection that it was, in fact, too full of nerves to spare an inch for oats, Hermione managed to finish her breakfast. She pushed her empty bowl aside and unfurled the letter for a fourth inspection, taking in Nico’s elegant scrawl, aware that Malfoy’s firm and unblinking eyes were latched onto her the whole time.

“All arranged?” he asked, sounding strained.

“Yes.” She folded the letter and set it aside—it said precisely what she’d expected it to. “I just need to tell Harry.”

Malfoy nodded, his lips pressed into a firm line, a faint rim of purple curved below his muted eyes. Without another thought, she rose from her chair and went to him, curling into his waiting lap. He did not protest; in fact, his hands wrapped around her waist immediately, thumbs climbing her ribs as if to soothe. She took her hair in one hand and pulled it over her shoulder, giving him full, unobstructed access to the flesh of her throat. He stared at the column of her neck with growing concern, watching as she swallowed slowly, realisation trickling into the corners of his eyes.

“No,” he murmured, brushing her hair back over her shoulder and covering her neck from view. “I don’t want you weakened before you meet him.”

“It makes no difference. I could take steroids and he would still be stronger,” she snorted. “You, however, need to be at full strength, just in case.”

He wound his eyes shut, blowing out a harsh breath through flared nostrils. “That *just in case* is killing me, Granger.”

“I know.”

“I want to...” He winced. “I *need* to protect you.”

She threaded her fingers into the soft hair at the back of his head. “You’ll be there to do just that.”

“Not close enough,” he said, eyes darting open to meet hers, pinning her like a thousand little needles. “You’re more apprehensive than you’re letting on.”

Hermione tilted her head and considered all the things she felt: nervous, sure, scared, yes—all of which he could feel, like her emotions were his own. *When you drink from someone, you can feel everything they do.* That’s what he’d told her all those weeks ago, from her makeshift bed in this consuming library.

But it was more than that, and they both knew it.

“I need to ask you something, and I need you to be honest,” she said quietly, cupping his jaw, feeling the way it pulsed in her hands. His fangs slipped free as she pulled his face taut, and it felt like magma moved through her veins, the roar of it loud enough to reach his ears—his widening eyes confirmed as much. “What is it between us? What is this feeling?”

He held her tighter and said, in the steadiest tone she’d ever heard, “You already know, don’t you?”

Hermione looked into his stormy eyes and found every answer waiting there for her. It was all shared; the love she felt was a real, touchable, flowing thing. Their connection was rare, but not abnormal—nothing had ever felt quite so natural as being with him.

“I think I do,” she admitted, sighing with full-bodied relief, bringing her forehead down to rest against his.

“It’s...to cement it, you’d have to...” He inhaled sharply, closing his eyes. “I don’t want you to—”

“We’ve got time to talk about it,” she assured. “For now I want...I want to stay here, I want to help you fix up this manor and turn it into a home, I want to share it with you. You’re in my blood, I just want to be where you are.”

His returning exhale was shaken, warped with shock and pleasant surprise, and Hermione got to witness his lips curl into a wide, unfettered smile. It was beautiful, universe-altering, a vista of rocky mountains and an endless sea of desert dunes, every earthly wonder in the curve of his lips. She leaned back, exposing her throat once more, determined to seal her commitment with the only gift she could give.

“You *are* my blood,” he said, leaning in to speak against her skin, the words gliding like silk. “There is no life but the one we share.”

With that, he cupped the back of her head and sank his teeth into her pulse. Bliss raced through her body with urgency, so different now that they’d admitted to the true depth of his bite, that this connection was not a temporary hunger, but an insatiable need they would sustain for the rest of their lives.

Clothes were shed, as they always were when they shared this scarlet intimacy, and her legs settled on either side of his hips as his cock slid home, his teeth finding purchase in her shoulder next. It was deep, languid, savouring every unhurried thrust, her body clenching to keep him inside for longer, her lips parting to moan his name, her head tipped back to offer him more. There was none of the usual theatre; no demands, no push and pull, just the two of them existing in the moment for as long as it lasted.

He held her heartbeat in his hands—care in the press of his fingertips, love in the points of his teeth.



Hermione craned her neck to look up at the restaurant, the name still unintelligible in its neon cursive, its decadence still obvious upon first glance. It took a staggering amount of will not to glance over her shoulder; she would find nobody within eyesight if she did, but they *were* nearby—she could feel Malfoy’s concern even from where she stood. The building had been scoped, wards had been set, and there was nothing more to do but enter.

Before her resolve could break, she stepped through the doors and into the restaurant. The red carpet was soft and deceptively inviting, for it was the stage upon which she would confront the man she considered a peer—a friend. The tungsten sconces over the wine bar were a familiar sight, as were the lone-stemmed glasses suspended between them, or the serving hatch offering a peek at the extravagant kitchen. One noticeable, startling difference was the presence of people. It was bustling, with waitstaff weaving between full tables, groups of people laughing over shared wine and pointing at menus.

Nico Carlsen did not have access to pluck the same strings the Minister did, it seemed.

It was indisputably better this way, safer with more witnesses, even though a part of her wondered if they were to be used as collateral should things go south. She ignored that thought, walking through the restaurant and towards the table she knew he would be sat at, for it was the same one they’d spent so many hours sharing conspiratorial, or more often *exhausted*, glances at over the recent months.

He was alone, which was a relief, and stood to greet her with a warm smile, as though nothing in the world was wrong. In all the hours Hermione had spent with Dr Nico Carlsen, she'd never seen him looking anything other than perfectly polished. Yet, today his glamours were shed, revealing the truth of him under the clear light of day, and what a bittersweet truth it was; he was taller than he'd previously appeared, broader, carrying that same naturally imposing energy as Malfoy. His face was different, too. Sharper, drawing her eyes to the cut of his jaw and the small tattoo below it that hadn't been there before: two connected diamonds, one layered atop the other. Her eyes lifted back to his with active effort, and when his warm smile curled into a knowing grin, all she saw was the flash of his pointed incisors.

"Hermione," he greeted smoothly.

She dipped her chin. "Nicolae."

He grinned wider, eyes sparking with bemusement, and gestured for her to take the seat opposite him. The table was far too large for two, but the distance was a welcome obstacle, offering her enough space to think while out of his immediate reach. Hermione was stiff in her chair, posture rigid, a stark contrast to Nico's relaxed figure.

For a moment, they could only look at each other.

"It seems unfair," he mused.

She was inclined to agree, but still asked, "Which part?"

"I've removed my disguise, yet you still wear yours."

Nico's eyes fell to her neck, and her hands tightened in her lap. With narrowed eyes and a loud, purposefully petulant sigh, she waved her wand and let her own glamours fall. The fresh bite, given to her only that morning, was now clear on the side of her throat. Nico raised his eyebrows at it, vindication pulling at the corners of his mouth.

"You are not repulsed by us, at the very least," he said.

"You knew that already."

"Yes, I did."

"That's why you picked me."

He leaned back in his chair, arms loose. "It is."

Hermione sat forward, setting her hands flat on the tabletop where he could see them, and levelled him with a look she only hoped fell somewhere between determined and understanding. After all, she wanted him to talk, not to shut down. Therefore, her anger had to be mitigated.

"What did you pick me *for*, exactly?"

Nico ran a hand through his hair as a waitress approached to pour them each a glass of chilled water—he took a long sip from his, but she knew better than to trust anything she’d not poured with her own hands, not while in such dangerous, conniving company.

“I’ve never lied to you about my motives, Miss Granger,” Nico said, wiping a drop of water from his beard.

She scoffed. “Just everything else?”

He laughed then, lifting one shoulder like he knew her words could not be disputed, like he did not even want to try. “Have you read the book?”

“Your ancestor wrote it.” He nodded. “You knew it was at the manor.”

“I suspected.”

“And you sent *me* to look for it, because you *knew* Malfoy was still there, and you killed his father,” she accused.

A flash of anger surged in his face at that, schooled in the blink of an eye. “I did not *kill* his father. I *turned* his father.”

“Then left him to find his own way through a blood haze,” she snapped, pressing her palms against the tablecloth so they wouldn’t form fists. “He attacked his wife, turned his son...you think that responsibility does not fall on your shoulders?”

“The Malfoys made mistakes, that was the price of them. The boy was simply a casualty of war.” Nico raised a hand to stop her visible seething. “I will admit to being young, and stupid, and abiding the bidding of a master I feared.”

“Voldemort?”

Nico flinched, the first crack in his bravado. “You always speak his name so freely.”

“It’s just a name.”

“I suppose it is now.” He put his hands on the table, flat like hers, where she could see them. “All of us were caught up in the war one way or another. You had your role, and I had mine. I paid for it, as you did. I made mistakes I cannot take back, but I *have* learned from them... what we are doing is evidence of that.”

Her mind was in freefall, for it was suddenly all so clear; what he was doing, the blueprints of his design may as well have been etched upon the table space between them. Hermione breathed in slowly, regaining her composure.

“This was all you,” she said. He waited for her to continue, in no apparent rush. “You had Baysangur Anzorov turn the vampires so that we could rehabilitate them. You had them leave enough victims to spark public interest. You had me find the book so we could publish it.”

He smiled slowly. “Well done.”

“Don’t *patronise* me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Did you want me to find out?” she asked, feeling borderline hysterical, the reality of the previous weeks settling on her tongue like salt.

“I hoped.” Nico bowed his head to the table, breathed deeply, then met her eye with blinding conviction. “We used to have integral positions of power within the government. It is only due to ignorance and misconception that we were ousted. What we have now is an opportunity to set the record straight.”

“You already have an integral position of power within the government, do you not? Kingsley clearly values your opinion.”

“And I got here by hiding under several layers of glammers,” he said flatly.

She shook her head. “All the attacks have done is make people more fearful.”

“I disagree,” he said, to which she frowned. “We’ve put the conversation in the headlines. Awareness is everything, Miss Granger. Thanks to Baysangur, the public has someone to blame, and thanks to some respectable titles and your diligent care, they now have vampires to *root for*.”

She lowered her voice to a whisper, “You didn’t need to kill people for that.”

The look he gave her was laced with irritating pity, as though her response was immature, uncalculated, a gut reaction instead of a considered opinion, and it made her stomach churn.

“You and I both know that, historically, this is exactly what needs to happen to bring about change.” His words gave her pause; she could still see the lines of bodies placed along the walls of the Great Hall—too small and too battered. If she closed her eyes, she could conjure vivid images of grotesque injuries, of bones bent in ways they shouldn’t be, of skin peeling in ways she could not fix. Her hands remembered the rough starch of fresh sheets, ready to remake a recently cleared bed. When Nico spoke again, his voice was softer, as though he could see it all too, “You can’t tell me you’ve never bent your morals in times of need?”

Of course she had—she knew it, everyone knew it. She’d done what was necessary for her survival, and the survival of those she loved, but this was not the same situation...was it? He vied for power, she sought peace...right?

“We could have worked together on a campaign,” she said weakly. “We could have—”

Nico’s head shook slowly, almost not at all, but it was enough to silence her.

“And watch it sit under a pile of draft bills until I die of old age? How many of your department’s bills have ever made it to green paper?” Her hands shook against the table, and he nodded, taking it as confirmation enough. “No, Hermione, creating a sense of urgency was the only way.”

The churning in her stomach stopped and curled inward, tearing her open, upturning all she thought was true, all she thought was right, and setting it on its head. It was wrong—Nico was wrong—but he also had a point.

“You told Rowan that society wouldn’t see him as anything more than a creature,” she said.

“It won’t. Not in its current state.” His eyes crinkled with misplaced warmth. “But you and I can change that. After all, *you* told him that he is still a person.”

“He *is*.”

“This is what I mean!” He pointed at her animatedly. “We each bring something to the table that the other lacks. I’m pragmatic, you’re optimistic, I’m competitive, you’re studious, I’m experienced, you’re famous. I am a *vampire*, you are a *human*. Think of all that we could do, if only we aligned our goals.”

She gritted her teeth, feeling her molars grind and creak from the pressure, and spoke through them, “You are being very forthcoming.”

“I told you, I want us to work together. Consider this my pitch.”

“I could be wearing a wire,” she said, which got a genuine laugh from the man before her, the sound kicking her heartbeat into a higher tempo, rattling her ribs until they ached. “You’d be arrested.”

“Would I? Do you honestly think I didn’t put up my own wards?” He looked delighted, but she, however, went instantly cold. She hadn’t *noticed* any unexpected wards. “I know you aren’t wearing a bloody *wire*, Hermione, just as I know you aren’t foolish enough to have actually come here alone.”

She blinked. “I...”

“And neither am I,” he said, low and menacing. Her entire body froze in response. “You already know Baysangur wasn’t my only option.”

Her skin prickled; cold turning to frost, frost to ice, coating her whole body in armour. She did know that; the final attack took place after Baysangur’s arrest, but she hadn’t suspected Nico taking matters into his own hands...which seemed witless, now that she could see him for who he really was.

Suddenly, Hermione became very aware of how quiet the restaurant had fallen, considering there was not a vacant table in sight. She wasn’t sure when it had happened, only that her breath could be heard throughout the room. She turned her head and found every other person in the room looking back at her, unmoving, though intensely focused. She was, to put it lightly, surrounded.

Without wasting another second, she reached for the charmed coin in her pocket, ready to alert Malfoy and get out of there, but Nico was saying something, waving his wand in rapid, unknown motions. Something stung on her waist, not overtly painful, but enough to halt her

movements. She looked down at herself, unsure what she expected to find, blindsided nonetheless to be met with the sight of blood seeping through her shirt. Tentatively, she peeled back the fabric, where a large symbol was carved deep into her torso—the same from the book's leather binding, the same on Baysangur's neck, on *Nico's*.

Hermione turned her attention back to the room at large, which no longer felt large at all, and found that the watchful eyes had morphed into something distinctly different; they were sickly, pale, shaking with anticipation. She hadn't noticed it before, preoccupied with her own nerves, but she noticed it now, could easily place the look in their eyes, for she'd seen it so many times before in Malfoy's.

Hunger.

Her chair kicked over when she leapt from the table, wobbling on unsteady legs, blood dripping from her stomach to her hips, to her thighs, pain shooting through her body like a curse. She shoved a hand into her pocket to retrieve the coin, but Nico was faster, wrapping her in a tight headlock before her fingers could touch metal. She reached up and dug her nails into his forearm, scratching deep enough to draw blood, but he didn't move, didn't even hiss, didn't *begin* to relent. There was no way to wiggle free; he was, after all, much, much stronger.

"Relax," he said into her ear, like he was calming a wild animal.

And wild she felt, clawing at him, legs kicking, her mouth opening to let out a scream she knew Malfoy would hear. Nico caught the sound before she could make it, his hand squeezing violently around her throat, pinning her wrists to her side with his other when she went for his face.

"I said *relax*," he barked. "We don't want to provoke them, do we?"

With blood rushing to her face and her throat protesting its lack of air, she scanned the room again. An ocean of waiting vampires—waiting on *his* word, she realised, for he was their sire.

"Really, Hermione," he drawled, fangs at her ear. "How far do you think you'd get?"

His wards.

He'd set up his own wards. Even if she managed to evade every set of teeth in the room, she'd never make it out of the restaurant.

Nico held her tighter as his hand dove into her pocket. "What have you got in—*shit!*"

A vicious hiss tore from his lips as he threw the coin aside, shaking off the lingering burn. It wasn't much, but it was enough to allow her an inch of wiggle room, and that was all she needed. It was a risky move, but Hermione was no stranger to fear, nor was she new to thinking of solutions despite it, and this room was full of vampires, who, for all their strengths, still had weaknesses. So, she closed her eyes, pictured the kitchen that she'd

always taken the time to peer into upon entering the restaurant, and crossed one foot over the other.

The kitchen materialised as she stumbled out of her apparition, clutching her mangled stomach. If she'd gone any further, she would have splinched herself to ribbons, but the risk had been worthwhile. Panicked, Hermione fished her wand from her back pocket and began piling heavy items by the door and porthole window, croaking spells to increase their weight, barricading herself in—and the vampires out. It was a short-term solution; with that many Vampires, it would take no time at all to get inside, but it bought her a few minutes to think of something else.

She slipped on her own blood as she turned and tried to summon the coin, hoping it would find a small enough gap to pass through—which it did. Blackened and warped from a direct curse, Nico must have tampered with it. With the wards in place and no way to activate the coin, she could not be sure a rescue was coming. Surely, they would be watching close enough to notice something was amiss, but until then, she would need to *think*.

There was a remarkable lack of silver in the kitchen, and no matter how many drawers she ripped open or cabinets she scoured, nothing came to her aid. It was well thought out, she had to admit, that Nico had removed all silver from the restaurant in preparation. It was only a matter of minutes before the door started to cave in, and she was losing blood too quickly to put up a real opposition. The vampires, whose number she had not been able to count, would require only one word of command from Nico to—

Hermione stopped, turned slowly to look at the ruined sickle on the countertop, then down at the pulsing symbol carved into her stomach, and finally at her hands, which were covered in her blood and scrapings of Nico's flesh. The pages of the forsaken book unfurled in her mind, the rituals, the incantation, the requirements to sever the sire's influence:

Emblem of the house.

Carved into her skin.

Vampiric matter.

Buried under her fingernails.

Powdered silver.

"This is stupid," she warned herself, but it was also her only option.

She grabbed a steel bowl and dropped the sickle into it, praying that her message had been received. Then, she pointed her wand at the coin and broke it down into a fine powder. Her magic screamed with fatigue, her body begged for rest, her blood wept from her wound, but Hermione did not stop. She sank to the floor and peeled off her shirt, pouring the powdered silver into her wound, trying not to scream at the sting of it.

When it was done, she allowed herself one fleeting moment of anguish, three tears of dread, and one broken sob.

A slam of the door told her it was time to make haste, so she buried her pity deep, ignored the sudden sensation of utter loneliness, and shoved her fingernails into the wound on her stomach. The scream that filled the room must have been her own, but she was too focused to hear it, too fixated to spare it a passing thought; she knew what needed to be done.

Forged by flame.

With her free hand, she held her wand tight, pointed it at her stomach, and cast on a strangled wail, “*Incendio.*”

Flames engulfed her waist, the silver sparking in the fire, her hand curling away instinctively, though she dug her fingers in deeper and held strong. Her cries were scratched, broken sounds, lost to the roar in her ears, to the blinding, unimaginable, inconceivable pain of it. Yet she kept her hand still, kept her mind focused, kept control of herself.

Because, despite the agony, this was not the worst pain of her life. This was not the drawing room of a darkened manor. She was not under the wand of a sadistic witch with a penchant for torture. If she could survive that night, she would survive this, too.

The words fell from her tongue, just as she practised so repetitively, and maybe they were bellowed, maybe they were thick with rot and scorched flesh, but she said them all the same.

“*Přeříznout lano!*” The room was filled with the scent of sizzling skin. “*Moji mysl je moje! Moje tělo je moje! Jsem osvobozen!*”

The makeshift barricade moved as something, or someone, or many someones, slammed into the door. Behind the lock, she could hear the frenzied screaming of young, hungry vampires.

“*Přeříznout lano! Moji mysl je moje! Moje tělo je moje! Jsem osvobozen!*”

The banging stopped, just for a moment, before starting again with a vengeance. The fire didn’t hurt as much anymore, her body numbing as she inched closer to oblivion, but there was enough energy for one more shout.

“*Přeříznout lano! Moji mysl je moje! Moje tělo je moje! Jsem osvobozen!*”

No noise came from the other side of the door, despite her barricade crumbling under the stress of it. When seconds passed, and the banging failed to return, Hermione rolled to her side and reached for her wand, pulling her blistering hand free of the flames and dousing herself in a screamed *Aguamenti*. The water was painful enough to rouse her again, to have her peer down at her ruined body and take in the battleground; her stomach pouring and raw, the skin of her hand peeled away.

She wasn’t sure if it worked, but hope was all she had left, and she clung to it with burned-off fingerprints. Blood coated the floor surrounding her, some of it cooked, some of it fresh, and she rolled in it, hauling herself up with her one good arm and leaning against the counter, curled in on herself. Tears slipped down her nose, unwillingly shed, and dripped to mix with the blood on the floor. Hermione tried to steady herself, to take a series of deep breaths—all of which came shallow, strained, and wheezed.

Her time as a healer had taught her enough to know that this wound required more complex treatment than her shaking hand could offer. If she could get out of *here*. There was still the matter of escape, which seemed impossible from her position in the corner of a barricaded kitchen, still surrounded by vampires and their machiavellian sire, coated in tempting ichor, unable to reach adequate medical assistance—

The door burst open, her barricade flying into the side wall with a resounding thud that made her withering body jump back into action. Nico stepped inside, his eyes wide and wild as he took in the ghastly scene.

“What did you do?” he asked, sounding genuinely concerned, which was wrong, and confusing, and had her questioning if she’d imagined the last few minutes, if she’d already died.

Weakly, she raised her wand to him. “Stay back.”

“They’re not *obeying* me.”

Her knees buckled, but she caught herself, staring him down through half-lidded eyes. “I’ll fight you if I have to.”

“Hermione, look at you. You’re in no fit state,” he said cautiously, stepping closer. She held her wand tighter, lifting her chin in final defiance, and he blew out a frustrated, impatient breath. “I don’t want to *hurt* you, I want to *work* with you. That’s why I bestowed you with my house vigil, for protection.”

“Protection? From who? *You*? I didn’t want it!” Hermione wheezed. “You didn’t bestow me with anything! You cut me, you sent them after me—”

“Because you weren’t *listening*!”

He inched closer, and she stumbled back, shoes smearing blood along the kitchen linoleum. She didn’t believe him, not a single word, and he must have known it, for he made another move, his arm outstretched.

It didn’t matter, though, because she felt him before she saw him. Her remaining blood settling, her smoke-filled lungs filling with oxygen, her racing heart soothed, because from the corner of her eye, there was movement. Draco Malfoy stepped into the kitchen, as silent as a tiger—he’d never looked so...so viciously riotous, absolutely torn asunder with murderous fury. His eyes were pitch black, his lips pulled back into a snarl, teeth longer than she could remember them being.

In that moment, he was not a man at all.

Her breath caught in her worn throat as she kept her eyes on Nico, not wanting to alert him. Like he had in the forest, when his target was merely an unsuspecting stag, Malfoy stalked up behind Nico and wrapped an arm around his throat, hauling him back against his chest. She saw his teeth flash under the bright kitchen fluorescents, saw his mouth move to form stilted

words in Nico's ear—the sire stunned, writhing, no match for the freshly fed, fiercely angry Malfoy.

“I'm going to fucking kill you,” he growled.

Then he sank his teeth into Nico's neck. Not to drink, Hermione realised, but to tear, and like that night in the hallway when she'd watched him lift Will's feeble body, she acted without first thinking.

“Stop!”

Malfoy halted, looked up at her with glassy eyes, moved them slowly over her ravaged body, lingering at her torso and the ruins there. In a flash, his eyes went from black to a deep, unthinkable red, and she spoke again before he could rip out Nico's throat.

“I need him alive!” she pleaded. He didn't look remotely interested in letting Nico go, but when he looked at her again, devotion and vengeance warring on his darkened face, she shook her head. “Please.”

With a loud snarl, Malfoy pulled his teeth from Nico's neck and slammed the sire's head into the kitchen counter, knocking him out cold. Nico crumpled to the floor, a heap of useless limbs for Malfoy to loom over, looking beastly. It wasn't until Hermione whimpered, no longer able to hold herself upright, that he snapped out of it. He rushed towards her, holding her upright and reaching for his wand, not thinking twice before tending to her wounds.

She didn't have the heart to tell him that any immediate care would only be superficial, for his focus was singular, and it was momentous. The one thing he could not do for his mother, he was now able to do for her without hesitation; his want of her blood incomparable to his want of *her*. When he caught her eye, she could see the same realisation flood his veins, melting his fury and leaving only blood-soaked panic in its wake.

“That's...” he tried, voice cracking.

“Going to need more than a spell, I know.”

Hermione's feet lifted from the floor as he bundled her into his arms, pressing firm kisses into her hair. She couldn't even lift her hands to hold on, but her face found the skin of his jaw, and she breathed him in.

“I thought I was too late. The coins burned, but didn't change, and I thought...”

She huffed a small, pained laugh. “Almost.”

His body shuddered around her, and she might have found the reserves of her strength to offer him comfort, had Harry and Will Prosper not burst into the room at the same second. Will launched himself at Nico, who seemed to be coming to, and placed him in silver handcuffs before casting a full-body bind, ignoring his mumbled protests.

“Shut the fuck up,” Will snapped.

“Will?” she asked, confused, surprised, even *glad* to see him.

“You good, Hermione?” Harry called.

Malfoy answered for her. “No.”

“Healers are outside, take her to—”

“There are...other vampires,” she tried to warn.

“I know,” Harry replied, unconcerned. “Ron’s got them.”

Sleep felt so close, her body was so weak, but she didn’t understand what was going on, so she fought it off. “How?”

Will answered, “Most surrendered, some tried to flee.”

“But he had...wards...”

Harry looked at her, his face twisted with worry. “No, he didn’t. You need to see a healer, Hermione.”

So Nico had bluffed, and she’d fallen for it out of sheer terror. If he hadn’t warded the restaurant, then perhaps his intentions had not been that nefarious after all, perhaps he’d not been lying about wanting to talk. Either way, it was a consideration for another time, when her vision was not spotting at the corners, when her stomach had not been turned inside out, when her body was not half-drained, half-burned, and wholly spent.

Malfoy shared a curt nod with Harry before carrying her out of the bloody kitchen, hurrying through the restaurant to the waiting healers. It seemed to take a lot for him to relent his hold of her, but he managed, settling her down and letting the healers ply her with potions that brought her to the brink of lucidity.

The sconces danced in her swimming vision, haloing him in a warm glow, and she reached between the healers to find him. “Draco?”

He took hold of her good hand, squeezing it lightly. “I’m right behind you.”

She believed him, knew it to be true, could feel it in her heart; he’d follow. When she finally closed her eyes and let her body drop like a stone, the darkness that met her felt familiar, like the hallways of a manor that she would walk for years to come, and it did not seem too dark after all.



In the south bedroom, under the break of dawn, golden light filtered in through the sheer curtains to coat Hermione's naked body in faint warmth. Satin on her legs, gauze on her waist and arms, fingertips checking every available inch of her. There would be scars, that much was to be expected, but considering the damage she'd inflicted upon herself, she'd gotten off remarkably lightly.

Malfoy hunched over her, tightening the bandage that hadn't had the chance to loosen. He'd not left her side since the restaurant; not when the Aurors came to take her statement, not when Harry and Ron arrived to ensure she was fine, not when the healers were running through discharge instructions and explaining medications, and not since they'd arrived back at the manor.

Upon his request, Tibbs had presented a bowl of broth for her to sip from, which came with a severe and somewhat terrifying admonishment from the little elf, who seemed to have finally found her voice. Malfoy then spoon-fed her slowly, blatantly ignoring her complaints that he was going marginally overboard with his self-imposed caring duties.

After he'd bathed her with careful passes of a soft flannel, ensuring not to disturb her fresh bandages, he'd carried her to bed, where he'd been fussing ever since.

"Draco, I'm fine—"

"Don't." He glared at her. "You are not fine."

"I *am*."

"You almost died."

"But I didn't—"

"The next time I tell you something is a *bad* idea, you'll *listen*, Usurper."

She couldn't help but smile at the name, letting it wrap around her like a blanket, a diaphanous embrace that told her he was still there, under this layer of worry, waiting to mock her. With caution, she lifted her bandaged hand to cup his pale face, feeling stubble on his jaw that hadn't ever been there before.

"You're angry with me," she said quietly.

"I'm *in love* with you," he snapped. "And you scared me."

"I know," she murmured, shuffling along the bed. "Come here."

"Your injuries—"

"Please?"

A resigned sigh, but not a denial. Not a minute later, he was slipping under the sheets with her, his skin on hers, his arms holding her steady. She curled into him, letting their heads knock together. They breathed like that for minutes that stretched until time could not confine them, until the undercurrent of panic settled into ripples.

“I love you too, you know,” she whispered.

“Yeah?” he chuckled.

A happy sound escaped her lips, which had him tensing like she’d shocked him with five thousand volts. He propped up onto his elbow, lifting the covers to check her over.

“What is it?” he asked hurriedly. “Are you in pain?”

“Not anymore,” she said, pulling him back down, knocking their noses together, brushing her lips against his, smiling when his sharp teeth nipped at her. “I’m just happy to be home.”

Then she kissed him, and kissed him, and kissed him again. In their bed, in their home, at the start of the life they would have together. She kissed him until she felt his body relax, until his hand threaded through her hair, until he kissed her back—loving, gentle presses of his mouth to hers. She kissed him until the sun filled the sky with the promise of a brighter day, and she knew, as sure as the air in her lungs and the marrow in her bones, that this was exactly where she was supposed to be.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, whores.

God, this chapter beat the shit out of me almost as badly as Hermione beat the shit out of herself. I’m sorry if it fell flat. This is what I get for setting out to write vampire porn and accidentally involving a plot.

Anyway, if it worked, that is very much down to my beta babe. Thanks for lending me your dark and twisted mind, Ebony Dark'ness Dementia Raven Way:

[Miagas](#)

Chapter 13: Thy flowers are withered on the stem.

Chapter Notes

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

Her blood hummed, the soft and soothing melody of a sparrow's song, as she craned her neck before the stone building, which was more glass than wall. It stood proud; well-crafted lines preserved by the caring hands of little elves, resplendent in its nourishment, blooming out of the dwindling overgrowth. The door, which was doubled, each half a labyrinthine display of serpentine metal work, cradled a waiting lock.

She knew, a feeling so settled in her bones that she hardly even noticed the weight of it, that the building housed precious life; the elves wandered the hallways freely, maintaining the magnificence of the structure for as long as they felt so inclined, endlessly loyal and voluntarily dedicated. Just as she knew, with proven surety, that her footsteps would hardly echo alone through the entryway before being met by another set. The gentle kiss of the ornate key in her palm, warmed by the autumn sun, reminded her that she was meant to be here.

Tibbs would hear her call out, would rush to take her coat and ask if she wanted a cup of tea, would walk with her through the passageways of this reignited, historical estate, would sit with her in the vastness of the library and luxuriate in the safety of their shared home. Slowly, she turned the key, listening to the lock rejoice in her return. It gave a low rumble of satisfaction when she leaned her full weight into it, and the scent of freshly picked flowers rushed to fill the opened space.

Happily, the manor welcomed her in.



Hermione stepped out of the lift with a stifled yawn, her heels clicking off the emerald tile that led to the Minister's office, down the long hall and far to the right. The days were long and only growing more so as they inched towards another milestone in the rehabilitation project, which had proven to be a raging success.

The vampires affected by Nico Carlsen's orchestrated attacks were no longer confined to an offshore facility but returned home to spend their days beside their loved ones. It hadn't happened overnight, nor had it happened all at once; it had taken months of slow exposure and much trial and error to reach this tepid equilibrium. It wasn't a clean cut, either. They were still subject to frequent check-ins and weekly appointments with various mind and body

healers, except now, they didn't need to do it alone. Malfoy had taken up the mantle and offered invaluable guidance on their perilous journeys.

The job, which had not existed before he rejoined the world and now could not exist without him, had given him a much-needed second wind in life. He was out of the house almost as much as Hermione these days, working directly from the facility or at the unplotted ward of St Mungo's, offering insight and training recommendations for those young vampires who found themselves lost in the scarlet fog.

Meeting people like himself, helping them, hearing their struggles and relating them to his own had gone a long way in healing some of Malfoy's self-loathing. It would likely never go away for good, especially not with the taste of his mother's fear still so potent on his tongue, but Hermione had never known him to be so content, and that was enough for now.

The vampires liked him much more than they liked Hermione, which allowed her to take a back seat and fall into her preferred role as an observer. She often sat in on his sessions and made notes, detailing the mental and physical changes of the vampires, which grew starker with every passing visit. When Genevieve asked if it would ever be possible to enjoy drinking human blood, Malfoy had not recoiled as he once might have. Instead, he'd lifted his eyes to where Hermione sat in the far corner, a small, reverent smile playing on the corners of his mouth.

"Yes," he'd told Genevieve, but his gaze remained on her. "It can feel like the greatest gift in the world."

She'd buried her smile in her notebook and not recorded another word.

It was only a matter of time, and that time was fast approaching, that the vampires would begin their reintroduction into the workforce. Their previous positions had been temporarily filled during their extended absences, and would certainly not be handed back all at once, but the bar was set, and Hermione had no doubts that they would reach it.

Kingsley's office was already bustling by the time she arrived; the task force's weekly meeting was almost underway. Deputy heads filled the eclectic space, leaned against the hardwood cabinets and gestured animatedly over the globe spinning in real-time. Kingsley stood between two Corinthian columns, the decorative capitals adorned in gold. In the centre was a half-moon table, folded over to make room for the growing company, and only one person currently occupied it.

Elise had returned—not to her post, but to these meetings—though she remained incredibly insular and skittish. When Hermione passed her, she reached out and squeezed her shoulder, a move that had the new vampire flinching, but not pulling away. They shared a tight smile, and it *was* progress, each and every passing day.

"Hermione," Kingsley called, waving her over while everyone else conversed.

She shuffled to his side, head dipped. "Minister."

“It's not *Minister* business for another five minutes.” He bumped his arm into hers, and her hackles lowered.

“You’d better not be trying to swindle me for more of Molly’s Victoria sponge.” She smirked. “She’ll prepare one just for you if you actually show up next month.”

“I’ll be there if I can make it work, but no, it’s not about her Victoria sponge.” He presented a manila folder from behind his back and held it out to her. “Although this might be a disappointment by comparison.”

She glanced between the folder and his face, which was the portrait of muted excitement, then took it with tentative hands. The folder fell open to reveal a signed, headered letter, and her eyes widened as she realised exactly what it read. It was the rights to the manor, revoked from the D.M.L.E and handed to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, more precisely, handed directly to *her*.

Hermione’s mouth fell open, words lost to the overwhelming crash of emotion that pulled her under. While neither Kingsley nor Robards had wielded their power over the manor since she’d moved into it, the threat of surprise entry, of them sending unwieldy Aurors or another unbridled soul to scour it for mysteries, always hung over their heads like a guillotine. Beyond that, the restrictions imposed meant that any major renovations had to run a gauntlet of approval, layers upon layers of procedure designed to frustrate anyone enough to prevent them from bothering.

Now, the approval needed only to come from her, and she was not inclined to make any decisions without Malfoy.

“You were right,” she choked, voice thick with feelings she tried to oust, only to find them collecting along her waterline. “This *is* a letdown.”

He chuckled, clapped her once on the back, and looked over her shoulder to the room at large. “Right then, Miss Granger, you’re in charge of this one.”

She sucked in a sharp breath and stood tall, brushing down the back of her hair with one cupped palm, wiping the moisture from her eyes before it could spill. With a final, fleeting moment of collection, Hermione took her place next to Kingsley at the table. The task force sat waiting, watching her expectedly—even Iwan, who was always prepared to rebuff whatever suggestion she tried to make. Today, though, she was more than happy to blindside him with something he would never expect to fall from her lips: *praise*.

“Morning, all,” she said, clapping her hands together. “Firstly, we ought to take a moment and congratulate Iwan on his assiduous efforts.”

Iwan’s face slackened in shock, growing redder when all eyes turned to him, and Hermione, who so loved to watch him squirm, let her mouth curl into a fearsome grin.

“We heard back from MACUSA today,” she continued. “The date is set.”



“You’re going to Washington?”

“On Friday.”

“For how long?”

She grunted irritably. “Seventy-two whole, glorious hours.”

Nico’s laugh echoed off the damp walls of his murky cell, carrying over the howling sounds of nearby prisoners and the crash of the raging sea below. There was no light in his cell, only what trickled in from the swinging candles in the hallway, casting his hollow face in shifting penumbra. The bars were fortified but poorly maintained, the surrounding sandstone was charmed to never wear, never chip away, and the chains wrapped around his ankles were heavy and rattled with misery each time he moved.

Nico was thinner, despite her demands that they adhere to a strict diet of fresh blood—she hadn’t been able to convince the warden to allow him coffee, much to his chagrin. Indignation flared at the sight of his conditions. The prisoners of Azkaban may well have been criminals, from the war-mongering to the fraudulent, but they deserved a livable space. The entire prison system was in dire need of an overhaul, but it was not her department yet, and Hermione could only eat one meal at a time.

Hermione had forgone the opportunity to apply for the Deputy Head position at the D.M.L.E., for she was needed where she was, and Benedict had been right; she didn’t need a lot of power to do a lot of good. One day, once she had accomplished all she needed to, another, larger door would open, and she could move on. Not today, though, not yet.

“Are you taking your show-and-tell vampire?” he asked.

“Don’t call him that,” she warned. Nico held up his hands in surrender, chains clinking and dragging along the stone floor. “No. This is just an initial meeting.”

“With Harding?”

“And Cyrill.”

“Hmm.”

“What does *that* mean?” she asked, heedful.

Nico tilted his head, pondering, and it was a well-worn back-and-forth between them by this point; she’d had to admit, after much reflection and an arduous trial, that while she may not have agreed with his methods, Nico’s assessment of society was an undeniable truth. The

plans he'd made, his understanding of public perception, all of it was too invaluable to let rot away in an ocean prison.

Ultimately, publishing the book had been a good move, and due to her name, famed connections, and now highly publicised relationship with old school-time bully, war-time nemesis, and traumatically-turned vampire Draco Malfoy, her recent campaigns had been a resolute success. It was difficult to admit just how right Nico had been about it all, especially aloud, though the bars of a cramped cell he would surely never leave. It was even more difficult to admit her own naivety, to admit that she *needed* his guidance, that she *wanted* it.

"Cyrill is a tough nut to crack," he finally said.

"I think that's exactly why they are bringing him along."

"He'll try to throw you off."

"He's welcome to," she scoffed. "The proposal is solid."

The meeting was with the American minister and his hardball adviser to discuss the formation of a large-scale, multi-location string of facilities to assist newly turned vampires, and the adjustment of their label as 'dark' creatures. For all their successes, the one recurring roadblock was funding, and it was time to turn their attention to the globe; the USA had a far greater population of vampires and significant economic influence. If they joined forces—and budgets—other countries may be more inclined to follow suit, even the stubborn ones like Romania, where restrictions made a clean blood supply still staggeringly inaccessible.

"It is," Nico said warmly. "It's *very* solid."

She shifted in her creaking chair. "I didn't write it alone."

"No, but you chose your people well."

"You're only saying that because you are one of them."

He flashed a grin, teeth still sharp and white despite his filthy conditions. "Naturally."

Hermione cleared her throat, unwilling to slip into a cordial conversation, the sting of betrayal still too fresh to ignore, and flipped through the files on her lap. She stopped at the dossier on Cyrill Longhorn and held it aloft for Nico to read.

"Do you have any advice?"

"On wooing Cyrill?" he asked, snorting when she nodded. "You could pretend to love golf. That'll soften him to you."

"That...might not be possible."

Nico's fangs glinted with mischief. "He is known to be susceptible to threats of extreme violence."

Hermione paused, let the dossier fall to her lap, and released a long-suffering sigh. “Dr Carlsen...”

“He’s very fond of his cat, a hairless little thing, should you need a hostage—”

“Nico.”

“Maybe the Imperius, if it comes down to the wire, and—”

“*Nicolae.*”

Nico laughed, a sharp, rebounding sound that cut like a blade, but then his face fell just as quickly, smile lines shifting into a frown. Her chair groaned from the other side of the bars, her stomach dropping to her feet.

“You may not like it, but I wouldn’t change a single thing that happened.” He didn’t say it to be proud, he said it because it was true—she could hardly hold it against him, hardly even *blame* him, when his convictions were what got her to the position she now found herself in. He met her eyes, held them firm. “Sometimes you have to spill a little blood to get anything done...and it can’t always be your own.”

“Maybe so,” she murmured. “Though I doubt it will come to that.”

“You’ve done a good job, Hermione,” he said fondly, utterly earnest. Understanding flowed through the grated bars between them. Their goals were aligned, just as he’d said back at the restaurant. Nico leaned back against the stone, his malnourished body sagging. “I knew all along that this would need to be spearheaded by a human. By *you*, specifically.”

She nodded, knowing that he had, that he’d chosen her, knowing that even now she didn’t want to let him down, didn’t want his trust—however misguided—to go to waste.

“You’re right.” Hermione stood from the chair, brushed the gathered dirt from the back of her trousers, and threw him one last glance before she turned to leave. “But I’ll change that. I promise.”

As she walked away, she heard his lingering chuckle, his long exhale, his quiet reply of, “I believe you will.”



Maybe in the future, distant or not so, after many midnight discussions and reviewed considerations, after several plans and revisions, there will come a day...

At home, which is a manor in the heart of Wiltshire, she lies flat against a bed of soft Bermuda grass; not to give *up* to her desires, as she once thought, but to give *in* to them. Petals from flowers grown in their gardens gather along the lines of her naked body; white lillies, daisies, red fuchsia, honeysuckle—all of them displays of eternal devotion.

She glances down at her body, at the large symbol on her stomach made of taut and risen scar tissue, at the soft curls that gather at her core, at the moisture that coats her inner thighs in anticipation. It was an ever-evolving thing; her body, her mind, her understanding of the world and all its many shades. Silk sits waiting, folded neatly by graceful hands, ready to adorn her at the first sign of a shiver—but not yet, *not yet*.

Malfoy lowers to his knees, eyes set on her, and presses his body to hers. Instinctively, she tilts her head back to offer him unhampered access to the length of her throat, her skin ablaze with the need for his touch, the ache for his bite, the want to provide him with every drop he needs and *more*. Malfoy, however, takes her jaw in his palm and tilts her face back down, bringing their lips together in a slow, exploratory kiss, sending bubbles down the length of her spine.

“Are you sure?” he mumbles, nibbling at the skin below her ear.

“Yes,” she whines, because she’s never been so sure of anything, not in all her years.

He nods, pulls back, and brings his hand to his mouth, keeping his eyes on her as he presses his teeth into his palm, dragging one sharp incisor along the flesh until hot rivulets of blood spill down his wrist. She licks her lips, and slowly, he brings his wounded hand to her mouth.

“Drink, Usurper.”

His command sounds more like a promise, one she is more than happy to accept. Copper meets her tongue, the taste rich and ripe. She takes long pulls, fights to keep her eyes open through the waves of intense pleasure, lets his life source fill her body with warmth.

“*Corpus meum do*,” he whispers. His other hand cups her face, thumb passing over her cheekbones in loving strokes, his eyes dark with unremitting desire. “*Animan meam do*.
Desiderium meum do.”

When she’s taken enough, he presses his lips to hers and licks into her mouth, moans deeply at the taste of his blood and her need. It is otherworldly, completely essential, a feeling she wants to live inside for as long as he’ll allow. With a thumb under her chin, his bloody handprint starkly crimson on her throat, he pushes her head back.

“Ready?” he asks into her collarbone.

And she is. *She is*. She has been since he first appeared in the hallway under fleeting candlelight, so she wraps her arms around his back, presses her fingers into his skin, and smiles up at the high ceiling.

“I’m ready.”

There is a moment of stillness, of tender affection, comfort found in each other's burning, bleeding bodies. Malfoy grins into the curve of her neck, presses a red kiss to the soft skin there, and sinks his teeth into her vein.

Chapter End Notes

Goodbye, beloved blood boy and freaky Hermywormy. <3

As many of you already pointed out, the chapter titles are lines from Byron's [The Giaour](#).

Fortunately for us, our kinky lovebirds had a happier ending.

Everything I write would be very bad (and I would be very, very sad) without the support and pussy jokes from my beloved friends and betas. Thanks for coming with me, yet again. There aren't words for how I adore you, but there ARE slick, sloshing sounds, and I'll send them to you later:

[Miagas](#)

(AKA Undertheglow, she's having a midlife crisis and changed her name)

[Accio_Funky_Pants](#)

Another big thanks to [chaosandcodices](#) for lending her beautiful talents to this fic and bringing Vampire Draco to life in the sexiest way.

This was a very self-indulgent little project, essentially featuring me with several images of opulent rooms and a list of my favourite words to describe them. Thank you for letting me have it, and for being willing to come along for the clit-biting ride.

I don't sleep (less sexy vampire, more chronic insomnia), so I have been working on another fic. It's about chess, and it's all finished. I'll start posting it soon...hope to see you there.

In the meantime, feel free to yap with me on instagram [@ginger_baggins_posts](#)

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