

## Meet Me At Midnight

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# Meet Me At Midnight

by [forawhile](#)

## Summary

NEW AUTHOR NOTE (as at 18/01/2025): This fic will remain up until June 01 2025, where it will then be removed from ao3. Thank you to all who have supported me x

## Synopsis:

When Hermione Granger is accidentally cut by an old Malfoy Family Heirloom, a matrimonial blade, an ancient magic seems to think she is betrothed to the last Malfoy heir, and begins to pull her into Draco's bed every night, at midnight.

A non-epilogue compliant Dramione fan fiction.

Binding queries: all binding requests of this fic have my blanket consent as long as they are for personal use only, with no intent to profit off the bind whatsoever.

- Translation into Italiano available: [Meet Me At Midnight | Traduzione in ITALIANO](#) by [Lunaa\\_slytherin](#)
- Translation into Français available: [Meet Me At Midnight](#) by [Grimm \(Nova\\_Grimm\)](#)

IT STARTS WITH A CUT



Hermione was never going to escape Draco sodding Malfoy.

She rolled her eyes before focusing back down on the blade in the box she had just opened, having spied the Malfoy insignia clearly plated onto the bronze handle. Hermione scanned her eyes over the blade, taking in the glinting silver edges, the delicate cross guard and all the way up to the hilt.

It was quite a stunning design, she had to begrudgingly admit, with the shimmering emerald pommel surrounded by a coiled dragon, devouring its own tail—the ouroboros of the Malfoy family. There was an inscription on the side, too. The words in Latin were intricately carved across the glossy metal.

Hermione sighed as she pulled her paperwork towards her and started to list the details of the item, scrawling *Draco Lucius Malfoy*, as the likely current owner. It had already been a long day—cataloguing was always egregiously taxing—but it became all the worse when she was reminded of the man who seemed to haunt her every footstep since leaving Hogwarts.

Hermione carefully scrawled a detailed note of the blade's visual aspects, before she laid her quill down and pulled her wand from her pocket. She cast several diagnostics on the blade, and then determined there were no magical properties. Hermione noted it and then sat back in her chair, letting out a deep breath.

She couldn't wait to go home. Or rather, she was ready to leave work.

Because home—which was currently living with Harry and Theo in a shared apartment—meant seeing Malfoy, who always joined them for a Monday night dinner every week. An unfortunate consequence of Hermione's best friend being married to Malfoy's best friend. It irked her to no end.

Glancing at her watch, she saw she had thirty minutes left of her day. So, she leaned back towards the Malfoy blade and carefully picked it up, readying to label it so she could send it to the redistribution team, who would research the ownership of the item before returning it to the rightful owner.

"Granger!" came a voice from behind her, and she jumped at the sudden noise in her usually quiet section of the Archives, which were buried deep in the lower levels of the Ministry.

"Fuck," Hermione hissed as the blade slipped in her fright, the sharp edge slicing a little at her palm.

"Oooh, sorry, Granger—are you alright?"

She set her jaw to look up at Cormac McLaggen, who didn't look sorry at all as he leaned over her desk with one hand and smiled down at her.

"I'm fine," she said brusquely before she settled her gaze back to the blade and returned it, now labelled, into the box. She closed the lid with a finger and then looked down into her palm, where a small pool of blood welled. "What do you need, McLaggen?"

Hermione only half-listened as she used her wand to clean the wound and then healed it in one easy flourish.

“—bunch of my friends heading to the pub down the road, would you like to join us?”

Hermione raised her eyes to him. Once up a time, she had been polite to the man. She would have responded with an easy smile and a quiet, but kind refusal. Now, after three years of them both working at the Ministry, with monthly attempts at asking her out, Hermione was over it.

“No.”

McLaggen’s smile didn’t slip, the smugness stayed on his face—like this was some kind of game to him, one that he intended on winning.

Hermione, at this point, would rather date a blast-ended-skrewt, than Cormac.

“Alright, no troubles... one of these days, you’re going to say yes.”

She pursed her lips and slid the box with the Malfoy heirloom away from her, before she set her blazing eyes on Cormac.

“I’d say I’m sorry to have to disappoint you—because I will *not*—but I’m not interested in dating you. Now, I’ve told you before: only bother me if it’s work related, otherwise I’m not interested.”

Some of the smugness slipped away a little, and something dangerous crossed his face, but then it was gone, and he smiled once more.

“No matter,” he said and leaned away from her desk again, taking a few steps backwards while still watching her, “I’ll be seeing you around, Granger.”

Hermione turned away from him before he was out of sight, her irritation falling away from her slowly as she focused back on her job.

*At least today couldn’t get any worse*, she grumbled to herself.

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Draco’s view as the green flames died around him and he stepped from the fireplace, was Hermione Granger wearing a frilly pink apron in front of him.

“Merlin, Granger—that... is terrifyingly *pink*.”

She was standing at the kitchen bench, a large knife in her hands as she cut carrots. Hermione raised her eyes and looked over to him coolly, before she blew a gust of air from her mouth, making a piece of hair fly out of her face.

“Don’t diss the apron, Malfoy,” she said, turning back to her carrots and then held the knife up in the air, waving it for a moment, “I have a knife, and I’m not afraid to use it.”

“Hmm...” he said, considering her as he walked closer, “you would never mar my pretty skin.”

She scoffed, before cutting, rather forcefully, at the carrots in front of her. Then she leaned her head back and shook her curls, clearly trying to tame the strands that had been sitting across her eyeline.

Draco reached for the cabinet to her right, taking out wine glasses automatically, part of his ritual every Monday.

“Shouldn’t you have to wear a hairnet or something?” he asked as the glasses clinked where he set them down, “I mean, I can’t speak for Potter or Nott, but I don’t fancy coughing up hair balls later tonight.”

Hermione huffed but didn’t answer, while Draco opened the refrigerator and pulled out a chilled bottle of wine.

“While I’m certain Potter and Nott are rather used to choking on balls—I am not.”

The knife clattered to the bench as she snorted, then turned around to fix him with a semi-humored glare. “God, Malfoy... do you have to be so crude?”

He pulled the cork from the bottle in one fluid motion, smirking at her. “Yes, and you love it.”

She rolled her eyes and turned back away from him, busying her hands with something he couldn’t see as he poured wine.

“You are always welcome to eat somewhere else, you know, at your own house,” she said in a teasing tone.

Draco’s smirk deepened, pouring into another glass. “Well, you could always find your own apartment, you know, stop living with *married* people.”

Hermione laughed, or rather, huffed out a gust of air that could have been a laugh. She turned back towards him and leaned her back against the bench and then held out her hand towards him as she said, “that’s a bit rich, Malfoy... don’t you still live with your mummy?”

His eyes narrowed over at her, his jaw jutting a little as he swiped up a glass of wine and passed it to her, her fingers curling around the stem and taking it carefully without touching him.

“No, Granger, my *mummy* lives with *me*.”

Hermione took a careful sip, her lips curved up at the corners before she turned away from him once more.

Sighing through his nose, Draco lifted his own glass and took a drink. He grimaced a little, not a huge fan of wine, but he would make do.

“Malfoy!” came Theo’s voice from behind him, and Draco glanced over his shoulder to see him, and Harry entering the living area from the hallway.

It was still just as bizarre to him today, as it had been three years ago, that Draco's best friend had married *Harry Potter*. His childhood nemesis, of all people. But, after working with Potter, both of them Aurors, since leaving Hogwarts, had caused Draco to build a grudging respect for old Scarhead. He wasn't... so bad.

And of course, there was Hermione. The proximity of Hermione to Potter meant that Draco wound up spending an inordinate amount of time with her for the past three years. It had certainly not been an easy road... starting with open hostility and slinging insults, until it slowly morphed into a mildly uneasy truce where all they seemed capable of doing was teasing each other and each trying to gain the upper hand.

While Draco still thought of her as an irritating know-it-all, he had to admit he didn't mind their usual verbal sparring. There was a fire in Hermione, and a gleam in her hazel eyes that was oddly... fascinating to him.

"Nott," Draco said in greeting and then nodded at Potter, who simply nodded back.

Theo bound straight over to the kitchen and plucked up a glass of wine, taking a sip and humming appreciatively.

"Did you hear about Pansy?" Theo asked, the interminable gossip.

Draco raised his brows, half his attention on Hermione as she started sautéing the carrots. He found himself rather fascinated at watching her cook in the muggle fashion, without magic. The cooktop was still an anomaly to him, no matter how many times Hermione tried to explain it to him.

"No, I don't really keep in touch with her," he said, lifting his wine glass to his lips as Potter joined them in the kitchen, making it feel suddenly crowded.

"I heard she started dating Longbottom," Theo said, his arm casually wrapping around Potter's waist and pulling him closer until their hips touched, "and her parents have apparently flung her out on her ass over it."

"That's ridiculous," Hermione said over the crackling sounds of her cooking, turning towards them with a scowl on her face, "Neville is one of the best people I know."

"And he's a pureblood," Theo said, and when Hermione shot him a look, he quickly added, "not that that matters, I'm just saying... for her parents to throw her out is a bit heavy, considering."

"What's their problem with him, then?" Hermione asked, hands on her hips, the picture of haughty righteousness.

Theo shrugged and looked to Potter. "I don't know—did you hear why?"

Potter shook his head. "Neville wasn't very forthcoming; he was a bit... distraught over the whole thing. Feels like he's ruining Pansy's life."

“Hmph,” was the only sound Hermione made as she turned away from them again. She clearly had a lot to say, like she always did, but was holding her tongue, which she rarely did.

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Even though it happened every Monday, Hermione was still entirely unamused by the seating arrangements at the table. There were only four seats, and since Harry and Theo always sat together, Hermione ended up seated next to Draco.

She would constantly send him a perplexed expression at the way his table manners still portrayed that of an exhausting aristocrat. The looks Draco would give her in return were filled with simpering condescension. Because heaven forbid Hermione only utilized ONE fork while she ate her dinner. The horror.

His dinner manner entirely negated the dangerous energy that buffeted from him within the DMLE. His reputation as an Auror was known across all of wizarding England, particularly notorious for his ruthlessness and for being a whip as a curse specialist.

So, it was equally surprising as it was unsurprising when Draco would send a smirk or a sharp silvery look her way, that she would feel stupid flutters in her stomach, which would only fuel her irritation to greater limits. Hermione, knowing herself rather intimately, acknowledged that her fascination with him came from Draco being shockingly competent, something she had always found wildly attractive. It could also be the element of danger he exuded, though that thought needed to be stored away for future analysis, likely not touched again until Hermione was very drunk.

But there were butterflies.

But he was Draco Malfoy.

So, the butterflies needed be killed, at all costs. The insufferable ass should not, by any means, cause butterflies. *The horror.*

If that weren't irritating enough, the silent looks that Theo and Harry exchanged as Hermione and Draco bickered were enough for her to want to start flinging mashed potatoes across the room in protest.

By the time Hermione was clearing the dishes, her hackles were standing on end, her teeth constantly gnashing together.

Hermione was rinsing the dishes in the sink when she sensed his presence behind her, his scent of pine and sea breeze washing over her. She pulled in a deep breath, readying herself for a round of verbal sparring.

“You know,” Draco said, his tone light and teasing, “it would take me all of ten seconds to clean those dishes. Even that's too long, in my opinion.”

Hermione ran a brush across the plate as he placed the empty wine glasses next to the sink. “And while I'm sure ten seconds feels like a long time to you,” she said, sending him a



simpering look while his eyes narrowed at her implication, “I, myself, like to savor the small things in life. Cleaning after a meal allows me to appreciate the food, the company, and everything involved. I don’t need to rush through life using magic in order to enjoy it. I enjoy it just as it is.”

“Do you really enjoy cleaning dishes?” he asked, leaning his hip against the counter, facing her, “I thought all you enjoyed to do was act superior to everyone around you.”

She snorted as she plucked up a wine glass and dunked it into the soapy water. “You only think that because when we’re in the same room together, I *am* superior.”

“Oh, you are a witty little thing, Granger,” he said in a low voice laced with humor, “don’t make me spank you.”

She had been reaching for the next wine glass, but his words had her hand faltering around the stem, and she almost knocked it over. Draco’s hand shot forward with the reflexes of a trained Auror, and they both grabbed it at the same time. The moment their fingers brushed, a sharp sensation on the inside of her palm struck her and Hermione withdrew her hand with a gasp.

Draco looked to her with a shocked expression as she cradled her hand to her chest, his face then morphing into confusion mixed with irritation. “Oh, come now, Granger. That’s an over-reaction if I’ve ever seen one.”

“No, I...” she unfurled her fingers and stared down at her palm, bewildered to find the slice across her skin, welling with fresh blood.

“Oh, fuck,” Draco muttered, seeing her blood, “how did that happen?”

Hermione glanced up at Draco to see him look over at the wine glass, which wasn’t broken, not a sharp edge to be seen.

“I... it was...” her brain muddled through the cut she had sustained earlier in the day, by the Malfoy heirloom. But she had *healed* it. She met his stare, feeling confounded in every way. “...this happened earlier, the very same cut... but I’d healed it...”

Draco’s brows pulled together as he took in her words and stared down at the blood, a trail of it now sliding down the side of her palm. He met her gaze.

“What do you mean?”

Hermione huffed, gathering her wits once more. She moved for her wand, and vanished the blood, cleaned at the cut, and then with heavy concentration, she cast a healing spell. The slice in her skin knitted together, just as perfectly as before.

When she was done, Draco was still staring at her.

Hermione leaned against the bench and crossed her arms over her chest, meeting his gaze. “I was cataloguing some miscellaneous items at work today. I came across a small blade, one with the Malfoy insignia and ouroboros on it.” Draco’s eyes flared in surprise, but then they

settled back to normal quickly. “I was... taken by surprise for a moment, and accidentally cut my hand on it,” she explained and held up her hand, palm facing him, “right there, same place.”

“That’s... odd,” he said, his eyes scanning over her hand until Hermione let it fall to her side, which drew his gaze back to hers, “what kind of blade?”

Hermione shrugged. “My best guess from the details of it is that it might have been some sort of ceremonial blade. Once it goes through the redistribution team, it should be sent back to the Malfoy family—to you.”

He looked at her thoughtfully. “Any magical properties?”

Hermione shook her head. “Not that my diagnostics picked up on, but I suppose some magic runs deep enough to be undetected unless you know what you’re looking for.”

Draco nodded slowly, a dark, pensive look on his face.

“...and was it... when I touched you, that the cut appeared again?”

Hermione swallowed and then nodded. “Yes, I think so. Do you think it would happen again?” she asked cautiously.

His eyes darkened a little further as he considered her question. “I can’t say I’m eager to find out.”

Hermione had been looking questioningly down at her palm as his words registered and she swung her gaze back up to his. She tried not to misinterpret his words; sure that it had nothing to do with not wanting to cause her pain. Though, Hermione couldn’t think of another reason why he wouldn’t want to test it out.

Flutters.

Hermione inwardly cringed as she mentally stomped on the butterflies.

“Alright,” she said, “well it’s healed now. And perhaps I’ll have another look at the heirloom tomorrow, maybe dig deeper into a possible magical background.”

Draco nodded. “Yes, do. And if you can’t find anything, bring it up to my office. I’ll get the curse breakers to have a look.”

Shocked, she stared at him. “Do you think it’s a curse?”

He shrugged, a little too nonchalantly for the topic. “Who knows with anything that came from the Malfoy family. We have a rather... nasty history of hoarding a multitude of dark and cursed objects.”

Hermione licked her lips, a measure of apprehension filling her at the thought she had potentially cut herself with a cursed blade.

“Don’t worry, Granger,” Draco said, regaining her attention, to find him smirking a little at her, “I’m sure the worst possible outcome is that you can never touch me or any of my descendants ever again.”

Hermione felt a smile tug at her lips. “What a shame,” she said, voice thick with sarcasm, “I might have to end it all at the very thought.”

His smirk deepened. They looked at each other. A throat cleared.

Draco looked over towards Harry, who had entered the living area, unbeknownst to either of them. Hermione turned back to the dishes and continued to wash as though nothing had ever interrupted the task.

“Malfoy,” Harry said, in a mildly droll tone, “I wanted to talk to you quickly about the Tattersall case, if you could spare a minute.”

“Sure,” Draco said casually, and then he was gone from the kitchen, taking his pine and sea breeze scent with him.

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True to Hermione’s nature, she had excused herself not long after Draco left their apartment to hunker down in her bed in her oversized shirt and pulled a number of textbooks in front of her, immediately starting to research cursed objects and cuts.

It took three hours for her to give up on her research, sure that none of the books at her disposal had anything useful inside.

Hermione sighed, resigned to waiting until the next day to pull the Malfoy blade back from the redistribution team in order to test it further.

It didn’t take her long to fall asleep after turning off her lights, her eyes closing, and her mind drifting away with exhaustion.

A sharp, cracking sound roused her an indeterminate amount of time later.

Something bounced underneath her, her mattress moving oddly, jostling her unpleasantly. Hermione groaned, scrunching her eyes tightly shut as she rolled over.

She felt cold all of a sudden, and Hermione reached out for her blankets, fingers scrabbling across unfamiliar feeling sheets. Confusion clouded her drowsy brain.

“Granger?” came a gravelly voice from beside her, “what the fuck?”

Hermione’s eyes flew open at the sound of the male voice, her pulse skyrocketing with panic. In the blackness she could see the dark shape of a person in the bed next to her, and she screamed, scrambling to the side to reach for her wand, but nothing was where it was supposed to be, and in the next moment, she was falling in a wild flail of her limbs, to the ground.

“Oof,” she grunted as she hit the ground, hard, on her tailbone.

A light erupted quickly from somewhere in the room, and Hermione squinted against it from her position on the floor, and then someone appeared from around the side of the bed. Hermione looked up at Draco Malfoy as he towered above her, wearing pajama bottoms and nothing else.

Her chest hitched with her sharp breaths as she stared at him. “What are you doing in my bed!” she demanded, voice slightly hysterical.

“Your bed?” Draco demanded roughly, “*you* just appeared in *my* bed!”

“Wha—” Hermione stuttered and then her gaze left Draco’s heaving bare chest to look past him, noting the dark timber of the walls behind him. Then she looked around, her eyes widening as she took in the plush red carpeting, the large expanse of the room, the unfamiliar portraits on the walls. Her breaths escalated as she realized she was not in her own room anymore. “How... what am I doing here?”

“Fuck if I know,” Draco said exasperatedly.

Shakily, Hermione pushed herself to her feet, and it was then that she looked down at herself. She was still only wearing her oversized shirt, with only her knickers on underneath. Her face reddened as she tugged on the edge of her shirt, which only just covered her private bits.

“I... must have apparated?” Hermione said, perfectly addled, and then her brain caught up with her words, “... except I don’t have my wand...”

They looked at each other, and something dawned on Draco’s face, just a moment before her own brain ejected a thought.

“The heirloom.”

“That fucking blade.”

They had spoken at the same time, and then their words floated around Draco’s room as they both stayed silent for several heartbeats.

“Alright,” Hermione said, trying to regain her composure, despite them both being in woefully undressed states in front of one another, “so... the heirloom definitely has some kind of imbued magic, if it sent me here.”

“You think?” Draco spat, before he reached up with both hands and rubbed over his face. He dropped them and fixed her with a glare. “I about hexed you within an inch of your life, appearing in my bed like that.”

Hermione glared right back. “It’s not like I did it on purpose!” she spat back, “I fell asleep in my own bed, never in a million years did I think this was going to happen!”

Draco pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. “Okay... alright...” he loosed a hoarse breath before he looked at her again, “was there anything else about this blade of note, that

you can recall?”

“It had an emerald in the pommel, a dragon coiled around it, tail in its mouth...” Hermione trailed off and thought back, the images flashing across her brain, and then the inscription came back to her. “It was inscribed in Latin,” she said slowly, trying to remember the exact wording, “erm... *inter se amamus et vitam communem*.”

She watched with a growing dread as Draco’s face hardened, his eyes darkening with each word.

Hermione swallowed her apprehension. “...what?”

“The translation is... roughly... together or with each other we will love and live jointly, or live joint lives. Something... like that.”

Hermione searched his eyes. “Okay... and why do I feel like you know what that means? About why the magic brought me here?”

“I have a theory,” he muttered darkly.

Irritation swamped her. “Well do fucking share, Malfoy, consider me waiting with bated breath!”

He exhaled roughly through his nose, his eyes flashing dangerously at her.

“The heirloom is likely a matrimonial blade, used for marriage ceremonies,” he said slowly, folding his arms across his toned chest, “from what I can recall, the old Malfoy traditions called for blood-sharing to bond two people together for eternity.”

Hermione’s mouth dropped open a little as she took in the information. She cast around for a coherent thought while the implications struck her on all sides.

“What... what does that mean exactly?”

“Well,” Draco said, the hint of a smirk on his face, though it held none of his usual mirth, “it would appear that, because you were cut by it, the blade thinks you have married the last Malfoy heir... which would be me... and has... uh... brought you to me.”

She stared at him, dumbfounded. “Brought me to you?”

“Well, yes,” he said, as though it were obvious, “to consummate the marriage,” Draco looked over to the clock on the wall, “at midnight, it would seem.”

Hermione almost choked on the gasp that flew from her mouth.

“That... that’s just...” Hermione covered her face with her hands, “fucking ridiculous.”

“Agreed,” Draco said.

She dropped her hands and scowled at him. “Right, I’m out of here. And tomorrow, I’m going to throw that fucking heirloom into the fire and watch it burn.”

Hermione stalked over to his bedroom door and wrenched it open.

“The floo’s down the hall,” Draco said a little gruffly, “it’s already connected to yours.”

She just nodded once and then was out the door, pulling it shut a little too hard behind her. Hermione had only taken a single step, when her body was wrenched through time and space with a snapping sound, and suddenly, she landed in a slump back on Draco’s bed.

She made a small squeaking noise out of surprise, which had Draco looking over his shoulder at her, his eyes having been cast on the door Hermione had just left through.

He turned fully towards her, sprawled on his bed. His eyes narrowed.

“Well... *fuck*,” he said.

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Hermione had been dumped, quite unceremoniously, across his sheets five times over now. It seemed that if she tried to leave his bedroom, whatever ancient magic was at play here, brought her right on back.

“Ugh!” Hermione grumbled, slamming her fists into his mattress when she landed again, thighs on full display under whatever bizarre sleep shirt she was wearing.

Draco just watched her temper tantrum, slight amusement clouding his puzzlement over the situation.

Hermione slid herself to the edge of the bed, and he half expected her to try again, out of sheer idiotic determination. But she just sat there and let her head fall into her hands for a moment before she looked up to him, grasping at the sides of her neck.

“Any ideas, here?” she said.

He shrugged one shoulder, a thousand ideas running through his head, but he banished most of them. Draco started to pace as he thought.

“Part of the issue here is that the magic will be expecting us to...” he shot her a quick look, finding her eyes tracking his movements, “you know... and there was something in the old marriage ceremonies about having a binding contract for the female, bound in their shared blood brought forth by the blade.”

Hermione’s brows creased. “A contract for the female?”

He stopped pacing to regard her. “Yes—the inscription says something along the lines of joint lives, joint love, joint *pleasure*—it makes it necessary for the wife to experience as much pleasure as the husband during consummation.”

Hermione scoffed, rolling her eyes. “How magnanimous of you Malfoy men,” she said with thick sarcasm, “because it’s far too hard to just give your wife an orgasm without a magical contract. Bleeding fucking christ.”

Draco just sighed as he watched her shake her head, curls flying about her head.

Finally, Hermione’s sanctimonious moment ceased, and she looked back to him, eyes narrowing a little. “So... what is that supposed to mean? You said you had an idea—what does... *that*... have to do with anything?”

Draco smirked at her. “Finally caught on, did you?” She huffed, her nose wrinkling in her irritation, which Draco found... a little too distracting. “I guess my theory is that since only you were cut with the blade, not both of us, that if you... uh... how to put this delicately...?”

“Have an orgasm,” she said bluntly, face suddenly impassive.

His gaze swung to hers sharply, not entirely expecting her to have said it.

He just raised a brow before nodding. “Yes, that could possibly trigger the magic to fade away, thinking the ceremony was complete.”

Hermione’s jaw worked as she pondered, her eyes glazing a little, clearly sinking into her thoughts for a moment.

“Of course,” Draco said, “that’s only a theory, and we can explore other options in the first instance. Get more information on the blade tomorrow, cast more detection spells.”

Her eyes shot back to his. “And what... I wait here, stuck in your room, unable to leave?”

Draco raised his arms and let them fall back his sides. “I don’t know, Granger—I’m guessing here.”

She stared at him for a moment, and something sparked in her hazel eyes that Draco found intimidating... something he would never admit to another soul as long as he lived. Hermione Granger was probably the only person in the entire world who could ever hope to intimidate him.

Finally, after several beats of silence, she spoke, “could always try your first suggestion, see if it frees me from the magic.”

Draco felt his jaw clench at her words, felt his stomach flip stupidly. He kept his face stony as he stared at her.

“I’m *not* going to fuck you, Granger.”

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Hermione’s eyes rolled at his reaction. She could have guessed he would say exactly that. It was a very good reminder for her to squish every single one of those pesky butterflies.

She stood from the edge of the bed to bring them on a more even playing field. Although, to her supreme chagrin, Draco still managed to tower over her with his tall frame.

When she said nothing, Draco seemed to think he needed to say more.

“You’re not my type,” he said, his silver eyes moving over her body, and she was far too aware of her bare legs at the perusal.

Hermione scoffed. “And what is your type, Malfoy? Leggy, blonde and with blue eyes?”

His brows twitched, a smirk starting. “Are you just describing the opposite of yourself?”

She set her hands on her hips. “Well, if I’m not your type, I could only assume.”

Draco laughed then, and the sound sent shivers down her spine. He pierced her with his silvery gaze. “I never said I found you physically unappealing, you’re a pretty girl, Granger,” something pathetic swooped in her stomach at those words, then immediately died at his next ones, “it’s the know-it-all swotty attitude that I find particularly detestable.”

She exhaled roughly and glared at him. “Well, count your lucky stars, Malfoy—” Hermione took a few steps towards him until they stood close enough to touch and she smiled coyly up at him, “—because I never said you had to give me the orgasm.”

Hermione watched with satisfaction as his eyes flared open. His mouth opened, and then closed. His throat bobbed as he swallowed, and her smile widened just a bit.

Then, he said, “Or, you could just wait until morning, see if it wears off.”

Hermione pouted up at him teasingly, enjoying it a little too much to see him squirm. “What is it Malfoy, are you afraid of a bit of female sexuality?”

Draco’s mouth twisted as he looked down at her. Then his own small smirk appeared, and he leaned in towards her, eyes flashing dangerously.

“Don’t make me call your bluff, Granger, I’ll let you do it.” Her heart suddenly started to hammer, and her lips parted as his silver eyes flicked between hers. “And you’ll live the rest of your life knowing you touched yourself in my bedroom.”

Something squeezed in her abdomen, a coil tightening somewhere, making Hermione feel like she wanted to rub her thighs together. She sucked in a shallow breath as they watched each other.

After a moment’s pause, Hermione stepped away, removing her gaze from him and sighing. “Fine, I’ll wait it out till morning,” she started walking over to his bed and whipped back the covers on the side that he hadn’t been sleeping on. Hermione paused to look over at him. “You better not snore.”

He chuckled darkly as he moved himself over to the other side of the bed. “I’m a gentleman in all things, including the way I sleep.”



Hermione laughed a little as she climbed into his large bed. “Gentleman? There’s nothing gentle about you.”

The bed dipped and shifted as his large frame moved in under the covers. His eyes floated over to her, and then he whispered a quiet spell, and all the lights went out suddenly, before he said, “you don’t know how right you are, Granger.”

\*\*

Hermione was surprised that she had managed to fall asleep at all, but she had.

When she awoke, warm and comfortable in the plush bed that belonged to Draco Malfoy, she slowly opened her eyes.

Her brain was still foggy with sleep as she took in how close he was to her. They had fallen asleep in the small hours of the morning; both facing away from one another and had each basically hugged the edges of the mattress. Now, they were both nearly in the center, facing one another.

Hermione stifled a yawn and rolled onto her back, staring up at the canopy of the bed.

Draco stirred next to her, and after a few moments of silence, he shifted away from her, rolling to his back also.

“Merlin...” he said in a gruff, sleepy voice, “I hoped that had all been a nightmare.”

Hermione looked over to the clock on the wall. It was just past seven in the morning. “Sorry to disappoint, Malfoy.” She slid from the bed and padded softly over the carpeting towards the door of his room. “Now to test it out.”

She heard Malfoy sit up in his bed as she turned the handle and opened the door. Hermione looked over her shoulder at him, he was watching intently, before she faced out into the hallway and then took a step.

“Oomph,” Hermione uttered as she landed with a flump right next to Draco on his bed. She sat herself up slowly and turned to face him. “Well, that didn’t work.”

Draco’s head fell into his hands, and he groaned.

“What now, smartass?” Hermione asked, taking her frustration out on him, even though none of this was actually his fault.

He turned his head to glower at her. Then he flounced from the bed and moved over to his armoire, pulling the doors open. “I’ll tell you what now. You sit tight, and I’ll head to the Ministry.”

Hermione jumped from the bed. “Like hell, Malfoy—you are *not* going to leave me stuck here!”

He threw a shirt on, buttoning it quickly, before he stripped off his pajama bottoms—Hermione cutting her gaze away quickly but not before seeing the long lines of his muscled legs—and changed into trousers.

“We don’t have much of a choice,” he said, turning back to face her and pulling a robe across his shoulders, “I need to get my hands on the heirloom, figure out what’s going on.”

Draco began striding for the door and Hermione raced after him.

“Malfoy, wait—you can’t—”

He had gone one step beyond the threshold of his room when a sharp popping sound echoed through the room and Draco disappeared. Hermione heard him land on the bed behind her as she turned to see his stunned form lying back on the messy sheets.

Hermione couldn’t help it.

She laughed.

Hysterically.

“Well...” she said in between fits of giggles, “... perhaps we should have seen that coming.”

Draco sat up slowly on the bed, then he pulled himself to standing and just... stood there. After a moment, he cut his gaze back to hers.

“Fine, Granger,” he said a little darkly, “you get your wish... time for you to walk the walk.”

Her heart descended to the floor. “Wh-what do you mean?”

He strode towards her and came to a stop directly in front of her. “Time for you to trick the ancient magic into thinking we’ve consummated,” his eyes searched hers as the color drained from her face, then the corner of his lips lifted, “and don’t take too long, I’d like to make it to work on time.”

She scowled up at him. “But I... you can’t even leave! I’m not doing that with you in the room!”

Draco just smirked. “Where’s your bravado from last night, huh? Where’s all your pious soliloquies about *female sexuality*?”

Hermione swallowed uncomfortably, and her hands came together, fingers fidgeting with nerves. Draco seemed to sense something shift in her, and he took a step back, his face softening just a bit.

He sighed. “Don’t worry, Granger. I’ll send a patronus and request some assistance.”

Draco pulled out his wand.

“No,” she said, and she shook her head when he looked over at her, “no... don’t, I—I can fix this. We don’t need to tell anyone about this.”

His eyes narrowed on hers. “That’s not necessary, we can ask Potter to—”

Hermione cut him off quickly. “Absolutely not! I don’t want him knowing a single thing about this whole mess. This is my fault—I’m the one who got cut, so I’ll... I’ll fix this.”

Draco’s jaw flexed, and he seemed to be considering her, then finally his face smoothed out to his usual default, stony exterior.

“Fine, do as you please—” he smirked, “—pun intended.”

Hermione pulled in a deep breath, her pulse pounding in her fingertips. Her eyes cast around the room for a moment, feeling anxious and awkward.

“Um... go stand over by the window and face that way.”

Draco stayed still for one moment more, before he acquiesced and moved with long-limbed strides to the window and faced out into the white light of the early morning. His arms reached up to brace himself on the windowsill and he leaned there, looking stiff and tense.

Hermione swallowed, looking around uncertainly and then slowly made her way over to the bed. She laid herself down and stared up at the canopy. Then she closed her eyes.

She wasn’t a stranger to touching herself, bringing herself to climax. Hermione would usually picture foreign hands, mouths and tongues in order to get her body hot and ready before using her fingers to get her over the edge.

It was entirely different to be in an unfamiliar environment, with a literal audience, one who essentially finds her repulsive.

Hermione was breathing a little roughly, her chest rising and falling quickly as she felt herself starting to panic, unsure she could actually do this.

“Calm down, Granger,” came Draco’s low voice from over by the window. She turned her head to look at him. He was looking out the window, his fingers gripping onto the windowsill. “The whole point of this is to relax, and it really sounds like you’re not doing that.”

The low tones of his voice washed over her body, making goosebumps sprinkle the bare skin of her legs. She cringed and looked away from him, back up to the canopy of the bed.

“Relaxing... is a little hard, right now.”

“Yes... I imagine so... you don’t have to do this, you know.”

Hermione bit at her lip, then rested her hands over her stomach. “I know, but I don’t see another way right now.”

“Then just... try taking a deep breath and do what you need to do.”

Hermione nodded, even though he couldn't see her. She closed her eyes again and tried to picture a different environment.

Her usual fantasy roamed into her mind. Being in a club, surrounded by numerous dancing, sweaty bodies. Hermione writhing in time to the music with another man, their bodies brushing against each other in beautiful friction, their eyes meeting with a heated gaze. Finding their way to a quiet corner to touch each other, before she was pulled into a secluded area, mouths finding each other in a passionate embrace. It was her favorite fantasy, one born of heat and need and wild, frenetic desire.

Hermione's hands drifted to the edge of her oversized shirt and pulled it up to expose her knickers, and then she breathed in a shaky lungful of air before she pushed her hand into them.

She ran a finger softly through her folds, but there was no real heat there and she was... dry. There was the smallest pulse of arousal, but nothing like what she needed. Hermione bit at the edge of her lip, squeezing her eyes shut as she tried to concentrate, to remove herself from where she truly was, and imagine something erotic... something that would get her hot.

Her finger moved through her folds, dipping into herself for a moment to try and gather some wetness, before coming back up to her clitoris, but there was hardly a spark. Her eyes opened with frustration.

This wasn't going to work.

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Her next sigh was not a happy one. At least not the kind that would insinuate this was going to work.

Draco gritted his teeth, his fingers biting into the wooden frame of the windowsill. He was trying *very hard* not to think about what was happening behind him. He certainly *did not* have Hermione Granger in his bed, touching herself. *Not at all.*

Suddenly, her voice floated over to him, sounding smaller than he had ever heard before, “Malfoy, I...”

His eyes fell shut, his voice coming out deeper than usual, “what is it?”

“I... I can't concentrate, I need...” her voice trailed off, something like desperation and humiliation mingling together.

Draco swallowed roughly. “What do you need?”

A long stretch of silence accompanied his question. Then finally—

“Talk to me?”

Draco's shoulders tensed, his brain short-circuiting as he processed her words.

"What?"

A quiet sigh from behind him. "Just talk... say something to me."

Draco pulled in a few, quickened breaths. His default response was on the tip of his tongue: that this wasn't his problem, that she should figure it out on her own... but then he found himself saying, "alright... like what?"

An indignant huff, a sound that went straight to Draco's groin. "I don't bloody know, Malfoy, use your imagination!"

"Merlin," he gritted out, bowing his head low between his arms, his brain going at a mile a minute. He was usually very good at this... at seducing women, at talking them through the finer points of foreplay and sex. Draco prided himself on it, in fact. But... this was not an ordinary sexual situation. The finer point of his hesitation being that this was *Hermione Granger*, on his bed, asking for his help to... get off. A small shiver skated down his spine. "Fine then," he ground out before he pulled in a deep breath, trying to remember what he would usually do to turn a woman on. "Tell me then, Granger... do you have your hand between your legs?"

A pause, in which he wondered if she had even meant for him to talk dirty to her. Then, a quiet, "yes."

*Fuck*, Draco thought roughly.

"A-and you're touching yourself?"

"Yes."

Draco took just a second to recognize that his cock was already hard in his trousers, and he swallowed against the sudden onslaught of his own arousal. He shook his head, gathering his sense.

"Okay, love... you're going to imagine that it's not your tiny, nimble fingers touching you, but... mine." He almost growled at the visual he was painting for her. "You're going to picture it's my fingers that are spreading your pretty thighs and parting your folds so I can see every bit of you."

He heard Hermione let out a quick, sharp breath. This time, he didn't think it was a frustrated breath. His heart sped up infinitely.

"...It's my fingers that's smoothing slow circles over your clit, making you writhe all over my bed sheets. And you'd be so wet for me... are you wet, Granger?"

A little, feminine moan floated to his ears, and his fingers tightened even further around the edges of the windowsill.

"Yes..."

“*Fuck*... are you—are you touching your breasts?

“N-no”

“Do it,” Draco commanded through clenched teeth, his eyes falling shut as he pictured it. “Use your other hand and play with those gorgeous tits, but imagine that it’s my hand touching you in a place you’d never have let me touch before... it’s my fingers pinching those pretty nipples. Are they hard, Granger? Your nipples?”

Another soft, breathy moan. Fuck, his cock was so hard in his trousers.

“Mmm...” came her soft assent, “yes... they *oh* are...”

“Good, love... how I’d love to close my mouth around them, one at a time. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Hermione didn’t answer this time, but he heard her quickened breathing, imagined her fingers moving quicker around her wetness, her desperation increasing.

Draco groaned himself, before saying, “you’re not a prude at all, are you? You fucking love this... love the way I’m talking to you, don’t you?”

Another sharp breath, following by a small whine in the back of her throat. “God,” Hermione breathed, “don’t stop...”

“Fucking hell, Granger...” and then Draco lost all sense and control of the situation, “I used to think about this sometimes, what you would look like spread open for me, what you would feel like under my hands... what you would sound like.”

Sharp breaths, soft moans, bed sheets shifting as Draco pictured her back arching.

“I... I want to walk over there, wrench your hand away and use my finger to fill you... because you’d be so tight, wouldn’t you? I’d get a second finger in, but you’d be swallowing me so tight I would feel every inch of your wet cunt around my fingers. Fuck, I want to watch my fingers sinking inside of you... you’d be so warm and wet and fucking delicious...”

Draco sensed the moment it changed, as she started to chase the climax down. Her breathing was wild, her moans shorter and closer together. Realizing she was close had his own breaths coming in pants, his trousers feeling uncomfortably tight, his hands turning white as he gripped the wood.

“God, Malfoy...” Hermione said breathily.

Fuck fuck *fuck*. “That’s it love,” Draco urged, “you’re going to come for me, aren’t you?”

“Fuck... yes...”

“Just for me?”

“Mm... yes!”

He gritted his teeth, using every ounce of his willpower not to turn and watch what she looked like when she orgasmed, when bliss riddled her body. The sounds she was making was enough to cause Draco to feel like he was coming undone himself, like a single pump of his own fist over his cock would have him spurting everywhere like a horny teenager having his first wank.

“You sound fucking amazing, Granger. I want to sink myself inside of you just to feel your walls flutter around my cock while you come. That’s it... show me what a good girl you are...”

Her sounds crested, a loud, lingering moan emitting from her. It hit Draco like a freight train, the sound washing over him until he almost couldn’t take it anymore. It was the most delectable sound, and he fucking wished she would make it against his mouth, while he was buried deep inside of her.

They were both quiet for a long time, only their joint sounds of their panting could be heard through the room.

Draco didn’t move a muscle, letting Hermione tell him when he could turn back around.

He waited, as patiently as he could, until she said, “I... I’m decent.”

Draco turned around slowly. Hermione was sitting on the edge of his bed, facing away from him. He didn’t move away from the window while she stood up and took a few steps, before she finally looked over to him.

Hermione’s cheeks were flushed a deep red. There was a brightness, a wildness behind her eyes that Draco found wholly attractive. He swallowed as he watched her fidget with her fingers in front of the hem of her shirt.

Then her eyes flicked down, and a small smirk lit up her lips. “Feeling a little... frustrated there, Malfoy?”

Draco didn’t need to look down to know she referred to the rock-hard evidence that he found that ridiculously arousing. He just met her gaze unabashedly. “I wouldn’t be so smug, Granger. I now know what you sound like when you come.”

Her mouth fell open, before her eyes narrowed on him. “Well... touché,” Hermione said begrudgingly, “aaand now I’m leaving,” she whirled around and headed for the bedroom door, muttering as she went, “God, please let me leave...”

She held the door handle, gripping onto it for a long moment. Then she pulled it open and took a tentative step. Then another. Then one more... and Hermione turned around to face him.

Draco strolled over, too, and stepped over the threshold, until they were both in the hallway. There didn’t seem to be any magic which was pulling them back to his bed.

“Huh,” Hermione said, casting him a sly glance, “the power of the female orgasm.”

Draco rolled his eyes.

“Now... I’m getting the fuck out of here, and we—” Hermione sent him a pointed stare, “—will *never* speak of this again.”

Draco's answering smirk seemed to make her falter. “Whatever you say, Granger.”



# IT DID, IN FACT, NOT WORK

## Chapter Notes

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

Hermione stood in front of her desk, arms folded across her chest as she glared down at the ornate box before her, foot tapping with irritation in her kitten heels.

She'd had... quite a bizarre night, and an even more bizarre morning—all because of this stupid thing that sat innocently on her desk.

Hermione had gone straight home through the floo from Draco's, refusing to let any of the mortification show on her face or in her posture as she had walked away from him. When in reality, the thought of what she had just done, in front of him... *with* him, caused her to burn all over, her skin prickling with it.

The worst part of it was that Hermione knew she should feel shame, and yet, the flashes of Draco's voice in her mind as he had spoken to her so sinfully... it sent courses of shivers across her entire body, heat settling deep inside. She seriously judged herself for the way her body had reacted to him, and the way it continued to react to the lingering echoes of his deep voice.

But now, she stared at the box, unsure what she needed to do next. Probably open it. That would be a swell start.

"Are you going to just stare at it?" came a very familiar deep voice from behind Hermione, causing her to jump and whirl around. Draco stood there, a smirk on his face as he watched her. "Or has your big brain already figured it out?"

She stared at him for a beat too long, hot flashes coursing through her body and sending blood rushing to her cheeks. And of course, he was looking tall and extremely put together in his pressed black ensemble, his hands casually stuffed into the pockets of his trousers. Hermione summoned a glare and her eyes narrowed.

"I was thinking about the most logical place to start, since you're so nosey," Hermione said haughtily before turning away from him to pierce the box with her glare instead, "I'm not in the biggest hurry to touch it again, considering."

She heard as he shifted closer, until Draco stood right next to her. Hermione kept her arms folded across her chest, bringing her elbows in just a little tighter, lest she brush against his arm. She could smell his aftershave, something earthy and masculine.

Draco reached forward and flipped open the lid, revealing the blasted dagger beneath them in all its intricate glory. The emerald glittered proudly in the lamplight which floated above their heads.

Hermione looked up into his face, to inspect his reaction to it, whether he had seen it before. His lips were slightly pursed as he took it in, but there didn't seem to be a flare of recognition behind those silver eyes.

"Anything you recognize?"

Draco's eyes moved from the dagger over to her face. "No, it's not a piece I've seen before, but it is unmistakably from the Malfoy line."

Hermione nodded, holding his gaze. "Yes... it's very Malfoy, isn't it? All ominous and sharp. Probably thinks quite a lot of itself, I'd imagine."

A small smirk on his lips. "Well, it did manage to best you, now, didn't it? Something you must be familiar with when the Malfoy name is involved."

"Oh, yes," Hermione agreed sarcastically with an eye roll before she let her gaze drop back to the blade, "I'm very familiar with *tiny pricks* as it pertains to the Malfoy name."

Draco chuckled, and lightly nudged her shoulder with his. "Oh my, your temper is hot this morning. One might think you might have had a... rough start to your day? Has something gotten you off?" Hermione sent him a sharp glare. "Set you off, I mean," he clarified innocently and raised his hands into the air.

She turned to him, arms still folded across her chest. "Is that never talking about it again?"

He just smiled down at her. "Whatever do you mean? Talk about what?"

Hermione let out a frustrated breath and refused to look at him for a moment longer, and resettled her eyes back to her desk. "You're deplorable."

"Mmm, yes I know," Draco murmured rather softly, and she realized with a start that he had leaned his head closer to her ear, his breath stirring her hair, "and you certainly loved it this morning, didn't you?"

A shiver ran down her spine, like phantom fingers trailing over her skin. Her reaction to him irritated her fiercely and caused fire to rip through her belly. Hermione turned back to him, turned into him. He had been leaning close, and had to straighten quickly at her sudden advance. She placed a hand against the thin black material of his button-up shirt, against the strong, hard muscles of his abdomen and looked up to him with a little smirk of her own. Hermione felt him twitch slightly under her hand, and watched his eyes flash down at her.

If he was going to bring it up... then so would she.

"Why, yes I did, Malfoy..." Hermione said in low voice, baiting him in the best way she knew how, "I had a fantastic time... all over your pretty sheets." She heard him pull in a quick breath, and was fascinated by the way two little pink spots started to appear on his cheeks. She pressed in a little closer, her fingertips splayed across his stomach. "Could you smell me on them after I left?"

He stared down at her, eyes hot with intensity. Hermione's gaze moved to his mouth as he rolled his tongue over his bottom lip. She met his eyes again, her smirk deepening.

"What *did* you do after I left, exactly?" she asked innocently, and let her hand slide just a little lower, underneath his navel. He twitched again. "Any fun activities?"

Draco's eyes were burning as he watched her. "Careful, Granger," he said slowly, "one might think you're after a repeat performance, and perhaps this time, I'll *watch*."

Hermione's brain was whispering at her to stop this now, to move away and end this ridiculous game they were playing. But her body was screaming at her to press closer, to touch him harder. She felt warm all over, hot evidence of her arousal sitting between her legs.

Her hand drifted just a bit lower, until fingers brushed over the dragonhide leather of his belt.

Draco's hand reached up and gripped at the side of her shoulder, his hand hot and firm against her. But it wasn't to push her away, he was pulling her closer...

Footsteps began to echo from around the corner, and they sprang apart at once.

Hermione immediately pulled her hands away from him and turned hurriedly towards her desk, a deep breath being pulled into her lungs to clear her mind. She placed both of her too-warm hands down onto the cold wood of her desk and fixed her gaze onto the dagger. She had no idea what Draco was doing behind her, but in the next moment, the footsteps came around the corner, and Hermione looked up.

Theo was walking towards her corner of the Archives, a paper bag in his hands. He smiled easily at Hermione, before he slid his eyes to her right, to where she assumed Draco was standing just behind her. He raised his brows at him.

"Morning, you two," Theo said as he came closer, "Mione, I have this for Harry—he left it at home, but he isn't in his office. Thought it was best to leave it with you, as those vultures up in the Auror's office—yes, I mean you, Draco—are likely to pick it apart."

Hermione took the bag with a smile. Theo always packed Harry a lunch, and while she hadn't seen any of them, Harry had once told her that he wrote a little note every day for him. It was the sweetest thing.

"Sure, no problem, I'll find Harry before lunch."

"Thanks," Theo said, and then looked past Hermione again, "what are you doing down here, you always say it smells like dirt and mold?"

She turned to fix her glare back on him. Draco was still a little pink in the cheeks, but he was leaning casually against a bookshelf, hands back in his pockets. He sent her a little cheeky raise of his eyebrow before looking back to his best friend.

"Indeed, I've had to stave off at least five sneezes, but alas I'll grin and bear it this morning—Granger here has found an old Malfoy heirloom and I've come to inspect it for magical properties and curses."

Theo saw the blade on the desk and reached for it.

They both jumped forward at once, but as Hermione was closer, she quickly flipped the lid shut before Theo could get close to it. “Don’t touch it!” she said a little too loudly. Theo took a quick step back. Draco was suddenly next to her again.

“Woah,” Theo said, raising his arms, “what’s wrong with it?”

“That’s why I’m here, you bloody spanner,” Draco said between gritted teeth, “did I not just say I was inspecting it for *curses*?”

“Right, course—but seriously, I was only going to turn the box towards me so I could see it—overreact much?” Theo said a little grumpily.

“Sorry, Theo,” Hermione said, but Draco just huffed from next to her, “I didn’t know that... I just didn’t want to take any chances.”

“Yeah, alright,” Theo said, still frowning, “best be off—house husband duties await!”

Hermione laughed at the silly term. Theo did work, but it was a non-profit charity that he did from home for dragon sanctuaries around the world. He also worked closely with Charlie Weasley to stop the illegal purchasing of dragon eggs.

She waved goodbye to Theo as he rounded the corner towards the elevators, and then they were alone once more. Hermione pulled in a deep breath, willing herself not to let Draco get the best of her. They had a job to do, and a curse to figure out.

“Right,” Hermione said, grateful that her voice was cool but firm, “Mr. specialist curse-breaker—where are we supposed to start with this?”

Draco stepped forward to her desk and then re-opened the box. She waited quietly as he leaned over and inspected it closely. Then after a few moments he straightened, reached into the pocket of his trousers and pulled out a white handkerchief. Draco placed it across his palm and then picked the blade up by the handle, careful not to touch any part of it. He held it up to his eyeline and turned it over, eyes narrowing as he read the inscription.

Hermione’s eyes caught onto the neat little ‘*DLM*’ stitched into the white fabric. She held in her snort. “Is that kerchief embroidered?”

Draco’s eyes moved past the blade to stare at her. His face made no reaction, but he said, “was that shirt you wore last night supposed to be pajamas?”

Hermione’s stomach swooped at the words. She crossed her arms at her chest again. “What does that have to do with what I said?”

He shrugged casually. “You asked an inane question. I returned the favor.”

She rolled her eyes and turned away from him, pulling out her chair and finally sitting down at her desk.

“You might as well go ahead and take the blade upstairs—let the cursebreakers work on it.”

“Trying to get rid of me, Granger?”

Hermione pulled today's paperwork towards her, and kept her eyes trained low. “I rather think we've seen enough of each other over the past 24 hours, don't you?”

“Hmm, quite,” Draco agreed, then he came back into her sight as he rounded her desk. He placed the heirloom back in its box, flipped the lid shut and then plucked it up into his hand.

He was about to turn away, when he looked down at the handkerchief still in his other hand, and then with a smirk he threw it down onto the desk, where it landed with a soft hiss near her fingers. Hermione frowned at the thing, before looking up at Draco with confusion.

He leaned against her desk, bracing himself with one arm, and came closer to her, looking positively wicked. “For the mess in your knickers.”

Then Draco straightened and turned, walking the same path as Theo had moments before.

She stared at his retreating figure, her mouth slightly open.

Feeling furious, Hermione looked down to the handkerchief, the ‘DLM’ nearly touching her pinky finger. She pulled her hand away from it and let out a huff.

Draco had won this round. He wouldn't win the next.

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After lunch, Draco had already cast over twenty different diagnostic spells and had three separate meetings with the cursebreakers in the offices above them.

And he was no closer to figuring out the magic behind the heirloom, the blade keeping all of its secrets to itself. Each spell he had tried, even the most complicated, had gleaned absolutely nothing, showing zero evidence that the blade held any magical properties. Which was utter rubbish, considering the thing had quite literally thrown Hermione Granger at him the night before.

With mounting frustration, Draco pulled a blank memo towards him and dipped a quill into an inkpot. He wrote a quick note to Hermione.

*Granger,*

*Cursebreakers have been looking at this all morning. Nothing yet—they would like us to try something to add to the picture of the possible curse at play. Come to my office at your earliest convenience.*

*Draco Malfoy*

He muttered a quick spell, and the memo pounced off his desk and flew through the air until it shot out of his office door, heading for the elevators and towards the intended recipient.

It took just over an hour before she arrived. Draco could hear her coming, the clacking of her little heels held just a hint of irritation that had him smirking before she even appeared in his doorway.

He looked up as Hermione stood there, looking delightfully huffy.

“You summoned me?”

Draco looked down at his wristwatch. “Why yes. Take you an hour to find my office, did it? This is a large place, Granger, but I thought even you could read signs.”

She took a few steps into the office. “You might be used to taking the piss with your work, Malfoy, but I happened to have been busy when your memo arrived. If it were urgent, you might have said so—but you said at my earliest convenience.” Hermione pulled one of his guest chairs back an inch as she rounded it to take a seat. “So, seeing as I was busy, it was not *convenient*.”

“Forgive me,” Draco said with mild sarcasm coloring his tone, “silly of me to assume you wanted to solve this mystery.”

Hermione only narrowed her eyes at him, now settled into his armchair.

He leaned his elbows onto the desk and slid a little closer. “Perhaps I was mistaken, and you’re in fact quite tickled to be the next Mrs. Malfoy?”

Hermione snorted at that. “Oh yes, sign me up—let’s await the reaction of your mother to your betrothal to a muggle-born, forever sully your perfect pure-blood line.”

Draco raised a brow at her. Was that the only thing she could come up with as to why that would be such a hardship?

Before she could come up with, let’s be honest, a million other reasons she would never want to marry him, Draco sighed and leaned back into his chair, steepling his fingers before him.

“Well, I thought you’d like an update,” he started, and proceeded to inform of her of the efforts made so far, and how little it had gotten them.

Hermione leaned forwards, listening intently. The single-minded focus she was able to adopt at the drop of a hat was something that Draco would always secretly admire about her. He could always tell when her brain switched into gear, there was a glimmer in her eyes he could see when she was truly concentrating, inspecting something, searching for answers.

“Alright,” she said, and her eyes shifted around the contents of his desk while she thought, “that’s a shame there’s nothing yet, but I’m also unsurprised. The magic was quite precise, controlled, meaning a very skilled caster set the curse into the blade, probably hiding it very well also. I wonder how long it’s been there for...”

Hermione trailed off, that focus still taking over her face. Draco could watch her think all day.

*Wait, what?*

He shook his head, clearing those thoughts away.

Her eyes finally met his again. “And you mentioned in your memo that the cursebreakers wanted to test something. What was that?”

Draco winced a little, before he stood from the desk and moved over to a shelf next to the window. He picked up the box that held the heirloom.

“You have it here?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said and moved to stand next to her, placing the box down and opening the lid, “they would like for us to try a few things. They are quite curious about the bond it has seemed to forge between the two of us—about how last night the cut reappeared when I touched your hand.”

Hermione pulled in a deep breath as she understood. She got to her feet and stood in front of him.

“Alright,” she said in a resigned voice, “and they want us to try that? See if the cut reappears again?”

“Yes...” he searched her face for any sign of worry, “are you alright with that?”

Hermione’s eyes flicked up to his, but her face was perfectly unreadable. “I’m fine.”

“Fine,” Draco said as he leaned his hip against the front of the desk, facing her, “and they would like us to take note whether the blade does anything unusual at the same time.”

Hermione nodded, and then held up her left hand so that her palm faced the ceiling.

Draco searched her face once more. “Are you sure?”

He heard her sharp exhale through her nose. “Yes, I’m sure—let’s get it over with.”

He swallowed and then reached up with his hand, letting it hover just underneath hers for a moment, before he closed the distance and cupped the bottom of her hand, skin-to-skin.

Hermione sucked in a sharp breath, and Draco watched as a deep slice appeared on her hand, blood immediately welling. His heart jumped painfully at the sight, and he quickly looked down to the blade, catching it glow for barely a second, before it returned to normal.

He withdrew his hand from her.

“Fuck,” she moaned and pulled her hand closer, cradling it with her other. She looked up at him, and there was a tinge of fear behind her eyes. “What do you think that means? That this morning didn’t actually work?”

Draco sighed and reached up to run a hand through his hair. A million questions poured into his brain.

“Christ, I don’t know what it means,” he admitted. Being a specialist in curses in the Auror office had always been rather fun, like he was being paid to find the answers to complicated puzzles. It was a game for him, usually. This felt far more personal, a little too close to home. And it was physically hurting someone that he...

Draco looked back to her, and she was pulling out her wand and quickly healing the wound there, only wincing slightly before the cut knitted neatly back together.

Hermione sighed with relief as her hand was perfect once more, before she glanced at him. He looked guiltily back at her, which caused her brows to pinch.

“What...?”

Draco clenched his teeth for a moment, and then said, “they want us to try it a second time, see if it happens more than once before midnight.”

Hermione pressed her lips together and pulled in a deep breath. “Okay.” She lifted her palm once more.

He shook his head a little and looked down at her. His arms stayed by his sides. Hermione was watching him, frowning.

“Don’t get soft on me now, Malfoy,” she said, and it was her voice that held the softness she spoke of, “come on—let’s try and fix this.”

Draco nodded, and then lifted his own hand, bringing it up to meet the back of hers. His fingers brushed her knuckles lightly, and he stared with intense focus at her palm, expecting to cause her more pain, to see more of her blood.

But nothing happened.

Her palm remained unblemished, unharmed.

To be sure, he pressed his hand more firmly upwards, so his hand completely encased the back of hers. Nothing.

Draco squinted at her hand, his brain working fast as he pondered what that could possibly mean in the scheme of the curse. Then, before he could truly think on his actions, he reached for her with his other hand and spread his fingers against the side of her face. He heard Hermione let out a soft, startled gasp, but he was staring at her hand still. Nothing more happened.

Draco let his hands fall away from her and took a step back.

Her hand slowly lowered back to her side.

“What... what does that mean?”



He pinched at the bridge of his nose before he turned away from her to stride around the desk.

“I have no bloody clue.”

They both sat down at the same time on opposite sides of the desk. Silence fell around them as they each descended into their private thoughts for a moment.

After a beat, Hermione stood rather quickly from her chair. “Well... I have a lot to do so... I’ll see you... um...”

“Later?” Draco said, and even though he didn’t feel it, he let a small smirk settle onto his lips.

“Tomorrow,” she said quickly, “at work—to... discuss more about the curse.”

Draco nodded once. Hermione looked at him for the space of another heartbeat, and then she was out the door on quick feet, her dainty little heels clicking all the way down the hallway.

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Hermione sat on her bed, her body positively buzzing with anxiety while she watched the clock next to her bed tick slowly onwards towards midnight. There were only a few minutes left and she couldn’t stop her hands from fidgeting restlessly while she waited.

She was wearing more appropriate pajamas tonight – another loose and comfortable shirt of a muggle band, but this time had sleep shorts on. Just in case.

Hermione was still hopeful that her little trick that morning had satisfied the consummation clause of whatever marriage magic the curse held, but something told her it wasn’t going to be that easy.

Not that touching herself with Draco in the room had been easy.

She held her breath as the last thirty seconds ticked away, her eyes following the minute hand with intense attention.

It ticked to the number twelve, signaling it was midnight, and then ticked on past...

Hermione’s heart leapt a little in her chest as the minute hand moved past midnight and kept on going. She leaned closer to her clock, squinting at it, wondering how accurate it was and then—

Something jerked around her navel, and she was spiraling, air pushing at her from all sides, until—

A soft mattress and even softer sheets were suddenly under her as she bounced onto Draco Malfoy’s bed. Hermione slapped her hands down onto the bedding and pushed herself up into a sitting position.

Hermione set her stunned eyes over on Draco, who had been sitting upright in his bed, a newspaper in his hands, clearly having waited up just the same as she had done. His jaw was set, eyes flashing silver as he looked at the intruder in his bed.

“Nope,” he said, and then proceeded to shove her off the bed.

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When Hermione emerged from the side of the bed, she glared over at Draco, who hid his smile behind his hand.

She got to her feet, placing her closed fists at her hips. “Am I to expect this every time I land in your bed—falling on my ass?”

Draco removed his hand from his face and gave her an innocent shrug. “I don’t know, Granger, it was a knee-jerk reaction to having someone suddenly land next to me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Jerk is right—and don’t play games—you expected me to arrive, otherwise you’d be fast asleep.”

Draco sighed and threw the paper he had only been half-reading, to the side table next to him before he fully sat up in the bed. He rubbed his hands over his tired face and then looked back over to her.

The night before had been a long night. Seems like he was in for yet another.

“Yes—I assumed you’d be back seeing as the cut reappeared.”

Her face fell, the anger leeching away. She sank onto the side of his bed slowly. “But... it let me leave, after...”

Draco hummed in agreement. “Yes, odd that. Truly odd—it’s awfully vexing that I actually have no idea what’s happening and how to fix it.”

Hermione twisted a little, bringing her knee up onto the bed to face him. “Really? The great Draco Malfoy is admitting to something he doesn’t know?”

He fixed her with an unimpressed stare, but his heart slightly jumped at the sound of his name on her lips. Pathetic.

“Must be rarer still for you to admit that you don’t know something, little miss ‘*Brightest Witch of our Age*’.”

Hermione sighed. “Alright, Malfoy—let’s just try our best to be civil and put away our constant need to jab at one another until we can figure this out.”

Draco raised a brow. “Are you capable of not trying to be the smartest in the room?”

Hermione glared at him.

He leaned back against the headboard, crossing his arms. “Fine. Consider me a perfect gentleman until this is over.”

She snorted. “Let’s not expect too much.”

“Granger...”

Hermione laughed softly and then pushed herself back up the bed until she, too, was leaning against the headboard near him. “Okay—civility, starting now.”

Silence.

Said silence stretched on for a long while as they reclined back on Draco’s bed. “Well,” he finally said, “it seems we have nothing to say to each other if we aren’t slinging insults.”

Hermione laughed, a proper laugh that came from her belly, and crinkled at the corners of her eyes. Draco looked over to watch it, and it was quite a sight. Especially in her tiny sleep shorts, and a black t-shirt broadcasting some band called ‘*Savage Garden*’. Draco thought she looked charmingly mundane in the bed outfit, in the kind of way he could possibly enjoy seeing every evening, in his bed...

When her laughter died away, Hermione turned her head to him. “So... what are we supposed to do now?”

“I worked closely with one of the cursebreakers today, Halpert, and he was quite fascinated with the way your cut would appear upon touching me. He... erm... does know about your attempt to trick the magic.”

He watched for Hermione’s reaction, but she stayed rather calm. She shrugged a shoulder. “I figured you’d have to tell those working on the curse. As long as this never reaches Harry’s ears... God, I’d never live it down...”

Draco smirked at her.

“Well, Halpert agreed with my original thought when you appeared last night. That the blade cut you... so the magic thinks you’ve been married to me and is insisting on consummation to complete the ritual of bonding.”

Hermione nodded along.

“Halpert had a thought that because I wasn’t cut also, that it may be tainting the magic, warping it somehow. This could be why the cuts keep appearing on you—possibly why the... trick... worked, but didn’t stop the curse.” Draco paused to think for a few moments. “The last conversation I had with him was that he needed more time to inspect the blade’s properties, and that some more tests would need to be done.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed at that. “What sort of tests?”

“I’m not sure—to the blade, I would think.” But he wasn’t certain. “Halpert will be fascinated to hear of your return, I’m sure.”

“Will he?” Hermione asked genuinely, “I would think he’d have expected it.”

Draco nodded. “Yes, you’re probably right.”

Her eyes widened by a fraction. “Excuse me? Did you just admit I’m right about something?”

He shook his head and looked away. “It’s been known to happen.”

Hermione scoffed. “Not in my vicinity, that’s for sure.”

“Hush, Granger,” Draco said, “civility, remember?”

“Oh, right,” she said, “apologies, my default setting is hard to turn off sometimes.”

“If it helps,” Draco said before he was able to stop himself, “I clearly know how to turn you on.”

Her head snapped sideways and she glared at him. “Really, Malfoy? Did you think that was a great time to bring that up? While I’m stuck here in your room again?”

He sat up and turned to face her. “I rather thought it was a brilliant idea, seeing as it did free us from the magic last time.”

“Oh, I see,” Hermione said, turning on the bed to also face him fully, “so you’d like me to get all dirty on your sheets again so I can fuck off home and leave you be, is that it?”

Draco smirked at her. “Well, it’s not the worst idea you’ve ever had.”

Something dangerous glinted in her eyes, and it made Draco shift, not because he was uncomfortable. No, he found the look wildly attractive.

“If you like my ideas so much, how about this one,” Hermione said, an edge in her voice that had him shifting yet again, and she leaned forward with a hand pressed into his comforter, “I took one for the team yesterday... and there just so happens to be two people in this fucked up pseudo marriage... perhaps it’s your turn, Malfoy.”

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Hermione watched with intense satisfaction as his eyes widened at her.

She scoffed and shook her head at him. “It’s all fun and games until it’s you who has to get handsy with yourself with someone else in the room, now isn’t it?”

Draco narrowed his eyes at her, and his surprise gave way to mischief. “Gagging to know what I sound like when I come, Granger?”

Despite herself, Hermione couldn’t deny that the thought was a tad appealing.

“Well, it’s only fair,” she said teasingly, and let her eyes rake obviously over him in his silly black pajamas. Does he own any other color? “Tit for tat, as the expression goes.”

Draco snorted a little.

“Well, funny you should bring it up,” he said, and her gaze moved quickly back to his, “Halpert did express the notion that we may have been on the right track with tricking the magic—but that perhaps only you doing so would not be sufficient.”

Hermione felt herself frowning at him.

“Hence,” Draco continued, “why it brought you back to me.”

*Brought you back to me.*

Something clenched in her core at the sound of the words.

She sucked in a deep breath. “And by that, I assume, you’re suggesting we... what, exactly? Masturbate next to each other? I think I’d rather throw myself down a never-ending staircase, thanks.” Hermione pulled herself from the bed, and started to pace restlessly. “I’m sure you have one in this godforsaken mansion you call a house.”

Draco stood from the bed too, and came around the bed to where Hermione paced.

“Granger.”

She stopped and looked over to him.

He watched her with a thoughtful expression. “Nothing about this is ideal, I understand that. So... what else would you suggest? I’m open to any ideas, truly. Shall I call Halpert via patronus?”

“I... really have no ideas,” Hermione said unenthusiastically. The thought of having to try and make a repeat performance of the day before was making her itch. Both with embarrassment and a deep-seated need, two warring feelings, battling for her attention. She had *enjoyed* it. The way Draco had talked her through it. The orgasm had been wild, and hot, ripping through her body in a way she hadn’t experienced in *years*. She was both reluctant, and keen.

It was maddening.

“Halpert, then?” Draco said, and he started to move for his wand.

“No,” Hermione said, and he paused, turning back to her. She placed her hands on her hips and regarded him. Her heart was thudding dangerously fast against her ribs. She moved a few steps closer to him, and Draco watched her advance with a schooled expression, but his eyes stuttered a little. “Tell me, Malfoy... do you find me attractive?”

His lips parted and his eyebrows twitched upwards.

“You told me last night that you thought I was a pretty girl,” she continued boldly, even as her pulse pounded in her fingertips, “but that you weren’t *attracted* to me. Yet, you were clearly... affected by what happened in the morning. So, which is it, Malfoy?”

His jaw worked as he stared down into her face. “Why is that important at this particular moment?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I may make many jokes to the contrary, but you aren’t stupid, Malfoy. I’m asking because if you don’t... there’s no way I’m getting into that bed with you to... do whatever it is that we need to do.”

She watched as Draco ran his tongue along the edges of his teeth as he considered her standing before him. His eyes flashed several times as they wandered over her face. Then finally, he said, “fine, yes, I find you attractive.”

Butterflies. Pesky, rotten butterflies. They swooped around her stomach at the words and the way he was now looking at her, like some sort of wall had crumbled down behind his eyes and suddenly there was desire there. For her.

“And what about you, Granger?” he asked, voice low as he took a step forward.

“Me?” as low as his voice went, her voice was high.

“Yes, you,” he purred, coming forward another step, “do *you* find *me* attractive?”

Hermione knew the answer. It was automatic, and it was a thought she’d had for a long time, well into her youth. Draco was a handsome man. More than that, he was sinfully hot in a dangerously attractive type of way.

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth as she pretended to consider him. Her eyes roamed over his torso, the silky black shirt looking stupid on what she knew was a delectably muscled frame with broad shoulders and a tapered, slim waist.

“I don’t know, Malfoy,” Hermione said, and her voice had dropped lower. He noticed it. “Take off that stupid silk shirt.”

The corner of his mouth lifted, and so did his hands. Fingers made quick work of the buttons, and then he was shrugging easily out of it until the black silk had dropped to the ground.

Hermione tracked her eyes over his frame, holding back her sigh at the ripples of lean muscle. The old Sectumsempra scar added a dangerous element to the façade, the white line skating from his left hip bone, across his midline, and up to the opposite collarbone.

She felt herself swallow before she looked back to his burning gaze. Her chest lifted with a deep inhale.

Hermione lifted a shoulder. “Decent enough.” She was sure the rough edges to her voice had given her away.

The other side of his mouth lifted.

“Tit for tat, as the expression goes apparently,” Draco said and if possible, her heart pounded even harder, “take off *your* shirt.”

Fair enough. She was a feminist, after all. Equality and all that...

She shivered with mingled fear and anticipation.

Hermione kept his gaze as she took the hem of her shirt and lifted it up and over her head. It gathered her hair until she had the shirt off, and then the thick tendrils fell back into place around her, tickling at her bare skin.

Because she was bare.

Hermione had no bra on.

Draco's entire body tensed the moment he realized that very fact, eyes dropping to her breasts for just a moment before he averted his gaze, bringing a hand up to his face as he turned profile to her. His fingers clenched at his screwed up eyes.

"Fucking *Christ*, Granger..."

Her chest was heaving as she stood half naked, and Hermione wondered if she had taken it too far. She could feel herself starting to burn with the embarrassment of it.

Then his head turned back to her, and his eyes hungrily took her in. The hand that fell back to his side was clenched. His body turned back towards her, and then Draco was striding at her. Hermione sucked in a sharp breath as he drew near, and then he stopped directly in front of her. She tilted her head back to look at him. The muscles in his jaw clenched and unclenched as he stared intently down to her.

She thought he would reach out to touch her—she wanted him to—and his arms seemed to shake as though he were straining. But he made no move to reach for her.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his voice so guttural that it seemed to draw over her skin, like he had actually touched her. She felt her nipples become harder, tightening almost painfully. Draco let out a rough exhale through his nose, and she realized his eyes were still on her breasts.

"Turn out the lights," Hermione said.

Draco whispered something, and then there was darkness. It was almost too dark for her eyes as they adjusted with the lamps gone. She heard Draco moving, and in the next moment, Hermione heard him pull at his drapes, opening them fully until the moon's light washed into the room. It cast a white glow into the room, just enough to see, but dim enough to hide when it might be needed.

Hermione padded softly to the bed—to the side she had used the previous day—and pulled back the soft covers before she sat on the edge and then laid herself down. She pulled the covers right up and over her chest, feeling as the bed shifted when Draco started to climb in from the other side.

When they were settled, all of the heat Hermione had felt while standing bare under his gaze fled, and she felt awkward instead.

“How... are we doing this?” she asked, voice small.

Hermione heard him turn to face her and shift just a little closer to the center of the bed. She remained on her back, staring up at the canopy.

“Look at me.”

The low tone of the order had her stomach jumping, her core clenching. Hermione shifted to her side, facing him. She could just make out his sharp features in the moonlight. The white glow of his hair was mesmerizing. They were close enough that she could reach out and touch him. She was careful not to.

“Like this,” he said, and he reached with a hand and tugged the covers down over her shoulders until it sat at her waist.

Hermione’s arm was bent, palm to the bed, her forearm covering her breasts from his view.

He kept her gaze in the soft light as he then dipped his hand beneath the covers that sat at his own waist. Hermione couldn’t see where his hand was going, but she opened her mouth slightly as she watched his arm move, saw the way his head shifted, the tendons in his neck standing out taut.

“Oh, God...” Hermione murmured, realizing he had started. Heat flew through her body as her heart thundered. She felt sweaty and prickly all of a sudden as she watched his shoulder rotate with the movements of his arm beneath the sheet. She clenched her thighs together, feeling a desperate ache between them. She swallowed thickly.

“Granger,” he breathed, and her chest hitched as she watched him, “go on, love.”

She licked at her suddenly dry lips, and then she shifted slightly, before she moved her own hand beneath the sheet covering her from the waist down. Moving her arm had left her breasts exposed, and she heard Draco’s soft groan from next to her. Hermione had to close her eyes, the visual of him coupled with his low sounds were almost too much to take in all at once.

Hermione moved her hand into her sleep shorts, and pushed straight through to the wetness at her core. The first slow drag over her clit was like an electric shock and she gasped, her thighs shaking with it.

“Fuck,” growled Draco, his arm moving quicker under the covers.

She bit down hard onto her lip as she moved her fingers over her core, swirling circles that had her shuddering, a moan escaping her throat. Hermione could come undone in a moment, a few passes across the most sensitive nerves would have her. But she avoided it, stroking around the place she needed to be the most. She didn’t want to show how affected she was by him, to prove to him how aroused this was making her.

She could hear his breathing, hard and clipped. It matched her own, except with each of her shaky exhales, Hermione couldn’t hold back the small sounds she was making. It was



impossible. It felt too good. Each pass of her fingers, even as she avoided the center of her, felt like heaven as she watched Draco bring on his own pleasure.

His eyes were all over her. They flicked madly between her breasts, over her bare shoulders, her face, watching her mouth open wordlessly, watching her eyes as they fluttered.

“I... we should come together,” Draco ground out, “if possible... I... *fuck*, I’m close...”

Hermione’s breathing was ragged, her chest heaving with it as her back arched. “I... me too.”

“Come closer,” he said hurriedly.

Panting, Hermione wriggled herself closer to him, before she desperately returned to her ministrations. He was so close to her now, his harsh breaths floated over her face. Each movement of his hand under the covers shifted them across her waist, letting it fall lower.

Draco stared into her eyes, and she sensed the urgency in them as his hand started to pump faster under the blankets. Her own fingers moved fast, and her orgasm was right there, a low moan already ripping from her throat at the beginnings of it.

In the next moment, Hermione realized he must have switched hands beneath the covers, because the arm he had been using suddenly reached for her and grasped at the side of her neck, fingers digging into her skin.

She felt a sharp pain sting at her left hand, but Hermione barely registered it, because the feel of his hot hand against her skin as he groaned roughly in front of her face, the feel of her own fingers in her slick passing once more over her clit, had her toppling, tumbling. She writhed and arched, her breaths coming in gasps as it ripped through her. Her left hand slapped against his hard chest while they both groaned through their orgasms, their breaths mixing between them.

Coming down slowly, they stayed there.

Facing each other, naked torsos, hands still touching themselves, and one hand on each other. His hand still gripped the side of her neck, quite roughly. Her hand was still against his pectoral. Their chests still rose and fell sharply as they both tried to regain control of their breathing.

Finally, it was Hermione who moved first, letting her hand slide away from him. It was then that she noted the unusual slickness under her palm. She had initially thought it might be his sweat, but this felt... different.

Frowning, she saw a dark patch on him where her hand had been. She turned her palm to look at it and it was then that she finally realized.

Hermione gasped and sat up, uncaring that her breasts were still on full display.

“What is it?” Draco said, coming to sit beside her.

Hermione lowered her hand so he could see. He looked down at his chest. At her blood that sat against his skin. She watched his eyes fall shut for a moment.

“Fuck...” he looked up at her then, and something flashed across his face, “I’m so sorry... I completely forgot. I shouldn’t have touched you like that.”

She couldn’t help it. A small giggle bubbled up. It may have been slightly hysterical. “I... didn’t even notice, honestly, I was a bit preoccupied...”

His lips lifted a little, but then he whispered another spell and the lights came back on. Hermione squinted against it for a moment as Draco reached for his wand, and then shifted closer to her. He took her hand gently in his, and healed her wound for her.

Hermione watched, a little surprised as he cleaned her up, and then, as though he himself were an afterthought, also cleaned the blood from himself.

If young Draco could see him now, hardly caring to be covered with her dirty blood.

He replaced his wand to the side table and turned back to her. His gaze flicked low, and it was then that it struck her—she was still topless, casually sitting before him on his bed.

Hermione cleared her throat and averted her gaze before sliding off the bed to find her shirt. She shoved it back on over her head before she turned back to him.

“So...” she trailed off awkwardly, “um, guess I’ll try and go... home?”

Draco sat and watched her for a moment. He looked like he wanted to say something, but instead he just nodded.

“Alright...”

Hermione strode over to the door, opened it, and stepped out into the hallway. She took a few steps, and when nothing happened, no magic pulled her back to the bed, she turned around. Draco still sat on the bed, watching her.

“Well... it worked again,” Hermione said unnecessarily, “and the cut did reopen, but it was before we... um...”

“Yes,” Draco said, his face impassive, “guess we’ll find out tomorrow if it worked.”

“Okay,” Hermione said, “um... goodnight, Malfoy.”

She turned and started to hurry away, but she heard his quiet ‘goodnight’ as she went.

Hello to all readers! Thanks so much to anyone reading this WIP, this is a bit of fun.  
Lots more to come!

Pop by in the comments to leave your thoughts - it keeps me going!

xx

- Forawhile

# HOW DID I END UP HERE?

## Chapter Notes

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

Draco walked the lower-level corridors with the weariness of someone who'd suffered through a few nights of disturbed sleep.

It had taken him a longer time than usual for rest to find him after Hermione had left. It had alluded him cruelly, while his consciousness threw images at him, of Hermione arching her back in front of him, followed closely by the echoes of her soft moans. A visual and auditory blend that was devastating to his poor brain. Draco thought perhaps that the picture of her half naked on his bed as she chased down her climax had ruined him for all other sexual experiences that may come in the future.

That was Hermione *bloody* Granger for you.

The ruinous bint.

He turned the corner, his nose already wrinkling from the dust in the air and the musty smells of all the old tomes that lived in the Archives.

Draco spotted her ahead of him, leaning over her desk as she reached for something, before settling back into her chair. She heard his approach and glanced upwards, her movements freezing for a moment, and he watched with amusement as she attempted to subtly return to what she was doing. Draco was less amused by the increased heart rate inside his own chest at the sight of her.

"Morning, Granger," he offered her as Draco advanced towards her desk.

He heard her quiet sigh, and he tried to suppress his smirk.

"Can't stay away from me, can you, Malfoy?" Hermione said, and kept her eyes trained low on the paperwork before her, a quill in her hand as she scratched away across the paper.

Draco leaned onto her desk with both hands.

"I recall it being you falling into my bed several times over the past few nights," he said, pleased to see a slight stain of pink across her cheeks.

She snorted and finally looked up to him, the fiery look he enjoyed lit behind her hazel eyes. "Oh, yes—I just couldn't keep away. Most certainly my *choice*." The sarcasm was strong with this one.

"Slow down, Granger—one might think you're about to profess your undying love for me," Draco raised his brows to her mockingly, a grin on his face.

“Well, you know what they say,” Hermione said and then she threw down her quill and stood from her seat to get on his eye level. He watched her stand, not taking his eyes away from her. Draco wasn’t sure he was capable of it in that moment. “First comes marriage, then comes awkward sexual encounters, which is of course closely followed by undying love.”

Draco breathed out a quick laugh as she shook her head at him.

Her small smile faded before she sighed again. “What are you doing down here now, Malfoy? Run out of people to irritate up on your level?”

“Ah,” Draco said and looked down. He reached forward to place a finger on his handkerchief that was still sitting on her desk from the previous morning. “You know I’ll always make time to irritate you, darling.”

He looked up to notice her eye roll, before her gaze settled down on his handkerchief, which he was now scrunching up into his fingers. She flicked her eyes back up to his.

“Oh, did you want that back?” Hermione asked innocently, though the wicked gleam in her eyes was anything but innocent, “I’m afraid I used it, per your suggestion.”

Draco’s brows shot up, his fingers spasming around the soft white fabric for a moment at the implication.

*For the mess in your knickers,* Draco had Joked with her.

The phony innocence faded away and she laughed at his expression.

“I’m joking, you halfwit,” she said, before mumbling, “so gullible, Malfoy.”

Draco resisted the urge to roll his eyes at her, which was decidedly very difficult. “Not gullibility, love—we call that hope.”

Confusion clouded her features as she met his eyes across her desk. “Hope?”

“Mm-hmm,” Draco said, and lifted the handkerchief to his nose to take a deep inhale. It smelled only of himself, his aftershave. So very disappointing. He sighed as he removed it from his face, taking in the wide-eyed expression of Hermione before him, and shoved it back into his pocket where it usually lived. “The wasted potential for it to smell... positively divine.”

Her bottom lip dropped open just a fraction as she garnered his meaning. Then she snapped it shut again before turning away from him, but not before Draco caught the flush spreading across her chest.

“Well,” Hermione said in a slightly husky voice as she rifled around at a bookshelf next to her desk, “I’m assuming you aren’t down here to collect gaudily embroidered handkerchiefs, so why don’t you enlighten me.”

Straight back to business then. Fine.

“I’ve provided Halpert with a briefing this morning of... last night's events,” he said and Hermione slowly turned back to him, a book clutched in her hands, “and he would like to meet with us, discuss a few things.”

Her eyes narrowed a bit. “More tests?”

Draco shrugged one shoulder. “He didn’t say. He asked for you before he would discuss it.”

Hermione’s lips thinned as she considered, then she slowly sat back down on her seat, eyes seeming a little unfocussed in her usual descending-into-the-brain-to-think kind of way.

Draco sighed. “Granger,” he said, and her eyes snapped up to his, the fog clearing, “I meant now.”

Her jaw jutted out insolently. “I don’t take orders from you *or* Halpert.”

He leaned against her desk and fixed her with a menacing glare, smirk on in full-force. “Perhaps not, Granger. But if you don’t want to come with me, I’ll assume you’re rather content to be popping into my bed again at midnight tonight... or, perhaps it is that you are...” Draco raised a suggestive eyebrow at her.

Hermione slammed the book into the desk and stood, glaring at him.

“Lead the way, Malfoy.”

\*\*

Draco had absolutely no right.

No right at all.

How dare he... look so bloody, charmingly fit in his damned soft-looking grey trousers, white button up and a gods-damned brown leather holster fitted around his shoulders and chest. It was simply not fair that Draco looked delightfully *lick-able* today...

Hermione cringed at her internal thoughts and forced herself to look away from his arse in those trousers just as they reached the lifts. Draco hit the button and then turned around to face her, leaning back casually against the dark marble wall behind him.

“So, Granger...” he said, his lips lifting slightly in one corner, “how was the rest of your... evening?”

“Fantastic,” Hermione said at once, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at him, “seeing as I actually got to sleep in my own bed. Yours is far too...”

“Soft?” Draco supplied before she could continue, “fabric too rich for you, Granger?”

Hermione scoffed. “Everything about you is too rich.”

“Oh?” Draco said before he pushed off the wall and took two steps closer to where she stood. He was more than an arm's length away, and yet she still had to tilt her head back to look him in the eye. Such a tall fucking tree, he was. “And do you know everything about me?”

“I know enough,” Hermione said defiantly against the wicked glint in his silver eyes, and the way that glint sent her pulse cantering like a wild horse.

Draco smirked down at her. “I hardly think so... there's *plenty* you don't know about me, darling.” He took another step towards her. “An abundance of *richness* for you to explore.” His eyes flashed at her on the last word, and he reached up with one hand towards the side of her jaw, but stopped a breath away, like he was catching himself. His smirk faltered.

Hermione's chest hitched at his proximity, at the warmth she could feel exuding from his palm so close to her face.

His eyes narrowed at where his hand almost touched her, and she saw him clench his jaw.

“You've already touched me after midnight,” she said, rather stupidly. So caught up in the thought of him touching her, Hermione was quick to forget who this was, that Draco was merely playing a game with her. As always.

Draco's eyes flitted back to hers, and the silver color darkened, his lips curving into a smug grin. “Oh, yes—how could I forget?” he said and then his fingers made contact with the underside of her jaw near her ear, trailing along until he had two fingers under her chin, tipping her head back slightly. Hermione felt the breath leave her lungs as he leaned forwards and said to her in a low voice, “you had your hand between your gorgeous thighs—quite an unforgettable moment, that.”

Despite the heat she now felt between those exact thighs, Hermione reached up and swatted his hand away from her face just as the elevator doors slid open behind Draco. She narrowed her eyes at him. “Well, do let me know if those memories plague you terribly, I'm quite the whip with memory charms.”

She strode purposefully around him, ignoring his throaty chuckle as she stepped onto the lift.

Draco stepped in with her and jabbed at the buttons to signal their floor. He resumed a relaxed position leaning against the side wall as the lift shuddered and began to move. Hermione stared at the doors and pointedly ignored him while simultaneously pointedly ignoring how the elevator felt *far too small*, the air *far too warm*.

She pulled in a deep, quiet breath.

“Any new theories on the blade, Granger?”

Hermione didn't bother looking at him as she answered, “only that it's clearly an instrument of torture.”

Another low chuckle that had her needing to take yet another deep breath to gather herself and ignore the way his deep tones made her feel like a shivering mess.

“Careful, Granger,” Draco said in a light tone, “you’ll wound my ego.”

Hermione snorted and finally did turn her head towards him, to find him in full-smirk mode. “Are you saying I have that kind of power? Boy, you must think quite a lot of me if that’s the case.”

He moved away from the wall and closed the two steps worth of distance between them until his chest was almost touching the side of her arm. Hermione craned her neck to keep his gaze as he looked down at her. “An insanely intelligent, pretty girl like you, Granger?” Draco murmured between them, and her eyes widened at the compliments, her heart stuttering pathetically inside her chest, “especially with tits like yours...” She choked on a disbelieving, breathy laugh. “You could rule the fucking world, let alone destroy little old me.”

And because she was rendered near-speechless in the wake of Draco’s words, all she could say in response was, “there’s nothing little about you, Malfoy.”

His small laugh blew his warm breath against the side of her face, making the flyaway curls shift and tickle against her cheek. “How right you are.”

Hermione’s eyes dropped to his mouth. The curve of his lips, the fullness of them, were positively wicked, sinful. She could only imagine what he could do with them... and what he could do with that tongue that could so quickly and easily match her repartee. That tongue and that mouth which sparred with Hermione so regularly... what would it feel like to have them against her skin, whispering those sharp-witted words to her flesh, trailing a path to—

“Granger,” Draco said softly.

She started, a quick breath pulling between her parted lips before her eyes flicked back up, realizing what she had been doing. Her cheeks flamed and her chest pulsed.

Draco wasn’t smiling, his silver eyes searching across her face intently.

Hermione whipped her head back around to face the lift doors, unable to breathe under his scrutiny, under the intensity of his fiery gaze.

“Granger,” he said again, this time his voice was lower, almost like he was groaning her name. Another quick breath pulled in between her lips. Her heart was thundering uncomfortably fast, she could feel the pulsing in her fingertips, the fluttering in her throat. “Look at me.”

She did. As though compelled, Hermione’s head turned back up to him, and her treacherous eyes dropped straight back to his mouth, her mind returning to their lawless thoughts about the hot slide of his tongue...

Draco swallowed and then his mouth opened, as though about to say something, but it was then that the elevator shuddered to a halt, and the doors began to slide open.

They remained there, quite motionless, for several long seconds, the sounds of busy office work could be heard around the corner of the open lift.



A memo flew in and started to flap around their heads and Hermione finally blinked and ripped her gaze away from his, her body starting forward to shift away from the warmth of his body. Hermione stepped off the elevator, so very aware that Draco was right behind her.

What kind of game was he playing now? Complimenting her? Looking at her like... like he wanted to devour her as much as Hermione wanted to be devoured.

She felt so worked up that she forgot entirely this wasn't her usual floor, and she had no idea where Halpert worked.

"Granger," Draco said quietly as he took her elbow from behind, which slowed her down while simultaneously steering her down a corridor to her right, which Hermione had been about to walk straight past, "it's this way."

"Right," she said stiffly and slowed herself down so that she was just behind him to take his lead, forcing his hand to leave her arm.

Draco led her into a large office at the end of a long corridor, palming the door open and then holding it for her, so that Hermione had to brush past him to enter.

A man that must have been Halpert stood near the center of room, a broad-shouldered, stocky Cursebreaker, wearing deep navy robes. Halpert had the Malfoy blade floating in the air before him, and Hermione felt her eyes widen as she took in the gentle arcs of sparkling golden lines that floated around the blade.

She stepped closer slowly, transfixed by the shimmery particles that spun around the dagger, creating the shape of an infinity symbol. It looked like a million pieces of dust... or sand.

"What is it?" Hermione asked in awe.

Halpert turned at the sound of her voice. "Ah, Hermione Granger!" he held his hand out for her, and she took it, hardly looking as her eyes remained on the spinning lines of the infinity around the blade. He shook her hand quickly and released her. "Such a pleasure to finally meet you—though these circumstances are rather unusual, aye?" Halpert stopped to laugh before saying, "I guess salutations are in order to the newlyweds?" He chuckled again.

Hermione finally tore her eyes away and scowled over at Halpert.

Draco sighed from somewhere behind her. "What did I say about jokes, Halpert?"

"Hmm..." Halpert said, as though trying to recall, "likely asked me not to, apologies."

Hermione twisted to raise a brow at Draco. "You insisted on no jokes? You?"

Draco lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug, his arms folded across his holstered chest. "Only him, obviously. I am under no such restrictions."

Hermione scoffed and turned back towards the shimmering before her. Draco came up to stand next to her, observing the display also.

“This,” Halpert said with a flourish of his arm towards the blade, “is the magic ingrained into the blade you have cut yourself with, Miss Granger.”

“Hermione,” she said automatically, “please call me Hermione.”

Draco tutted next to her and she sighed before looking over at him. He was shaking his head slightly, though his gaze remained forwards. “You don’t tell me to call you that,” he said quietly.

“Yes, well from you it would be just so... wrong.”

Or so very fucking right.

The sound of her first name from his lips would probably deplete her good senses entirely. Hermione would likely leap at him, right in front of Halpert. That would be a very bad idea, for multiple reasons.

Before Draco could respond, Halpert piped back up again. “Well, Hermione—as you can see the magic forms something infinite, which ties in quite swimmingly with the old ideals of marriage, particularly between pure bloods,” he looked over to Hermione and then to Draco, before focusing back on the magic, “they were rather big on forever and fidelity.”

Hermione tongue brushed against the inside of her teeth with a spark of irritation.

“Right here,” Halpert said, and gestured at a place near the intersection of the infinity, “I’ve noticed a slight disruption with the magic. This could be something to do with the fact that the ceremony wasn’t complete—only you were cut, Malfoy was not, etcetera...” Halpert then shifted his fingers to show another slight fracture in the curves of the symbol, “and right here is another one... and I do wonder if this disruption has something to do with the fact that it was you Hermione, who was cut by the blade.”

She frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“Well, because you’re a muggle-born,” Halpert said matter-of-factly.

“Oh,” Hermione said. But, of course.

Draco shifted his weight next to her.

“So, while the marriage bond is demanding consummation, the strange pulling of Hermione to Malfoy every night is a clear manifestation of that magic, trying to complete the ritual—however these disruptions, here and here, would likely make it impossible to complete anyway.”

Hermione’s mouth opened and then closed, like a stunned fish.

“Are you telling us that unless Malfoy is cut by the blade, or I suddenly turn myself into a pure blood, that... what? We can’t break this curse and I’m just... stuck being thrown into his bed for all eternity at midnight?”

Halpert turned to look at both of them, shaking his head. “Oh no, I’m not saying that at all. No, there’s plenty we can try to do to break the bond. Plus, it wouldn’t last forever, because the magic wouldn’t allow it—it would probably kill you before it got—”

“Halpert,” Draco hissed and his eyes shifted to Hermione’s white face, before he settled back on the Cursebreaker, who had ceased talking at the tone of his colleague’s voice, “do shut the fuck up.”

“Ah, right,” Halpert said, suddenly realizing what he had been saying, “apologies, my mouth runs quicker than my brain, I’m afraid.”

“Yes, that’s rather clear,” Draco said, still sounding perturbed.

Hermione swallowed against the sudden onslaught of fear, and promptly ignored the sharp cadence of her heartrate, the shaking of her fingers. She noticed Draco’s eyes on her so she clasped her hands tightly in front of her skirt and took in a deep breath, keeping her focus on Halpert. “You... you, um, said there were some things we could still try—what are those?”

She needed a directive, something she could focus on. That would clear the onslaught of haziness in her mind, a fog of terror that was clouding her rational thinking.

“Well, for starters, we could gather some more information on how far the magic extends. For example—Hermione, would you still be pulled to the bed, if Malfoy weren’t in it? What if you were both out of your respective houses, beds? What would happen etcetera... I propose we play with the magic, tease it out so we can figure it out. Meanwhile, my team and I will continue to pull this you see here apart to look for other fragile spots. If we can find a more definitive weakness, we can possibly exploit that to make the bonding null and void. Like a... magical divorce?”

Hermione let out a fast breath, before pulling in a slow one, needing to find a calmer rhythm for her heart. She nodded once, body feeling almost incapable of anything more.

“Fine,” she said, voice strained and clipped, then glanced over to Draco, who seemed to have continued watching her. His grey eyes were darker than usual, lips thinned and tight. “I’ll talk to you later about what we plan to do for tonight’s... um...”

Draco’s gaze roamed over her face for a moment, expression betraying nothing. “Yes, alright,” he said with a quick nod.

Hermione bid them both farewell and quickly exited, her small heels clicking as she hastily moved for the elevators. The corridor was blissfully empty as she walked a quick staccato across the tiles. She let her hands fall to her sides as she walked, shaking them out next to her hips, needing to expel some of the buzzing tension she felt in her fingers.

This whole thing was idiotic. She could hardly believe she was in this mess.

Did Halpert really just tell her that this curse could *kill* her? That the magical bond might turn to poison somehow should it not be completed...

Ridiculous.

Terrifying.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts, but they pounded in relentlessly, needling at every section of her brain.

Hermione reached the elevators and stabbed at a button as her body began to shake, first a small tremble, but the longer she stood still and waiting, the greater the shaking grew until she could barely stand still against the rocking of her limbs.

Something was pulsing through her chest, something toxic and painful, it was seizing her—like angry fingers were squeezing at her organs. Her lungs suddenly hurt, and Hermione briefly registered that she hadn't taken a breath in a while, and so she gasped one in, and then she felt her chest stutter with the need for more air.

Panic.

Was she panicking?

*Oh...*

“Granger—”

A voice from behind her, reaching her ears as if spoken through water. She blinked at the silver doors of the elevator before her, sucking in tiny, uneven breaths. Hermione pressed a hand to her chest, frightened at the fast pace of her heartbeat beneath her fingers, at the way her lungs couldn't seem to get quite enough air in. Her chest fluttered up and down quickly with her desperation for air, but she couldn't get enough... not enough...

“Granger?”

The voice was closer, and then a hand was on her shoulder, forcing her to turn.

Hermione's body was pliant as she was turned. She was only capable of keeping her hand pressed firmly to her chest, on trying to keep pulling in oxygen, on keeping her legs standing beneath her body as a riot of aching sensation coursed through her.

“*Fuck,*” came the deep voice from in front of her. Her vision was blurry but there was something white in front of her. She could see buttons, she thought. “Granger, it's alright—fucking breathe—”

Something warm was against her face, and her head was forced backwards. She looked up into silver eyes. They pierced into her as she shook like a brittle leaf in the wind, gasping and panting, the effort of which made her limbs feel incapable of keeping her upright.

It was Draco, she knew it, the familiarity of him pushed in through the maelstrom, the sudden tempest in her mind. She stared at him with her wide eyes, and she wanted to plead with him, but no words would push through her lips.

Draco was saying something in a low voice to her. Then his eyes left her face, and Hermione nearly buckled under the loss, but he was gazing behind her, before he growled something low and grating and then he was pushing her backwards several steps. She almost fell at the forced movement. Her surroundings got smaller, walls closer.

Elevator.

She was in the elevator with Draco.

He held her steady and returned his silver eyes to her, piercing straight through to her heart. She gasped a breath and with her free hand, she reached to clutch at the front of his shirt, her fingers tightly closing around the brown leather strap on his chest. A silent plea.

“Granger,” Draco was saying to her urgently, “nothing is going to happen to you, I swear it, I swear it on my own life, I won’t let anything happen to you—”

She heard her own sob as she pulled in her next harsh breath, the sound rasping up her throat.

“Breathe with me,” he said in a softer voice, those silver eyes flashing with something akin to his own panic.

He was holding her close, their bodies nearly pressed together, his hand was still on the side of her face, keeping her gaze positioned upwards to him. Draco took in a deep breath, his chest rising. He let it out slowly, gaze never wavering from hers.

“Breathe with me,” Draco whispered between them.

Hermione focused on him, keeping one hand to her chest, and one hand to his. She watched him breathe, watched his chest shift up and down with his calm, slow pulls of air.

She shuddered with the effort to mimic him. The terror still rippled through her, but under his careful gaze, the steady warmth of him, Hermione started to slow her breathing, sucking in a deeper breath, before letting it out again, slowly, in time with him.

Hermione saw his tiny nod.

“That’s it, love, you’re doing great,” Draco murmured as he kept breathing with her, an arm tightening comfortingly around her waist, a thumb sweeping across her cheekbone. Her senses began to shift, to narrow down to the feel of him, glancing away from the panic, letting it slowly fall away from her.

Hermione could feel it easing, the fingers that had been squeezing her heart painfully were pulling away from her, releasing her from the icy grip. Her brain was clearing as she flooded it with oxygen. Her vision was returning.

Relief cascaded over her.

Her body still trembled, but she felt herself coming back. Her next exhale was a sigh, and Hermione let her head drop forward onto Draco’s chest. The hand on her cheek slid to the back of her head and held her there.

Her fingers around his holster eased away, and instead she flattened her palm against his chest, soaking in the warmth of his skin beneath her.

She couldn't be certain, but Hermione thought she could feel Draco's body shivering slightly, too, his fingers unsteady in the tendrils of her hair.

He held her, silently, and Hermione didn't have the strength to pull away, needing to simply exist with him for a moment, to let him comfort her. She hadn't had a panic attack for years—she'd had her share of them following the war, but Hermione had thought she'd rid herself of them through her regular Healing sessions.

She might have stayed there forever, enveloped in his arms, if it weren't for the sharp noise, the jerking of the elevator, and the unmistakable crunching sound of metal as the doors started to slide open.

Voices and footsteps had Hermione's body jump-starting, and she quickly lifted her head and took two startled steps away from him. Draco's hands slid away from her.

They looked at each other for a drawn-out moment. His face was almost inscrutable, in the way Hermione was so familiar with, but there was something beneath, a current of something that she wanted to understand.

Then several people crowded into the elevator, bodies shifting between them and snapping the cord between them. Hermione's eyes finally left him and she forced herself to face the front of the elevator.

She was breathing a little heavily again, but not for the same reasons as before. Now, she was feeling acutely aware of Draco once more. He was separated from her by two wizards, but it was like there was nothing and no one between them.

He had been so caring, so gentle with her... even when she was past it, broken through the panicked haze, Draco had just held her. Hermione might not have expected him to start throwing jabs at her after something like that, she didn't believe him to be a monster, but she didn't expect the... tenderness.

The elevator shifted on its path downwards, and Hermione swallowed through her strange thoughts of Draco Malfoy. When she looked sideways, something in her midriff sparked and shot through her wildly, finding his silver eyes still on her. It almost looked like he was glaring at her, an intensity behind the look that was powerful and heady.

One of the wizards caught the look on his face and cringed away from Draco slightly. His reputation as a rather ruthless Auror always caused a stir, but as Hermione looked at him, she felt anything but scared.

The elevator jerked to a stop again, and everyone ambled off the lift, leaving Hermione and Draco alone once more.

She watched as Draco swallowed, and moved a step back towards her, making her heart jump inside her chest, but before the doors of the elevator could slide closed, someone squeezed in.

Draco paused in his advance on Hermione and they both turned their heads to the newcomer.

Hermione felt anger pulse through her, teeth clenching inside her jaw.

Cormac McLaggen had sidled inside, and when he saw Hermione, started to grin ferally at her.

“Granger,” he said, taking up position next to her, slotting between her and Draco, “twice in one week. I knew things were looking up.”

Hermione faced back towards the front of the lift, folding her arms across her chest.

“McLaggen,” was all she said in greeting, letting her frustration bleed into her tone.

Draco stood stiffly and silently next to Cormac.

“Morning treating you well?” Cormac asked and gave her a slight nudge with his shoulder against hers. Hermione grimaced and took a small step sideways.

“Not particularly,” Hermione said truthfully.

“Ah,” Cormac said and grinned over to her, “how about a morning pick-me-up? Grab a coffee with me. I was just heading to the—”

“No,” she said, cutting him off rudely, before grudgingly adding, “thanks.”

From the corner of her eye, she could see that Cormac was looking sidelong at her, and that Draco was also.

“Come on, Granger,” Cormac said in a simpering tone, and Hermione finally lifted her gaze to look at him, trying to ignore Draco’s eyes just past him, “what will it take to finally get you to—”

Cormac had put a hand on her shoulder, and it was then that Draco spoke.

“I’ll thank you to take your hand off her, and to stop trying to ask out my wife.”

Cormac recoiled as Hermione choked on her next gasp of air. He whipped his head towards Draco, almost as if he hadn’t realized he was there in the elevator with them.

“Wife?” Cormac bit out with disbelief.

“He’s kidding!” Hermione said quickly, hardly believing Draco’s words herself. Her shocked gaze went to Draco, and he was glaring at Cormac with a look that would have shriveled even the most powerful wizards before him, his height towering over the other man menacingly. “Malfoy...” Hermione warned carefully.

Draco’s eyes moved from Cormac, sliding over to her, and then one side of his lips tipped up in the corner. He straightened and stepped away, his face easing again. “Alright, I am kidding—but not about touching her,” Draco said, voice calm as anything, looking back to Cormac

once more, “do so again without her express permission and I’ll tie you a noose made from your own intestines.”

Hermione’s mouth dropped open a little, betraying her shock at the callous threat, but thankfully her body did not also betray the swooping in her gut, the flood of arousal between her legs. *What the hell was wrong with her?*

Something dark and powerful seemed to ripple outward from Draco as he stared with pleasant fury at Cormac, lips still quirked in the corner. Hermione could hardly look away from him, her chest rising on a deep inhale her body desperately needed at the sight of it.

Cormac took a step away from Hermione and raised his hands in the air. “Hey now, Malfoy—that’s not necessary—Granger and I, we’re good pals. From school, you know?”

Something sharpened in his gaze, eyes the color of a deadly blade, like they would slice right through Cormac if he said the wrong thing. Draco looked to her, took in her incredulous expression before he focused back on Cormac.

“I’m sure,” Draco muttered, clearly unconvinced before he hit a button on the elevator panel with barely concealed anger. The elevator shuddered to a stop and the doors were sliding open. His gaze was now on Hermione, intense and electric. “Now get out.”

Cormac gaped, looking over at Hermione. “But I—”

Draco’s eyes didn’t leave Hermione. “Get out!”

Cormac jumped slightly, but he shuffled out of the elevator meekly, and then the doors were closing, leaving Hermione and Draco alone in the small space.

His stare on her felt like a touch, it was so concentrated, penetrating. Hermione felt her breath stutter as she took it in, the raw power emanating from him.

“Are you alright?” Draco ground out, as though his teeth were clenched.

“Yes,” Hermione breathed, “I... thank you.”

Energy crackled in the confined space between them, and she inhaled it, making her body feel warm all over. As though magnetized, Hermione took a step towards him, finding that she craved his touch, to be back in his arms. She felt strangely unraveled, pulled to Draco in a way she had never experienced with anyone before.

His eyes flashed at the step, like a warning. “Granger,” he said, voice sounding strained as his gaze moved to her mouth, and Hermione stopped in her tracks, swallowing at his focus on her lips, which parted under the scrutiny. The warmth in her body spread and she hardly felt in control of herself as her foot took another step forwards. Draco watched her approach with a trembling focus.

“Granger, stop.” A command, a plea. Hermione stopped, she was just out of arms reach, yet she still had to tilt her head slightly back to keep his gaze. Draco’s hands were clenched at his sides as they stood facing each other. “I confess I’m a little out of control right now,” he said



in a quiet voice that still managed to resonate around the elevator, “and if you get any closer, I’m not sure I could hold myself back from pressing you against the wall of this fucking elevator.”

Her inhale was sharp, surprised by Draco’s admission. More warmth flooded her, concentrated between her legs.

Everything with him, ever since their lives had become entwined through their mutual friends, had always felt like a game, each of them vying for the upper hand, toeing a line between flat insulting and outwardly flirting.

But this.

This didn’t feel like a game.

Draco’s face was utterly serious, not a trace of the usual smugness to be found.

Hermione held his eyes, which gleamed at her with rapt attention, the muscles along his jaw rippling as he waited for what she might do next. Whether she would heed his warning, and step away or whether she would cross that line they had been so careful not to cross until she had been cut.

She took a step forward.

Draco’s groan was half-growl, and no time was spared as he pushed himself forward and took hold of her, his lips crashing down onto hers with a speed that startled and electrified her. His mouth was a hard press against hers, punishing and brutal in the most delicious way. There was no hesitation for Hermione, her mouth opened to him with a ragged inhale, and Draco’s tongue moved along hers, a rough drag. A moan pushed up her throat, her hands grasped at him, finding the leather of the holster around his shoulders and gripping them, pulling him in towards her with desperation.

Their chests pressed together, warmth seeping in through her clothes. His hands felt like they were everywhere. On her face, in her hair, skating up the curves of her waist, pulling her closer with his fingers unyielding at her spine.

True to his word, Draco was pushing her backwards, until she hit the wall of the elevator behind her, a rough breath escaping her mouth at being caged in by him, thrilling her.

His mouth was unrelenting, nipping, biting and sucking at her lips, before pushing at them to open their mouths to each other, tongue slick and warm against her own. Hermione tried to match his fervent pace, but soon gathered that Draco was in control of this. She had never liked to relinquish control, but in this, she succumbed.

She was weak against him, *for* him, as Draco kissed her like he was starved. Like Hermione was everything he needed in that moment.

Hermione bathed in it, feeling wholly worshipped.

His mouth left hers, trailed a pathway of hot kisses down the side of her face, his hand tangling in her hair and pulling at it to expose her neck. She tilted her head, the heaviness of her breaths echoing in the elevator as his lips pressed in under her ear, moving downwards to leave a trail of wet warmth. Shivers rocked down her spine, and her fingers gripped the straps of his holster, her eyes falling shut, mouth falling open on a silent moan.

Hermione felt his teeth against her skin, just before he bit her, hard enough that a small burst of pain had her body jerking, a gasp leaving her lips. Draco pushed his hips into her as he groaned, running his tongue over the sore spot, before clasp his mouth back around her skin and sucking deeply.

A shuddering breath left her as he sucked on her skin, hearing his heavy groan, the sound vibrating across her neck.

She whined desperately at the ache between her legs, pushing her pelvis against his, seeking friction at her core.

Draco removed his mouth from her neck and straightened himself up, looking down at her, eyes sparkling and lips dark and swollen. Both of his hands left her body and came to rest against the wall on either side of her head. He towered over her, his gaze was deadly sharp, focused. "Granger," his voice low and strained, "make that sound again and I'll damn well fuck you right here in this elevator."

She sucked in another quick breath, feeling his words right through her body, like he was already sliding his fingers through the slick between her legs. Her eyes fell shut, her chest pressing forwards and head falling back at the very thought, a moan dragging out of her mouth unbidden.

"*Fuck*," Draco ground out, sounding almost pained.

His mouth was hot against hers once more, and she welcomed it with a passionate intensity, her hands finally leaving the leather at his chest to grasp at the sides of his face, kissing him back with a hunger that matched his own.

She was reaching to touch his hair, when the doors of the elevator began to screech open once more.

A rush of cold air greeted her as Draco removed himself from her immediately and stepped away with a rushed exhale.

A harried-looking wizard stepped on, thankfully looking down at some papers in his hands as Hermione blinked stupidly, still sagged against the wall. She managed to straighten as the oblivious wizard pushed a button and the lift doors shut and they started to move.

Hermione was working to control her breathing and the mad pace of her heart as she tried to casually brush down her clothes, making sure nothing was out of place. She could see in her periphery that Draco was doing the same, carefully reaching for his collar, straightening the straps of his holster against his chest.

They resolutely did not look in each other's direction.

The air felt thick and hot as they moved.

The elevator stopped again, at her floor. The doors opened noisily.

Hermione stepped, as if in a daze, through the open doorway and kept walking, as though her nerve endings weren't on fire, as though her body weren't demanding she go right back to Draco and have his mouth on her again.

Before the doors shut behind her, Hermione glanced over her shoulder.

Draco stood in the center of the elevator, watching her leave, his eyes smoldering at her. In those eyes, Hermione could see it. There was a clear promise: that they would finish what they had started.

The doors closed, hiding him from her view.

\*\*

*Fuck.*

Fuck fuck fuck.

Draco forced himself, with great effort, to head back to his floor and sit behind the desk in his office. It had taken every ounce of strength inside of him not to follow Hermione out of that elevator, find a nice quiet, dark space in the Archives, and bury himself inside of her, fucking her into the wall until she was screaming his name.

Behind his desk, Draco's eyes fell shut, jaw clenching as he pictured it. He strained in his trousers and shifted uncomfortably, blowing out a frustrated breath.

The way he was feeling was entirely inappropriate, and he felt like an utter asshole for it.

It had been positively awful, finding her in front of the lifts, suddenly struggling to breathe. The wide eyes, hand pressed into her chest, her tiny panicked breaths—it was haunting, to have watched her in such a vulnerable state, making him feel entirely desperate and helpless before her.

His relief had been visceral, overwhelming, when Hermione had broken through it, leaning into him, her breaths finally calming.

Draco could not fathom how they had gotten from there... to him attacking her mouth in such a way. His reaction to that fuckwit, McLaggen, had been decidedly primitive, possessive. The aching need to claim her had overcome him with a deadly force.

And she had stepped towards him, disregarding his warning...

*Fuck.*

His head fell into his hands atop his desk, groaning as he recalled how perfect she had tasted, felt beneath his hands, mouth and body so flawless, so soft...

Draco jerked his head up, a sudden thought entering his mind that had his gut clenching into uncomfortable knots.

He stood and strode quickly from his office.

Halpert was still in the same spot, staring at the shimmering lines around the blade, signaling the magic imbued into it, the magic that was currently connecting him and Hermione together.

"Halpert," Draco said, finding his voice accusatory and demanding. When the Cursebreaker turned towards him, he took in a deep breath and tried for a calmer tone. "I need to ask you a question about this bond."

Halpert just nodded at him and turned back to the floating blade. "Sure, go ahead," he said pleasantly, despite the likely agitative state Draco presented.

Draco stepped forwards, the lights of the infinity shining across his face. "This magic... when Hermione was cut with it... does it... have any effect on forced emotional connection? Or... er... sexual desire?"

Halpert turned to face him fully this time, brows raising high towards his hairline.

"Why do you ask that?" Halpert said, though the tone of his voice suggested he knew exactly why.

The muscles in Draco's jaw pulsed as he tried not to snap back at him. "Just answer the question," he almost growled.

Halpert's eyes glinted knowingly. "No," he finally said, "this magic is clearly for matrimonial bonding only. Where there is a clear contractual caveat for sexual relations, there is no sway on emotion or sexual desire. Plus," Halpert continued as he turned back to the swirling golden lines, "that kind of magic was outlawed in the 18th century, considered quite dark to force that kind of connection... and this blade is definitively 19th century or later."

Draco swallowed, relief coursing through him.

Hermione... she had stepped towards him. She had *wanted* him to...

Draco excused himself, rudely not pausing to thank Halpert for his knowledge. As he walked, he bit hard against his bottom lip as he considered the way she had responded to him.

He and Hermione had spent years winding each other up, jabbing incessantly at each other, each trying to win the game of who was more clever, who could come up with the best insult, who could gain the upper hand that day.

Hermione had had his attention for a long time, Draco's fascination with her had been undeniable, almost from the moment he had been practically forced into interacting with her

when Potter and Theo started dating.

Her quick wit and sharp tongue had caused Draco's interest to be keener than he would have liked, causing some of their playful arguments to feel like flirting. On occasion, he had thought that she, too, might have thought the same.

But they had never crossed this kind of line before. Not until Hermione started appearing in his bed.

Now his attraction to her was undeniable, and it unmoored him.

Draco felt out of control, and he *really* didn't like feeling that way.

By the time he returned to his office, he decided that a return to their status quo might be the best course of action. Draco was a man who needed control, and Hermione was slowly breaking him apart, piece by piece.

\*\*

Hermione sat down with Harry for a break in the Ministry's lunchroom, and she picked unenthusiastically at her sandwich.

Harry was in a very pleasant mood, happily regaling her with a funny story that a fellow Auror had told him that morning. Hermione was only half-listening, but she managed to smile and laugh at all the right moments.

Her mind had been occupied for the remainder of her morning, the flashbacks of Draco in the elevator had her body flushing hot on far too many occasions.

The promise in his eyes when the doors had shut between them, it was plaguing her in an almost shameful way. Hermione could not expel Draco from her mind.

It had her wondering at the true effects of this curse... was it pushing Draco at her, in more ways than one?

"...and can you believe it? Markson took almost three hours to turn his leg back into a—bloody hell, what's Malfoy doing in here?"

Hermione's head jerked up suddenly, disbelieving of Harry's words. Draco never had lunch in here...

But there he was, in his delightful grey trousers, white oxford and brown leather strapped across him. His eyes were on Hermione as he strode purposefully towards their table.

Her heartrate kicked up and she swallowed at his approach.

Draco's eyebrow twitched upward for a moment, and a smirk graced his mouth as he got to their table, pulled a seat away, and sank down into it.

Harry seemed just as flabbergasted as Hermione.

“Malfoy—did you need something?”

He slid his eyes over to Harry. Instead of answering him, Draco said, “no brown-bagged lunch today, Potter? Is Theo already so remiss in his husbandly duties?”

Harry raised his brows at Draco. “Theo has a busy day today, I told him not to bother. What are you doing in the lunchroom? I have literally never seen you in here before.”

“Ah, alas,” Draco said, leaning back into his seat as though he were as comfortable in the plastic contraption as could be, “I also have a spouse neglecting their duties to pack me delicious home-made lunches.”

His eyes moved over to Hermione, and she felt her eyes narrowing on him.

“Spouse?” Harry said with humor, “who would tie themselves to the likes of you, Malfoy?”

Hermione snorted at that, and Draco’s eyes snapped to hers, full of their usual mischief.

“Something funny, Granger?”

She licked at her lips and placed her sandwich down on her plate, brushing at the crumbs on her fingers. “Well, yes, if you must know—the idea of you taking a wife sounds laughable, seeing as you can’t even tolerate a partner at work.”

Draco’s eyes glinted at her and he leaned forwards, arms coming up onto the table. “Well, you know me... I just *hate* to give up control.”

She leaned towards him, like they were two magnets, drawn to one another. “Well, Malfoy, perhaps you could learn a thing or two about how delightful it is to occasionally relinquish control... quite cathartic, really.”

He raised a brow, a smile on his lips. He opened his mouth, but Harry cut across him.

“Merlin, please stop it,” Harry said, and they both looked over at him, “I’m trying to eat my lunch without vomiting, thank you.”

“What?” Hermione asked him.

Harry gave her a pointed look, eyes blunt behind his round spectacles. “I’m just going to eat at my desk.” He picked up his food and shot a look between them, before he rolled his eyes and walked away.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, to call him back, but nothing came out.

She sighed and looked back to Draco.

His head was slightly turned away from her, watching Harry leave with an unreadable expression. Draco slowly looked back to her, the playfulness of earlier having vanished.

“Why are you actually here?” Hermione asked, trying to keep her composure under his gaze.

The silver of his eyes roamed over her face for a moment, before he breathed in deeply and then sat back into his chair, regarding her more coolly than he had for a while.

“You said we would discuss a plan for tonight, so, let’s discuss.” He folded his hands over the table between them, taking on a business-like look. Hermione frowned at him, uncertainty washing over her. Only a few hours ago, he had been pressing her against a wall, kissing her with more ferocity than any man ever had in her lifetime. Now he was looking at her like she was no more than a colleague, no more than someone who was irritatingly thrust into his life, someone he was forced to tolerate.

*What was he doing?*

She swallowed uncomfortably.

“Alright,” Hermione said uncertainly, “well, based on Halpert’s recommendations, I think we should both be far from our beds when midnight hits, see if the pull into your bed still occurs in the same way.”

Draco’s lips pressed together as he considered her words. His head cocked to the side, face so professional and ordinary. Hermione hated it.

He nodded once. “Seems reasonable, let’s hope that works.” Then Draco stood suddenly, shoving his hands into the pockets of his grey trousers. “I’d say I’ll see you later, but I’m hoping I won’t,” he said, and Hermione’s heart squeezed a little at his words.

She blinked at him, incapable of responding, and then he was turning and walking away without another word.

\*\*

Hermione paced around the living room of her flat at 11.30pm, the fabric of her dress fluttering around her knees.

She had waited for Theo and Harry to head to bed before she got herself ready to go out, so she could make sure she put as much space between her and her bed as was possible.

But as she strolled around in front of the fireplace uneasily, Hermione realized she had no idea where to go.

She bit at her lip before she reached for the floo powder, feeling out of sorts ever since Draco had regarded her with such unfamiliarity despite the way they had become... very familiar with each other this week so far.

Was this all part of the game for him? Kissing her, making her acutely aware of how attracted she was to him... was this just Draco still trying to get the upper hand over her?

The thought irked her to no end, making her pulse with anger.

Before she could talk herself out of it, Hermione threw the floo powder down into the grate, watching as the flames flared bright green, and then she was saying with fierce

determination, “Malfoy Estate.”

Hermione stepped through the fire, and she was whisked away, spinning and flying through various fireplaces.

She arrived, stepping hurriedly out of an opulent mantel. Hermione swiped at the edges of her black dress, brushing away remnants of ash from her skirt.

“Granger?”

Hermione looked up, seeing Draco moving towards her with confusion on his face. He still wore the same clothes as he had earlier at work, causing a riot of butterflies in her stomach at the sight of his leather holster again. It was awfully distracting.

He looked at her with low brows, eyes narrowed.

“What are you doing here?” he said with a bite of irritation, “just couldn’t wait until midnight, could you?”

Her hands moved to her hips as she glared at him, Draco stopping a few steps away from her.

“What is your problem, exactly?” she demanded.

“At this very moment?” Draco’s lips curved upward menacingly. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed further. “What is it, Malfoy? Are your superiority tendencies really so fragile that you can’t admit you *enjoyed* what happened in the elevator?”

Draco’s eyes flashed, but he scoffed at her, which sounded false to her ears.

“The elevator, seriously?” he said, “which part, exactly? The part where you were losing your shit, or the part where you threw yourself at me?”

Hermione took a step back, her hands leaving her hips to fall to her sides with incredulity. She felt her face slacken, like he had slapped her across the face.

Draco’s eyes fell shut for a moment and took his own step away from her. Hands came up and ran through his hair as he sighed roughly.

“Granger, look—”

She held up a hand and he paused, watching her with that same inscrutable expression as earlier in the lunchroom.

Hermione twisted back to the fireplace, took a fist full of floo powder and threw it down with a jerky movement. This had obviously been a grave mistake.

She stepped in and didn’t even bother to turn around towards Draco as she said, “The Leaky Cauldron,” and left the Malfoy Estate with a *whoosh*.



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Draco watched Hermione leave through the fireplace with a sinking in his gut.

*Had he really just said that?*

Fuck it. Fuck everything.

He probably shouldn't, but he knew he was going to.

"The Leaky Cauldron," Draco said into the emerald green flames.

He stepped out of the fireplace into the pub, looking around the near-empty establishment. It was a Wednesday night, after all. So, it was easy enough for Draco to spot her halo of wild curls ahead of him, just beginning to settle into a barstool, shoulders slumped inwards slightly as she addressed the barkeep for a drink.

Draco sighed softly, feeling like a right idiot.

He walked up to her slowly, and Draco sensed her tense as he came up behind her.

"Don't you know a dramatic exit when you see one, Malfoy?" Hermione said, not bothering to turn around towards him.

He sighed again, pulling out the stool next to her, and plonking himself down onto it. He asked the barkeep for a double scotch. Draco looked sidelong at her. Hermione stared down at the bar-top and was rubbing her finger absently over a small scratch in the wood.

"In my experience, a dramatic exit is usually a plea to be followed," Draco said, "the whole damsel in distress complex."

Hermione looked at him then, turning her head to meet his eyes. She looked a little bereft, pain behind her eyes, and Draco knew with clarity that he had put that look there.

"Well, I think you've reached your damsel limit for the day," Hermione said, a little too monotone for his liking, "consider yourself off the hook."

A drink was placed down in front of her, and she looked away from him, placing her fingers around her glass and bringing it up to her lips for a sip.

Draco's scotch was put before him also and he frowned down into his glass for a moment.

"Granger," he said, "I should never have said what I said... I'm—" Draco grimaced, but forced the word between his teeth, "—sorry."

Hermione took another sip and then placed her glass back down. "It's fine, Malfoy. It doesn't matter."

He watched her profile. "It does, I don't... that's not something I, or anyone else, should ever joke about."

She looked over at him with an arched eyebrow. “Were you joking? You seemed quite serious. In fact, you’ve acted quite odd since the elevator.”

Draco gritted his teeth again. “I... may have thought that a return to civility might have been for the best... with everything going on with the curse and all.”

“A *return* to civility?” Hermione said, and her face turned incredulous, “when have we *ever* been civil to each other?”

His lips twitched upwards at that. “That’s fair. Perhaps I over-corrected a little.”

She snorted, took another sip. The glass went back down and he followed the action with his eyes.

“Do you regret it, then?” Hermione asked, and Draco’s gaze went straight back to hers.

His tongue flicked at the inside of his teeth as he considered her and his answer. He huffed out a breath through his nose, turned towards his drink, plucked it up, and downed the entire contents in one swallow. He put the glass back down and gestured to the barkeep for another.

When he looked back at Hermione, she found her watching him carefully.

“No,” he said finally, “I don’t fucking regret it. Part of the present issue is that I was trying to find a way to regain control of the situation, because every part of me seems to have become entirely obsessed with you.”

Hermione lips parted and he heard her small intake of breath.

“I shouldn’t have kissed you in the way I did, considering what had happened right before that,” Draco continued, feeling exposed but unable to stop himself, “I should have made sure you were alright... but I seemed unable to stop myself and it took everything in me not to find you again for the rest of the day and rip each of your clothes off.”

Her eyes were wide, a flush creeping into her cheeks as she swallowed.

“Oh,” she breathed.

Hermione took up her drink and swallowed the rest of it.

Draco’s fresh drink was placed on the bar-top.

She looked back to him.

“Is it... is it the curse, making us feel this way?”

Draco sighed. “No, I already asked Halpert that. The magic has no impact on emotion or... attraction.”

“Oh,” Hermione said again, flushing a deeper red and looking away from him, “I suppose if you’re being so honest, I should do the same and say I kind of knew the answer to that

already. I've been... attracted to you for a while."

Draco stared at her, astonished. "Really?"

She placed her chin into her hands and turned her eyes back to his. "Really."

"Hmm," he hummed, holding her gaze, before he said quietly, "that's surprising..."

"Is it?" Hermione asked, her lips lifting slightly.

He smirked at her. "No... not really, it's entirely unsurprising—I'm an undeniably attractive man, after all."

Hermione chuckled softly and returned her focus to her empty glass.

"I am really sorry, Granger," Draco said earnestly, hoping she understood he regretted it the moment he spoke the words, "I don't ever want to make light of what happened to you earlier."

She pressed her lips together, watching him carefully. "It's forgiven, Malfoy. I think we're a little high strung around each other at the moment, so some things we don't mean are bound to slip out."

"Are you alright? I wanted to make sure earlier, but..."

"I'm fine," Hermione said, the tip of her finger circling the rim of her glass, "I haven't... It used to happen sometimes, right after the war. But it hadn't happened in a while. What Halpert said about the curse just struck something long-buried and I..."

Draco swallowed and reached for her fingers, ceasing the fidgeting on the glass. He took up her hand and set it on the counter between them, setting his own on top of hers and giving it a gentle squeeze.

"Halpert's a genuine fucking idiot, while simultaneously being a genuine fucking genius," Draco said with a hint of ire returning over the Cursebreakers lack of awareness, "it's extremely vexing to work with him, sometimes."

Hermione stared at their joined hands before her chest rose with a deep breath. She set her gaze to him.

"It's almost midnight," she murmured quietly.

Draco's brows shot up and he looked down at his wristwatch. She was right, there were only a few minutes of today left.

He took his hand off hers immediately.

"Right," Draco said, flexing his fingers for a moment and then reached for his drink, taking another scorching sip. He dug into his pockets and fetched some galleons, throwing them down onto the counter, in case they both disappeared and left the Leaky as drink-thief's.

She hopped off the stool, and started to move towards the bathrooms.

“Granger,” Draco said, and she stopped and turned back towards him, the skirt of her dress flaring and falling back to her knees, “I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t help but want you back in my bed tonight.”

She bit at her lip, fingers coming together in front of her abdomen to fidget. Then a small smirk came on to her face. “Of course you do, Malfoy, because I am *also* undeniably attractive.”

Hermione spun back around and walked away, disappearing behind the door ahead.

Draco felt himself buzzing with desire as he watched her leave.

Undeniably attractive, indeed. So fucking, painfully attractive.

He checked his watch, swallowing hard. He stood from the stool and abandoned his drink, following the path Hermione had just taken through the bathroom door ahead.

Draco knew he should not be doing this, knew he was tempting fate and the curse, but he was drawn to her, incapable of stopping himself.

He wrenched the door open and stepped inside.

And Hermione was there.

Leaning against the opposite wall to him, hands tucked behind her back, eyes on him.

Draco stood, letting the door fall closed behind him. They watched each other for a heated moment.

“One step, Granger,” he said gruffly, “and I’m yours.”

Hermione rolled her tongue across her bottom lip, her hazel eyes piercing into him. Then she pushed off the wall and took a definitive step forward.

“Thank fuck,” Draco said and surged towards her.

He took her by the waist, fusing his mouth to hers at once, swallowing the low moan she uttered. In a hurried step, Hermione was against the wall once more, and Draco was pushing himself into her with a frenzied need, his hands moving to her arse and pulling her hips to grind against him.

Hermione uttered a breathy moan, her hands blissfully in his hair, pressing him close while he devoured her mouth, delving his tongue inside to taste her.

Gods, he wanted to taste every inch of her.

His fingers pushed in at her arse again, feeling the delightful pertness of her coupled with the soft warmth of her front as it ground against him.

Draco was already hard and straining in his trousers, begging to slide into her wet warmth, to feel her clenching around him.

He groaned against her lips at the thought of it, of her walls fluttering around his cock while he spilled into her. Draco thought he might come in his trousers at the very concept.

A sharp popping sound echoed around them, and suddenly they were no longer on their feet, becoming horizontal and falling onto a soft mattress all at once.

One minute, he had her up against a wall, and the next, Draco was on top of Hermione, pressing her into his bed instead, their kissing never ceasing despite the change of their positioning.

Hermione moaned underneath him, tugging on his hair and wrapping her legs around his waist and immediately grinding upwards against him.

Draco pulled his mouth from hers with great effort. Hermione practically whined at the loss and he smirked, unable to help himself.

Panting, he asked, “your hand?”

Hermione’s eyes flickered open and she removed her hand from him and glanced at it. It was bleeding.

Draco licked at his lips and then looked to her. “Does it hurt?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Great,” Draco said and descended back to her mouth, Hermione gasping at the suddenness of it. He tilted his head, encouraging her to open her mouth, which she did, and he relished in the feel of her tongue against his own.

“Malfoy,” Hermione said and turned her head to stop the kiss. His mouth just moved to her neck instead and started to nip and bite at the sensitive skin while she breathed heavily underneath him. “The blood... your shirt, your sheets...”

He licked at her skin, tasting a saltiness there. “Fuck the sheets.”

Draco continued laving at her neck, so keen he was to actually taste every inch of her now that he had her. Hermione didn’t try to stop him again, her body wriggling underneath him, hips bucking upwards in her desperation.

He moved down, kissing at the hollow of her throat and then her collarbones. Draco was definitely out of control, seeing as he didn’t even pause to ask before he took up the center of her dress and ripped the bust right down the middle, exposing her breasts with a startled gasp from Hermione.

Draco closed his mouth over a nipple, and Hermione moaned, her hand coming back to his hair and pushing him into her while his tongue flicked, his teeth lightly biting.

“Oh, Gods...” Hermione said, her back arching, chest pushing up into him.

He couldn't wait.

Draco had to feel her.

While he dragged his tongue over the hard peak of her nipple and Hermione writhed and whined beneath him, Draco slid a hand up her thigh, moving the skirt of her dress out of the way, before he plunged beneath the band of her knickers.

His fingers slid into her slit, groaning loudly against her skin at the hot wetness he found.

Hermione bucked, a stunning noise leaving her lips as he circled over her clit, before he went down to her entrance, gathering wetness and coming back up.

“Fuck, Malfoy—” her voice was strained, breathless.

Draco moved to her other breast, closing his lips around it and sucking hard, his fingers gliding through her slick, focusing on the bundle of nerves, feeling his cock twitching at the way her hips were thrusting upwards as though she couldn't control herself.

He slid a finger into her, his thumb pressing down onto her clit, and Hermione gasped loudly, back arching off the bed entirely, and Draco was surprised, yet entirely gratified to feel the walls inside of her gripping at his finger, her orgasm fluttering around him.

Fuck, it was the best feeling in the world. The noises she was making above him were the best sounds in the world.

And then.

Draco flumped onto the mattress, Hermione suddenly not underneath him anymore, his finger no longer inside of her.

Panting and confused, Draco sat up and then looked around slowly.

She was gone.

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Hermione, her vision black at the edges, body riding the high of an incredible orgasm, took more than a few moments to realize that the warm mattress was no longer underneath her, Draco's weight no longer on top of her, and instead, something cold and hard was under her back.

Breathing roughly. Hermione sat herself up.

Darkness was all around her, and she couldn't tell where she was.

But she was no longer on a bed, and instead she seemed to be on a cold, wooden floor.

“Malfoy?” Hermione asked uncertainly, and then she could tell she was in a cavernous space, her soft question echoing loudly.

Swallowing, she got unsteadily to her feet and blinked several times, trying to adjust her eyes to the darkness.

Hermione pulled at the torn fabric of the front of her dress, covering her breasts as she looked around.

A few things started to come into focus. The fireplace to her left. The chandelier above her head. The opulent flooring that Hermione knew with a singular awareness had had her blood flowing over it once upon a time.

She was, somehow, in the Drawing Room of the now-abandoned Malfoy Manor.

Hermione gasped in a shaky breath.

“Fuck.”

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you'll all forgive me for the length in between chapters - I'm working hard over on my other full-length fic *The Animagi Effect* (almost complete) and then my focus will be on this one!

But this is a LONG chapter, so I hope that makes up for it! And I hope you enjoy!

Please leave a comment to let me know your thoughts, I love hearing from you, it keeps me going!

xx

Forawhile

# SO VERY UNSPORTSMANLIKE

## Chapter Notes

Warning: many swear words ahead, tread carefully. ;)

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

Hermione turned slowly on the spot, eyes darting into every shadowed corner for long, seemingly endless moments while her heart thundered in her ears.

She could hear her breaths, fast and shallow, the only sounds in the otherwise quiet, dark spaces of the Drawing Room. Hermione shivered violently at the thought of someone lurking in the shadows, picturing a mass of black curls surrounding a pale and sallow face with a wide, manic grin manifesting out of the darkness. She shook her head quickly, knowing that was impossible. Bellatrix was dead.

With shaky fingers, Hermione reached into the hidden pocket within her dress, and pulled her vine wand out.

“Lumos,” she whispered, and raised her wand high above her head and spun in a slow circle, checking every corner of the large room. The floors spanned out around her feet, shiny and opulent. Furniture was stacked along the walls, covered in white sheets. Dust covered everything, thick and cloying to her nose. But she saw nothing ominous, no spirits of old torturers jumping out to frighten her.

Empty.

She was alone.

Her breaths shuddered out of her as she wondered what the absolute *fuck* she was doing here, in Malfoy Manor, which as far as Hermione knew, had been abandoned since the war. Draco had never returned to his ancestral home, purchasing the Estate for him and his mother soon after. So, why...

She had been in bed, with Draco—she had just...

Confused, Hermione’s brain whirled quickly, pulling in and pushing out a thousand different thoughts and concepts before she loosed a heavy sigh.

She held her wand near her head and started moving cautiously towards the large double doors ahead of her. The black of the wood was ominous, uninviting, but Hermione moved towards them with a singular purpose: to get the fuck out of here.



Hermione reached for the door handle and tried to pull at it, but it wouldn't budge. Frowning, she tugged harder at the cold metal handle, but it remained immovable. Sighing she took a step back.

"Alohamora," she said with irritation. Hermione pulled at the door again, to no avail.

Swearing under her breath, she took several steps away from the door and considered, eyes tracking over the dark wood.

"Revelio," Hermione said, and a bright flare of light had her stepping back a few more feet. A wall of blue light appeared before her, rippling and undulating against the wood of the doors.

Warded. Heavily, by the looks of it.

"Bugger," Hermione grumbled, and looked over her shoulder, feeling her heart kicking around in her chest. The darker spaces of the room were frightening, despite being certain she was alone.

She turned back towards the doors, and sighed.

Closing her eyes and thinking of her parents, talking with them and laughing with them cheerfully, Hermione waved her wand and muttered, "Expecto Patronum."

A silver otter sprang from the tip of her wand and pranced around her in a tight, shiny circle. Hermione smiled at the small creature and then spoke to it.

"Please deliver a message to Draco Malfoy: I'm trapped in the Drawing Room at your old house, please send help."

The otter swirled around her once more, before it shot away from her in a blur of bright, shiny lights.

Hermione was sad to see the otter leave her. Its presence had been a welcome one. Alone once more, she glanced around the spaces of the room that had once been a recurrent appearance in her nightmares. She hadn't thought of this place in a long while, having come to terms with the frightful events that had happened within these walls.

But she had never wanted to come back, had never wanted to face this room, the cold darkness of it whispering to her unpleasantly until her body was shivering again. She wrapped her arms around herself and shook quietly, praying Draco would come for her.

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Draco pushed himself off the bed, the scent of Hermione still overwhelming his senses. He stood, looking around his room, as though she was going to somehow reappear before him.

Breathing out a frustrated sigh, Draco started to stalk towards the door of his room, wrenching it open, then he paused with a foot out the door.

*Where could she have gone... what was the magic up to now? It had never done that before...*

So many questions, so few answers. Disturbingly puzzling, all of it.

He took a few more steps from the room, and when he didn't get whisked back to his own bed, Draco continued down the passageway until he stood in front of his fireplace.

He remained still in front of the mantel, considering quickly.

It would do no good to go storming into her flat, waking Potter and Theo, alerting them to what was going on—but Draco also felt indescribably frantic to know what had happened, where she was, if she was alright...

He might have thought, if Hermione had been returned to her bed, that she might come back... that if Draco waited before the fireplace long enough, that she would appear, flushed and ready for him once more.

But the longer he stared into the flames, and they remained orange with no signs of green, the more agitated Draco became. He was tapping his foot, gripping at his forearms with impatience.

"Fuck, Granger," he bit out, and then dipped his hand into the bag full of shimmery floo powder, and threw it down, calling out for her flat.

Draco spun and tumbled, and then was stepping gracefully into the dark living room of the flat Hermione shared with Potter and Theo. The place was silent, filled with shadows as he glanced around surreptitiously. Moving quietly, but with purpose, Draco headed up the long corridor until he came to the door of her bedroom, knowing it was hers because it wasn't *theirs*. He had never had a need to enter her bedroom before. When he would walk past it to the bathroom during his visits, it was always tightly shut, hiding her belongings and secrets securely behind the closed door.

He swallowed and looked further up the hall to the other closed door, before he knocked quietly on Hermione's bedroom door.

He waited for a few beats, and then turned the handle. Draco only needed a second to know that she wasn't in her room. There was a feeling, a sense that was obvious to him, when a space was occupied by another person. Hermione's room was dark, cold and devoid of life.

Swearing again, he closed the door and paused, running his hands through his hair in nervousness.

*Where was she, then?*

Draco moved back out into the living room, and was about reach for the floo powder once more, when something bright caught his eye, and he turned towards it. Something flew at him, and his wand was in his hand in the space of a second, pointing at a streak of light.

In the next moment, he recognized that it was a Patronus, and he lowered his wand as a small, sparkling otter floated around him, almost playfully. Draco tracked it, the brightness of

it giving the living room a soft, white glow.

Then, he heard Hermione's voice echoing from the Patronus, her words causing ice to inject into his veins at once. "I'm trapped in the Drawing Room at your old house, please send help."

Incredulity, rage and fear all pulsed through him as her words replayed in his mind while the otter disappeared with a bright flash of light. Then he turned his head, and did not hesitate as he yelled at the top of his voice, "Potter!"

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It had been perhaps three minutes since Hermione had sent her Patronus, when she heard the unmistakable cracking sounds of apparition coming from somewhere beyond the doors.

She pulled in a sudden breath at the sounds of other people, relief coursing through her. Hermione was shivering aggressively now, even after repairing the front of her dress and healing the wound on her hand, she was dreadfully cold and frightened. It was a credit to her determination that she did not break down at standing on these floors again, but Hermione was resolutely not thinking of the time she had spent cowed on those floors, on not wondering whether there was a bloodstain that she had caused somewhere behind her, sinking into the grout between tiles.

Swallowing, Hermione strained to hear what was happening behind the doors, and she closed the distance between her and the entrance once more, almost pressing her ear against the wood.

Muffled voices, and then she thought she heard her name.

Then, more clearly, "Granger!"

Draco's voice, unmistakably so. She sighed, knees almost buckling on the spot at the sound of it. She pressed her hands to the door and managed to remain upright.

"Hermione?" she heard, unmistakably not Draco.

*Was that Harry? Oh, bollocks...*

"I'm here!" Hermione called through the wood, cringing at what Harry must be thinking, and what Draco had told him, "the doors seem to be warded, I can't get through them without a blasting charm or worse."

"Stand far back, Granger," came Draco's voice. He sounded rough and angry. "As far back as you can get, and cast a Protego."

Hermione widened her eyes momentarily before saying "alright!" and then she jogged across the room until she was pressed against the wall opposite the doors. She raised her wand and sent a shielding charm around herself, eyes fixed to the soft glow of light she could see through the small cracks in the doors. She had thought that Draco would find a way to

remove the wards, likely they were tied to the Malfoy name... it would have taken some time, but—

A crunching noise sounded before the doors blasted open, a booming sound then reaching her ears while wood splintered and flew throughout the room, crashing into the furniture covered by sheets, sending plumes of dust clouding throughout the space.

Hermione scrunched her eyes shut and pressed herself back into the wall as a few pieces flew in her direction, knocking harmlessly against her shield. She gripped her wand tightly and turned her head to the side, eyes closed as she waited for the blast to abate.

“Granger!”

Hermione opened her eyes, turning to face forwards once more and seeing Draco almost running towards her. She pulled in a deep breath at the sight of him in the darkness, the glow of light streaming in from behind him through the now-open doors, casting his features into shadows, but emitting a halo-like glow around his form, like an avenging angel coming right for her.

“Draco,” she breathed, too quiet for him to have heard.

When he was near enough, his hands started reaching for her, but they butted up against her Protego, which she had forgotten about. His palms were flat against her shield charm as he stared at her through the invisible wall, his chest rising and falling with his ragged breaths.

Hermione lowered her wand, letting the Protego fall, and Draco stumbled forwards into her.

His hands came immediately to her face, holding her while he looked down at her, eyes roaming every inch of her face, like he was inspecting her.

“Are you alright?”

Hermione nodded, his hands on her cheeks shifting from the movement.

“Yes... fine, I just—”

“Hermione?”

Draco’s hands fell away from her face, and he quickly stepped away and to the side. Hermione saw Harry just behind him, walking quickly towards her with his wand in his hand while wearing flannel pajamas. Another shadow was just behind Harry, advancing a little more slowly.

“Um, hi Harry...” she said awkwardly, her arms coming around her middle, feeling sheepish at the attention.

“Bloody hell,” Harry said, surveying the mess of wood and dust around the floors. He set his green eyes on her. “What on earth is happening here—how did you even get in here? This place has been closed and warded since the war.”

Hermione slid her gaze to Draco, who was watching her carefully. Clearly, he had not divulged the details of what had been happening between them. His silver eyes gave nothing away as he stood to the side, arms folded across his chest, looking stoic once more.

She looked past Harry and saw, with a start, that Halpert was there. He had clearly also been woken abruptly from his sleep, wearing rumpled clothing, hair sticking out chaotically. He grinned at Hermione and gave her a small wiggle of his fingers.

“Magic being tricky with you, tonight, hm?” he asked with a pleasant lilt to his voice, like this was all some sort of fun game.

“Magic, what magic?” Harry asked, looking over his shoulder with confusion at the Cursebreaker in the room, before fixing his gaze back to Hermione.

She sighed. “It’s a bit of a long story, Harry…”

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They apparated to Malfoy Estate, while Harry stayed behind to reset the wards on Malfoy Manor that they had hurriedly broken through to get to Hermione.

She sat awkwardly on a wingback chair in a small library, near the fireplace. The flames danced and crackled before her, swaying in a mesmerizing dance, and Hermione watched them with a steadfast attention, hoping for the heat to sink into her skin. She felt like she was still shivering, like her skin was icy cold, fingers numb.

Halpert was on a larger couch beside her, sitting quietly with a pleasant smile on his face as he looked around the room curiously.

Draco had disappeared not long after they had arrived, and hadn’t yet returned.

“I’m so sorry to have disturbed your evening,” Hermione said, glancing over to the Cursebreaker while she splayed her hands out towards the fire in a bid to cease her shaking.

Halpert tore his gaze from the tall stretch of shelving behind them and looked at Hermione.

“Oh, no! Not at all,” he said with a genuine smile, “this is all quite fascinating, extremely so—the magic at play here is clearly very finicky, I’m curious to see what it will do next!”

“Finicky… yes…” Hermione said with a frown, “have you any idea why it would—”

A door opened and she turned to see Draco walking into the room, hovering a tray laden with a teapot and cups. Hermione raised a brow, watching as he set the tray down on a small table before them, and then he lifted a cup and started to pour.

“Tea, Granger?” he asked without looking at her.

“Please,” she said, almost itching to have the hot liquid warming her from the inside.

Draco finished pouring and handed it to her, meeting her eyes for only a moment before looking away. Hermione took the cup gratefully with a quiet ‘thanks’.

“Halpert?” he asked.

“Oh, yes, that would be delightful,” he responded.

Draco handed Halpert his cup of tea, and then he poured one for himself before getting situated on another single wingback chair across from Hermione.

She took a sip carefully. It was scalding, but she hummed pleasantly at the feel as it slid down her throat. Hermione stared at Draco, who brought his own cup to his lips, his eyes on the ground.

He had hardly looked at her since he had arrived, like a proper Knight in Shining Armor, at Malfoy Manor. She wasn’t certain why Draco was seemingly avoiding eye contact, but Hermione could hardly find it in her to look away from him. She thought the vision of him rushing towards her, surrounded by the light from the hall beyond, was something she would carry into her dreams forever.

She shivered again, but not from cold this time.

His eyes snapped up to her, the silver shining in the fires light. Draco raised his wand and muttered something she couldn’t hear, and then with a quiet *whooshing* noise, something soft and warm settled around her shoulders, sinking over her skin and covering her bare arms. Hermione jerked with surprise, looking down to find a blanket draped around her.

Her eyes found Draco again, but he was taking a sip of his tea and had turned his head towards Halpert.

“Alright, Halpert,” Draco said as he set his cup down with clear irritation, “what’s the latest? Because the magic hasn’t done anything like this before. It’s always brought Granger to me, not taken her away from me.” He was almost growling as he finished his sentence.

Hermione breathed in quickly at those words and had to stare at him. The muscles along his jaw rippled, and he was tense and straight-backed, fingers curling into a fist atop the knee of his grey trousers.

Halpert took a long, slow sip of his tea, as though he were thinking. Setting his own cup down he looked at Draco, and then turned and looked at Hermione.

“I do wonder,” he began and looked back at Draco once more, eyes twinkling with the mystery laid before him, “of the significance of Malfoy Manor—or that room in particular.”

Hermione stiffened, and it was then that Draco finally looked at her properly, assessing her. His expression had hardened, his gaze sharp.

This was something which they had never talked about in front of each other before. Their usual banter would be awfully stymied by the injection of a bit of wartime torture.

Hermione swallowed her unease and set her cup down carefully. When she straightened in her chair, she pulled the blanket more firmly around her shoulders and forced her eyes over to Halpert. “It has some significance to me... I’ve been in that room before, during the war.”

“Have you?” Halpert asked, sitting forward a little in his seat, clearly intrigued.

“Yes,” Draco suddenly interjected before she could open her mouth. Hermione looked to him, and was startled to find he was still looking at her. “Granger was brought to the Manor as a prisoner during the war, and was put through absolute hell by my family—subjected to questioning and torture in the room we found her in—” he shot his gaze over to Halpert now, “—so why the *fuck* did it take her *there*?”

His words, spoken in clipped tones, sent her shivering once more. She clutched the blanket to her tightly.

Halpert raised a quizzical brow and he looked at Hermione. “Was blood spilled in the room—yours, I mean?”

Unable to help herself, she gripped at her forearm beneath the blanket. Her heartrate had doubled and all she could do was blink while she focused on breathing.

“Yes,” Draco bit out, answering for her.

Halpert hummed as he nodded his head, thinking quietly. “That is interesting, given the blood sharing aspect of the ceremony. However, Malfoy, what other significance does this room have in your family history... pertaining to marriage ceremonies?”

Draco narrowed his eyes on him for a moment, then his face smoothed out in the way one does when something has occurred to them. He looked over at Hermione, swallowing. “The room has been used for marriage ceremonies in the family history. Though, not since my great grandparents were married.”

“But likely during the time with which this blade was used for the ceremony?” Halpert asked.

Draco slid his gaze back to the Cursebreaker. “Yes, likely.”

Hermione breathed in deeply, and forced herself to let go of her arm. “So... it pulled me to the Manor, and to that room, to... what?”

Halpert looked at her. “I suspect it’s yet another wobble in the magic—it’s clearly faulty and therefore prone to little surprises like this. But it would seem it took you there, as that is where the blade would usually tie a witch or wizard to a Malfoy heir. Seeing as that didn’t occur at the time of your cut, this may have caused yet another fracture of the magic... curious, I didn’t see a third fracture... only two...” he trailed off slowly, eyes drifting away, clearly deep in thought.

Hermione tried to let this information sink in, but she was woefully inept for the moment. She felt overwhelmed and overstimulated. “Then it had nothing to do with my personal history with the room?”

Halpert hummed speculatively. “It’s unlikely—how would the heirloom know? Unless blood called to blood... but again, pertaining to the marriage aspect of this magic, it would be superfluous...”

Hermione leaned back into the chair, pulling the blanket to her tightly and let her eyes fall shut, suddenly exhausted.

She could hear Draco and Halpert talking quietly, but was unable to pay attention, feeling her mind drifting away slowly as the flames from the fire warmed at her legs, and the blanket had her feeling cozy.

The last thing she heard was Draco saying quietly, “... make sure she doesn’t get hurt...”

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Draco glanced briefly at Hermione, seeing that she was slumped back into the chair, head lolled to the side with her eyes closed. Her breathing was slow and even. She seemed fast asleep. His eyes raked over her for a moment, taking in the soft form of her beneath the blanket, the smoothed-out lines of her face, lips gently parted in her slumber. He couldn’t help but think of how beautiful she looked, so peaceful and relaxed in his chair, like she was made to be here... in his home...

"Halpert," he said, wrenching his gaze from her and trying not to let the desperation leak into his voice, “this is getting out of control, and I need to make sure she doesn’t get hurt by this.”

Halpert was nodding. “Yes, no doubt, that is the top priority.” The Cursebreaker was now looking at Draco with his head tilted to the side, considering something.

“Out with it,” Draco said, already at the edge of his annoyance.

“You have become closer with her?” he asked curiously.

Draco narrowed his eyes. “What exactly do you mean by ‘closer’?”

Halpert shuffled towards the edge of his seat, draping his arms casually across his knees. “I mean, what were you doing before she was—erm, how did you put it? Taken away from you?”

Draco gritted his teeth and flicked his gaze to Hermione. She hadn’t moved. He looked back to Halpert.

“We... may have been together.”

“So, closer... yes?”

“The point, Halpert—as in, fucking get to it,” Draco seethed.

“You and Hermione could very well be strengthening whatever curse is at play here,” Halpert said, rather plainly, “by becoming closer, or having... erm, relations?” He shrugged and then



reached for his teacup, like he hadn't just doused Draco with gasoline and set him aflame. "Just a thought."

Draco opened his mouth, feeling lightheaded all of a sudden, when Potter walked into the room, looking ridiculous in his flannel pajamas.

Draco jumped up from his chair and strode to meet Potter, feeling suddenly furious. At Halpert, or himself, he truly wasn't certain, but he was fucking *livid*.

"Potter," Draco said with his barely concealed rage, and flicked his head towards the hallway. He gave him a stunned look with raised brows, and then swiveled to follow Draco out of the library.

When they were alone in the hallway, Potter turned to him, folding his arms across his pajama-clad chest. Seriously, so ridiculous.

"What is it, Malfoy?" he asked, and Draco could glean that old Scarhead was not a fan of what Hermione had told him about the curse, and their... midnight ventures.

Draco matched his stance, arms tight across his chest. "You need to take Granger home, and... you should convince her to stay home, perhaps for the rest of the week."

Potter raised a brow at him. "Why would she do that?"

"She and I... will need to stay away from each other, until we can figure this out."

His eyes narrowed on Draco. "Oh? And what... if she's at work, Hermione wouldn't be able to stay away from you? Think a bit of yourself, don't you, Malfoy?"

Draco's hands dropped away from his chest and curled them into fists, and he almost stepped forward, but he breathed out as slowly as he was able, reigning in his temper. He relaxed his hands and stuffed them into his pockets to be safe.

Draco knew, if there was anyone whom he could trust to listen to him, to keep Hermione out of harm's way, it was Potter. So... to his trench-deep chagrin, he would need to offer up some honesty.

"Granger... is not the problem, I am. And I need to be in the Ministry, to assist Halpert, and she... needs to be kept out of it, to keep her safe."

Potter's face dropped with disbelief. "You... actually like her? And not just in the ridiculous lust-filled way you two have been pushing each other's buttons for freaking years, but... actually like?"

Draco worked the muscles in his jaw with irritation, sure that his face mirrored his desire to beat the snot out of him. *Hands in pockets, Draco, keep your hands in your pockets...*

Potter raised his arms in surrender, obviously sensing his impending demise at Draco's hands. "Alright, Malfoy... I'll see what I can do. But, if you know Hermione like I do... you'll know keeping her from anything can be a rather gargantuan, near-impossible task."

“Just do it, Potter,” Draco snarled, “now get her the *fuck* out of my house.”

Potter’s eyes widened just as he heard a small, sharp breath from behind him. Draco felt his stomach drop and his eyes close briefly, before he reopened them, smoothed out his expression, and turned to look behind him.

Hermione was in the doorway of the library, two small hands clutching at the sides of the blanket he had summoned for her. She was staring at him, eyes wide and vulnerable.

“Hermione,” Potter started, “it’s not—”

“Quiet, Potter,” Draco snapped without breaking eye contact with Hermione and keeping his face as detached as he was capable of while seeing the pain shooting across her face, “just do as I ask. Both of you, leave—*now*.”

Hermione’s lips parted, like she wanted to say something, but they snapped shut and her chin raised slightly. But Draco could see it on her face, in her eyes, the feeling of being exposed and raw, eyes shuttering with hurt. But she tried, so hard, to look unaffected by his callousness. She let go of the blanket, and it slithered to the floor with a hiss. Hermione tore her gaze from him and walked stiffly forwards, moving straight past him.

“Let’s go, Harry,” she said quietly, and her voice hitched slightly as she did. Draco didn’t turn to watch her go, he wasn’t sure he was strong enough to, but his eyes fell shut as he listened to their retreating footsteps.

Well, that was likely to keep her away from him. He should be relieved. So, why did Draco suddenly want to throw himself from the tallest turret of his Estate?

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“Hermione,” Harry said, stopping her righteous stomping towards her bedroom.

She sighed and turned to face him.

Harry raised an eyebrow at her. “You know what that was, right?”

“Malfoy proving he has the spine of a bloody flobberworm?” Hermione said fisting her hands and placing them on her hips.

Harry rolled his eyes behind his glasses, before he reached up to run a hand through his already bed-mussed hair.

“He reckons you should be staying away from each other, until this whole mess is sorted out,” Harry finally said, meeting her eyes, “and I happen to agree with him. Perhaps think about taking the rest of the week off work.”

Hermione glowered over at her best friend, who, at the very least, looked a little sheepish as he stood before her in his flannelette pajamas.

“Harry, how long have you known me?”

He sighed, but answered her. “A long time, ‘Mione.”

“Yes, and have you ever known me to show avoidance or cowardice in the face of a challenge?” she asked, daring him to disagree with her through her icy glare.

“No,” Harry said on another sigh, “but perhaps being around each other is dangerous, at least until the magic has been voided. It seems rather unstable, and you don’t know what it will do —”

“Exactly,” Hermione said, this time imploringly and taking a step back towards her best friend, “we have no idea what it’s going to do next, and he has no right to make choices like this without at least giving me the courtesy of a discussion. And perhaps Malfoy and I have taken things a little too far at times, which could be disrupting the magic in some way... but at the same time... we have been through a fair bit already the past three days with each other, and I find it... frankly deplorable that he would try to turn the tables like this on me. Shooing me out of his home like I was... *dirt* that had been traipsed over his precious rugs. It was... he...”

“He hurt you,” Harry summarized, leaning his hip against the back of the couch next to him.

Hermione met his green eyes, solemn and understanding behind those round glasses.

“Yes... very much.”

Harry pursed his lips and kept her gaze. “Would it help any if I told you I thought he was doing it out of... a hope to keep you safe from this whole thing? Like, I think he... ergh... actually likes you, quite a bit.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and looked away, but felt herself blushing, just a little. “Yes, well, Harry...” she sighed and then said, “I happen to also like that exhausting pillock, but I don’t take well to him trying to take control like this, like I’m some helpless damsel...”

“Well...” Harry said, and then raised his hands with wide eyes when her eyes shot back to his accusingly, “no, I’m just saying that what happened tonight was a bit ‘damsel in distress’, wasn’t it? And well... Malfoy was here in the flat, obviously looking for you after you disappeared, and the moment—and Hermione, I meant the *exact* moment he realized where you were, he was practically pulling me from my bed by my hair to come and help. Gave Theo a heart attack, honestly. Malfoy looked... proper distraught at the thought of you trapped in that room.”

Hermione had to work to control her breathing and her facial expression at the thought of Draco man-handling Harry Potter to come and help her. She swallowed as she considered her response to that information.

“Well, Harry... that’s just... neither here nor there,” she finally said, but felt her heart thumping in her chest, “if he wants to be a coward about this and avoid me... I can’t stop him.”

Harry's next sigh was world-weary. He walked past her towards his own bedroom. "Sure, Hermione... can't say I didn't try... good night."

Hermione watched Harry close himself away into his bedroom, and then stood in the empty hallway for several heartbeats worth of chaotic thoughts. She stood there, alone and cold, frustrated and upset, and wondered what she would do next.

What she *wanted* to do, was run right back to Draco and shout at him for being such an idiot, tell him that he had no right to make her choices for her. And then... well, she desperately wanted to fall back into his bed and finish what they had started earlier.

But there was also a part of her that knew he was likely right. That their recent proximity, and the way they had become closer in multiple ways could be having its own effect on the blades' magic.

Her mingled annoyance and pent-up frustration (and let's be entirely honest, sleeplessness) coursed through her, which, rather unfortunately, clouded her common sense.

Hermione stomped back over to her fireplace and fisted a bit too much floo powder in her irritation. She threw it onto the still-roaring flames and said, "Malfoy Estate" with the absolute unswerving intention to give Draco a piece of her mind.

But the green flare of the fire never came.

Hermione frowned down at the mantel, and then tried again, speaking as clearly as she possibly could.

When the flames stayed orange once more, she realized what had happened with a sinking sensation which both caused her a sharp pang of hurt while simultaneously *pissing her the fuck off*.

Draco had disabled their floo connection.

*Fucking bastard.*

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Hermione was a spiteful, revenge-seeking woman. And proud of it.

The next morning she dressed herself with a sole purpose in mind: to fuck with Draco 'I'm a prick' Malfoy.

She sauntered through the top levels of the Ministry wearing a tight emerald-green blouse tucked snugly into a short black skirt. The high heels certainly accentuated the lines of her legs and the curve of her arse... not that *that* was the reason she had worn them. Not in the slightest.

Hermione stopped by Draco's office first, and when she discovered it annoyingly devoid of a handsome face to shout at, she walked instead towards Halpert's office, enjoying only

slightly the appreciative looks that were sent her way as she walked past the desks crowding the main office.

Halpert's office door was ajar as she approached, and she could hear voices floating to her ears from behind it. She gently pushed it open with a patience that should have granted her a sainthood, and then placed her hip against the doorframe and took in the men before her.

Halpert stood before the same flowing lines of the infinity magic that swirled around the cursed blade, while Draco stood with his back to her, listening while the Cursebreaker spoke with wild arm gesticulations.

"Morning boys," Hermione said, injecting as much casualness into her voice as she was capable of mustering.

Halpert's gaze moved to her, and he gave her a wide, crinkle-eyed grin, while Draco visibly stiffened at the sound of her voice, his shoulders becoming taut lines.

Draco turned slowly and met her eyes, his mouth thinned with his own irritation, arms folded tightly across his chest.

Then, his eyes flared, widening as they flicked over her form and taking in her outfit. If possible, his shoulders stiffened even more, the hand she could see across his chest fisting in a white-knuckled grip against the sleeve of his shirt. Hermione was both delighted and peeved at the return of the leather holster strapped across him, this time fitted across a black shirt. Her body's reaction to him was unmistakable, feeling the warm glow of desire at just a simple look at him. But she had to focus—never bloody mind if Draco looked like an absolute snack.

Hermione smiled sardonically at him, before setting her gaze on Halpert and letting the fake smile fade away, eyes betraying her testiness.

"Seeing as I was so charmingly thrown out early this morning," she said with false pleasantness, "I thought I would stop by to see what updates there were, and what the plan is moving forward?"

"Interesting timing, Hermione," Halpert said and then beckoned her inside.

She pushed off the doorframe with her hip, but only got a step inside before Draco held up a hand to stop her.

"Terrible timing, actually," Draco said in a tight voice, and his eyes burned into hers when she looked at him, "you shouldn't be here."

Hermione stared him down, feeling the rage simmering in her belly. Keeping his gaze, she sauntered forwards until she stood right in front of his tense form, Draco watching every step, silver eyes sparking at her with fiery intensity. She looked up at him with a challenge written across her face.

“Go on,” she said in a silky voice, folding her arms across her Slytherin-green covered chest, “try to stop me.”

Draco pressed a step closer to Hermione as he glared down at her. He was close enough that she could feel the heat emanating from his body. His eyes moved downward and raked up her body while she watched, feeling the look like he was roaming his hands over her skin. Something sharp glinted in his eyes.

“Is that outfit for me?” he asked in a low voice, quiet enough that Halpert wouldn’t be able to hear.

Yes.

“You wish, Malfoy,” Hermione bit out, “I wouldn’t do anything for you even if you *begged* for it.”

“Oh, silly me,” Draco said with a half-smirk, “I must be imagining you wearing my old house colors and the *shortest* damned skirt I’ve ever seen you in.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. “Well, look your fill, Malfoy—that’s as close as you’ll be getting to my... *skirt*.”

The muscles in his jaw rippled as he took in a deep breath through his nose. He looked like he was going to say something, his lips parting and chest hitching on a quick inhale, but then Draco just turned away from her, taking several long strides back towards Halpert and the shimmering magic.

Keeping his gaze averted, Draco finally said, “take your preposterous skirt and leave, Granger. You have no expertise in curses, and therefore you have no value here.”

Hermione felt his words like a slap across the face.

Her hands felt limp and useless at her sides as she stared at Draco’s stony profile, feeling so unmoored by this man standing before her.

They had spent years throwing insults at each other, but never had it felt so personal as it did right then, after the things they had endured together this week, the things they had *done* together.

Halpert was looking between them, seeming uncertain about whether he should say anything.

When Hermione was unable to formulate a response, her insides knotting unpleasantly, Draco finally turned his head and looked at her. She truly didn’t know what her face was doing, but whatever it was, had Draco’s brows pinching, his arms falling away from his chest on a deep sigh.

“Granger—” Draco started, but Hermione found her zeal and cut in, taking a step forwards.

“If you’re done being a tosser, Malfoy, I’d love to hear from Halpert on the next plan of attack,” Hermione said, injecting as much bravado into her tone as possible and mentally

shaking off the ache in her chest. She set her gaze to the Cursebreaker. “Last night, we were both nowhere near our respective beds, and as you know, at midnight, we were both transported once again. Then following a brief, and let’s be honest—” Hermione cut her gaze to Draco, who watched her stonily, before she looked back to Halpert, “—*senseless* endeavor, I was then transported to Malfoy Manor. I’d like to know what’s going on, and how we bloody stop it, because if I could walk out of this office and be certain I won’t see Malfoy again tonight, I’ll go happily. Ecstatically, in fact.”

Hermione heard Draco’s soft sigh, but refused to look at him.

To his credit, Halpert made no reaction to their spat whatsoever, and instead gave her a smile and a nod.

“Right you are, Hermione,” he said, “Malfoy and I were actually just finishing a discussion of the next item on the table for us to try. You’re welcome to observe.”

“Halpert,” Draco said warningly, then he stepped towards the Cursebreaker, angling himself away from Hermione, “you were the one who said...”

Hermione strained to hear, but his voice trailed low enough that she missed the remainder of the sentence.

“Yes, yes,” Halpert said with an impatient wave of his hand, “but being in the same room is hardly comparable to you two—”

“All right,” Draco said quickly, “*fine*.”

“Marvelous,” Halpert said and moved around him to face Hermione again, and was either unaware or uncaring of the blatant promise of murder in Draco’s eyes, “now, Hermione, what we’ve discussed is finding ways to repair these fractures in the magic.” Halpert pointed out the slight disruptions in the infinity symbol that soared around the hovering blade. “We hope that if we can repair it enough to stabilize it, that a powerful Finite will end it, or a magical encumbrance box can hold it, and therefore nullify it.”

Hermione frowned at the fragmented places in the magical lines.

“But isn’t one of those fractures because I’m not pure-blood?”

“To our best estimation,” Halpert said with a nod.

Her frown only deepened. “How do you foresee trying to fix that one, then? Going to give me a transfusion? Strip away my useless muggle-born blood?”

“Don’t be daft, Granger,” Draco all but growled.

Hermione shot him a look. “Well, I don’t see how one can change one’s blood, so forgive me for failing to see how we can *fix* that part of me.”

Draco stepped towards her, and Hermione could sense the indignation rolling off him. “No one is trying to fix *you*, you ridiculous woman, we’re trying to fix *this*!”

She took her own step and prodded a finger into the black shirt across his chest as they each gave the other blazing looks. “You could have fooled me, Malfoy—it seems like you want to fix and control everything!”

Draco grabbed at her wrist, holding it bitingly between them and removing her finger from his chest. He leaned his head closer to her. “Back the fuck off, Granger.”

Hermione stared at him boldly. “Go on,” she breathed at him again, “try to stop me.”

The breath left Draco’s lungs and the silver of his eyes flashed down at her, before they dropped to her mouth and fixed there. His grip tightened around her wrist while her pulse drummed a heavy beat in her throat. Her body felt hot and prickly under his gaze, her lips tingling at the intense scrutiny with which he paid them. Hermione’s chest expanded on a deep inhale, arching unconsciously towards him—

Then a throat cleared near them, and the spell was broken.

Draco dropped her hand and they both took a quick step away from each other. Hermione looked over to Halpert, feeling her face burning alongside other, less visible parts of her body.

“Right, if you two are quite finished,” Halpert said, seeming entirely unfazed by their display, “I’ll answer your question, Hermione. Yes, one of the magical disruptions is likely caused by your bloodline. No, we don’t intend to try to mend that particular fracture due to the futility of it as you put it so eloquently. But we do have some hope that other fixtures will stabilize the magic enough that we can control it better. So far, none of our attempts to cease or cage it have worked.”

Hermione took in a deep breath, still feeling flushed and affected by Draco. “Okay then.”

Halpert nodded. “Right, so let’s proceed. Malfoy is going to purposefully place his blood upon the blade, to replicate the spousal cut and blood-sharing aspect of the ceremony.”

Hermione sucked in a quick breath and looked at Draco, who was decidedly not looking at her. “You’re going to cut yourself with it?”

“Not yet,” Halpert answered her, “first we’ll try a work-around.”

Draco just nodded once in understanding, and then wordlessly pulled his wand from the holster. He held his left hand open while he trained his wand above, and jerked it in a small slicing motion. Hermione felt herself flinch as a line of red appeared, immediately welling with blood. Draco didn’t indicate any pain at all, just blinked down at the fresh cut on his palm.

Hermione watched, fascinated as Draco stepped towards the blade, curled his fingers into a fist and hovered it above the sharp edges that shone and glimmered by the lights of the swirling vortex of magic. A line of his blood streaked down the side of his hand, beaded, and then dropped onto the silver edges of the blade.



She didn't know what to expect, but for a few moments, nothing happened while the three of them stepped close with intent inspection of the magic. Then, a very small flare of gold light appeared on one of the arcs and all at once, that section of the magic seemed to knit back together, linking seamlessly to let the golden particles flow easily and without disruption.

"Ah, intriguing," Halpert whispered in awe, "that seems to have worked."

Hermione watched the golden lines flow and circle around the blade, almost mesmerized by it. Draco seemed to be doing the same.

"Right," Halpert said, clapping his hands and bringing their attention back to him, "time to leave, both of you—I'll need my concentration for this next part. I'll be trying a few different ways to nullify the magic. I'll memo both of you with any news when I can. If it's after hours, I'll owl you. Now, shoo!"

Draco looked thoroughly put out at being ushered away, but didn't argue with him as they both stepped out of Halpert's office, and the door shut behind them with a *snap*.

They stood outside of the office for a moment and then both turned their heads to look at one another. Draco's face was impassive once more, jaw taut and twitching. Then as though they both knew what the other was about to do, they spun away from each other at the same time and started to walk in opposite directions.

Hermione decided she needed to bury her head in some busy-work for the remainder of the day, with the hopes of expelling all thoughts of Draco Malfoy from her head.

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Draco didn't think it were possible to be so jarringly consumed by someone, with high levels of both exasperation and yearning. For the remainder of the morning, he was barraged with hot flushes of irritation at Hermione, which tended to be followed quickly by *very* different kinds of hot flushes when he pictured her in that green shirt, with those blazing, steadfast eyes.

*The silly witch thought she was always right about everything, Draco would think one moment, and then in the next, the silly bint needs a thorough spanking, that little skirt would be so easy to pull up, exposing the perfect roundness of her firm—*

Groaning despairingly for the tenth time, Draco had to get up from his desk, abandoning his large pile of paperwork, and started to pace uneasily around his office.

He had been ill-contented with the concept of staying away from her as much as possible, throwing her out, closing their floo connection, and hoping Potter would convince her to take some time off. But knowing it might keep her safer from random apparitions to other horror-filled locations of her past, Draco thought it would be worth the sick feeling in his gut, the clenching in his chest.

But true to Hermione's nature, she just couldn't keep her nose out. T'was impossible for the witch, apparently.

As it turned out, by the time lunch had come and gone and Draco only hungered for one thing, he found it equally as impossible to stay away.

Knowing he was being a fucking idiot, Draco still descended into the dusty pits of the Archives, seeking Hermione out like he just couldn't help himself. Like he was slowly dying and Hermione was the only cure. His heart thudded aching in his chest as he moved towards her desk in a far corner.

Draco truly didn't know what he wanted to get out of seeing her, whether he wanted to yell at her again for being such a nitwit, or if he wanted to find out just how easy that skirt was to take off...

He prayed to the Gods for a modicum of self-control, but knew no one was listening, seeing as he was bloody down in the Archives in the first place.

Draco rounded the corner and paused, finding her desk ahead of him empty.

He pressed his lips together, considering.

He should turn around. Walk away. Take her absence as a sign, and leave.

Draco was also a nitwit.

He turned towards the large stacks laden down and groaning under thousands of old tomes. He only needed to walk past three aisles before he spotted her, a small figure standing in front of the books, craning her neck back to look up at a high shelf. Even in the dimness of the Archives, Draco could see the shimmery green color of the shirt she had chosen to wear today.

He almost grinned as he watched her, recalling how she tried to tell him that hadn't been for his benefit. Draco had, quite literally, never seen Hermione dress in green in his entire life. Gryffindor's seemed to think it was an insult to their precious house to even think of the color green, and he thought Hermione would die on that hill. But here she was, glittering like a shiny emerald before him.

Draco blinked at the devastating thoughts that shot into his head, like how much he wanted to fuck her while she wore that top, wanted to watch her come undone around him while representing his old house. His heart sped up and he swallowed raggedly, fingers curling into tight fists by his thighs.

*Turn around, Draco, walk the fuck away...*

Hermione's head turned and she froze when she saw him standing at the entrance to the aisle, a book tucked securely against her chest.

*Fuck.*

Draco stalked towards her, well aware that his frustration at himself would be written all over his expression. Hermione remained still, watching him approach with a wide-eyed expression, like she hadn't expected him to seek her out.

Yeah, well, neither had he.

“You know, as someone titled “*The Brightest Witch of Her Age*”, you sure can be awfully stupid,” Draco said as he approached her, jumping straight to the offensive with only a margin of hope that it might make her angry enough that he wasn’t immediately able to rip her skirt to fucking shreds.

Her wide eyes narrowed into slits and her hands tightened around the book she held. “Don’t make me brain you with this book,” Hermione threatened, “she’s small but *thick*.”

Draco stood before her and smirked. “An apt description for yourself, funnily enough.”

Her mouth popped open and then she scoffed. “If you’re going to try calling me stupid, why don’t you find a mirror. Pot, please meet kettle. Oh—you’re both black? How frightfully unexpected.”

Draco glared down at her fiercely. “You realize you’re calling yourself stupid in that analogy?”

“Well, I must be, to think letting you near me was ever a good idea!” Hermione seethed at him taking a small step closer in her burning ire, “and you mean idiom, not analogy.”

“Like it fucking matters, you insufferable know-it-all!” Draco fumed at her.

“I’m insufferable?” Hermione said with a humorless, rage-filled laugh, “please, spare me, Malfoy. You are the most insufferable git I have ever met—how dare you throw me out of your home last night after what had happened—and then you close the floo? What the fuck kind of bitch-arse move was that?”

Draco moved another step closer to her, closing the distance between them until his chest was pressing the book she held into her body, forcing Hermione to take a quick step backwards. He yanked the book from her grasp, Hermione emitting a sharp breath and letting him drop it loudly to the floor next to them.

“I was trying to keep us away from each other, as you well know,” he said between clenched teeth, advancing one more step, Hermione retreating yet another, “we have no idea what we’ve been doing to the magic.”

“Well, fat lot of good it did,” she said, voice dropping lower as she craned her neck to meet his gaze.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “What do you mean?”

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

Draco positively vibrated with anger, and this time when he took a step into her, Hermione couldn’t move back any further, hitting the shelves behind her. “I told Potter to keep you away from work until this was finished with. This is YOUR Gods-damned fault!”

Hermione’s breaths were fast and shallow. “My fault? Do you have no self-control?”

Draco scoffed. “Pot meet *fucking* kettle!”

Her mouth opened, eyes flashing with indignation, but Hermione said nothing. They were flush now, chests brushing in time with their heaving breaths, the shimmer of the green catching his attention as he watched her mouth. She swallowed, and then her eyes fell to his lips, and that was it.

Draco was done for.

Positively, wretchedly wrecked.

He descended on her in a rush, mouth claiming hers in a none-too-gentle kiss that had her gasping against him. Draco had a tiny sliver of hope that Hermione might stop him, might have more sense than he, and push him away.

But her hands came up to slide into his hair, pulling Draco closer towards her with a moan, deepening the kiss and finding his tongue with hers. Something feral was unleashed inside of him at the feel of her, the sound of her.

He pressed her into the bookshelves and devoured her, his hands quickly undoing the knot on her blouse at the hollow of her throat, and pulling the edges apart with a burning need to touch her, the buttons falling open quickly to expose her breasts. Draco snaked his hand inside the silky fabric and palmed at her breast. Hermione arched herself into him, pushing her heavy breaths into his mouth between kisses while he felt her hard nipple beneath her bra.

Hermione swallowed his own groan at the feel of her under his palm, then Draco tried to pick her up, but her skirt was so tight around her thighs that she couldn't get her legs around his waist.

He dropped her back to the ground and pulled his mouth away from her, looking down to assess the damned thing.

Draco's eyes flicked up to hers, hooded and hungry. “This really is a stupid, fucking skirt.” He kept her gaze as he took the edges in both hands, fingers grazing her bare legs, and yanked it all the way up so that it sat at her waist. She gasped slightly, her hands fluttering to sit against his chest.

“Much better,” he murmured, coming in to capture her lips once more before he grabbed her by the arse and lifted her again, this time her legs had the freedom to sit on either side of his hips, opening herself up to him.

Draco pressed her into the shelving, grinding his throbbing erection into the softness between her legs. He groaned again, picturing no barriers, his cock sliding into the slick warmth, her walls gripping him tightly.

“Ah, *fuck*,” he grumbled, pushing himself into her once more.

Hermione breathed in loudly and sharply, her head falling back into the bookshelf, eyes closing. Draco reached up, palming her exposed neck and sliding down the graceful slope of

it, fingers brushing over her collarbones and stopping between her breasts.

Growling at the sight of her before him, beneath him, Draco yanked the cup of her bra out of the way and dipped his head to drag his tongue, hard, across her peaked nipple, before he pulled it into his mouth.

Hermione positively whined under the ministrations, her hand gripping at the back of his head and urging him on, her hips undulating against him.

“Gods, I want you,” Draco said in a tight voice against her flushed skin.

Hermione reacted to his words in the same way she might have if he had suddenly touched her between her legs. She moaned, lips parting, body pushing forwards and seeking him.

Draco fucking loved it.

He kissed his way up her chest and throat, needing to taste every inch of her and—

Something nudged at the side of his head, and Draco pulled away with irritation and turned his head, just narrowly missing the sharp edge of a memo from spearing him in the eyeball. He let out a growling sigh and removed his hand from Hermione’s thigh to grab at it, lest it keep pecking him. He scrunched it up and threw it to the ground, and was about to turn back to her, when another one zoomed their way, this time with its attention on Hermione.

Hermione panted and slowly became aware of the memo’s existence.

“Oh,” she said softly, “it must be Halpert.”

Draco sighed again, much louder this time, and then he placed Hermione back on the ground and took several steps away from her, feeling the strain of his cock in his trousers intensely.

Hermione pulled her skirt hurriedly down, cheeks pink, and then plucked the memo from the air and opened it with slightly shaky fingers. She read quietly, and then looked up at Draco. She looked a little alarmed.

He frowned and then bent to the ground, swiping his own scrunched-up memo from the ground and pulled it open.

*Malfoy,*

*No luck on the magic yet, it flows on with no signs of stopping. It doesn’t seem to want to be contained in an encumbrance box, either—but we shall continue trying.*

*May I ask exactly what you have been doing the past few minutes before I sent this memo to you both, as the... how shall I write this delicately? The magic has... raged a little. Very bright and chaotic. It’s hurting my eyes. Do stop it.*

*Halpert*

Draco huffed and dropped his hand holding the memo back to his side and then looked up to meet her gaze, once hazy with desire, now clearing until there was little but wariness remaining.

“Well, then...” he said, voice deep and gravelly.

She nodded a little. “Yes, we should, um...”

“Yes,” Draco said curtly, and then shoved the blasted memo in his pocket. He reached to run his hands through his hair, and made sure to straighten the leather strapped across his chest. Then he gave Hermione one more look, sincerely wishing Halpert could have waited five more bloody minutes to drop that news, and then he turned and walked back up the aisle the way he had come.

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Hermione’s dinner at home had been... awkward.

Both Harry and Theo had a lot of questions about the past few nights that she had spent with Draco, unbeknownst to them. Theo found it all rather hilarious, while Harry seemed a little grossed out by many aspects of their... trysts, which Hermione would just roll her eyes at. He had asked, after all.

When Hermione sat on her bed, knee bouncing with anxiety, she stared at her clock and waited for it.

Midnight approached quickly, and the magic’s pull came even quicker.

Between one breath and the next, Hermione was whisked through space, until she landed onto the soft bed that belonged to Draco Malfoy.

For once, he wasn’t on the bed when she had landed.

Hermione braced herself with her elbows and pushed herself up, looking around the room. Draco sat in a chair in the corner, arms draped over his knees as he looked over at her with a sharp gaze. He wore silky black pajama bottoms and no shirt. A bold choice, considering. At least Hermione had thought to wear long bottoms and a proper shirt.

“You... weren’t pulled into the bed,” Hermione said, mystified.

Draco straightened in the chair, sitting back against it. “It appears not.”

Frowning, Hermione sat up and looked around with a sigh. “Will this ever end?”

“Yes,” Draco said, with such conviction that her gaze swung back to his. He stood from the chair and then he strode quickly over to the door of his room and pulled it open. Draco took a step outside into the hallway, and then he vanished.

The mattress moved underneath her, and Hermione turned her head, finding him flat on his back beside her.

They were both silent for a moment, Draco pushing himself up to sit next to her.

“What do we do now?” she asked.

Draco sighed quietly. “We go to sleep, Granger, and hope Halpert is putting in some overtime tonight.”

He stood and then whipped back the blankets, before he settled himself into the bed, facing away from her.

Hermione shifted up the bed, and wriggled under the covers, turning away from Draco as well, facing the door of his bedroom. Draco muttered a quiet spell, and the lights flickered out, and then all she was looking at was utter darkness.

They said nothing for a long time, the silence as all-encompassing as the darkness.

“Malfoy?”

“Granger?”

“What are you thinking about?”

She heard a soft sigh from behind her.

“I’m thinking about how fucked up this is,” he said, “and how torturous it is to have you in my bed and not be able to touch you.”

Hermione’s body warmed at his words, and she wriggled a little uncomfortably. “I did tell you that blade was an instrument of torture.”

He laughed softly. “Yes, well, just this once Granger, I’ll admit that you were right.”

“Someone alert the media,” she said into the darkness.

“Too small, I’d think,” Draco said, “we should alert the historians, this is one for the books.”

Hermione let out a small laugh, and then shifted onto her back. She felt Draco shift as well.

“Granger?”

“Malfoy?”

He was silent for a long moment, and then he finally said, “good night.”

She turned her head, seeking him among the shadows, but she couldn’t make out his features. Wishing she could have seen him, and wishing for so much more, Hermione swallowed and looked away again.

“Good night.”

## Chapter End Notes

I have found extra time to write this next chapter a bit quicker, so I do hope you enjoy this one and the smaller wait in between chapters! This is a particularly fun fic for me to write, so I hope it's enjoyable!

I am working tirelessly to finish the VERY FINAL chapter of The Animagi Effect (full length 8th year Dramione), and the final chapter will be coming this weekend \*sobs\* - feel free to join me over on that venture, also :)

Drop a comment and let me know your thoughts, I love to hear from you! Thank you SO MUCH to any readers

xx

Forawhile



# AN UNFORESEEN AND MILDLY IRRITATING DEVELOPMENT

## Chapter Notes

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

Hermione looked at her reflection in the mirror, hands smoothing down the beautiful satin of her white dress, marveling at the sparkly pins that held her mass of wild curls aloft.

Her heart felt full and happy as she spun before the mirror, knowing how long she had waited for this day, for this man.

In a whirlwind that felt like a blur, Hermione suddenly found herself at the end of the aisle, standing shakily in her high heels and wedding dress as she took in the sea of faces that turned to watch her. The number of eyes made her feel itchy and awkward, but she swallowed past the discomfort and glanced to the other side of the large room, eyes seeking... him.

The breath left her lungs as she saw Draco, standing tall and utterly dapper in a three-piece grey suit at the end of the aisle. Hermione suddenly couldn't get there quickly enough as she walked towards him, finding that she was entirely incapable of tearing her gaze from him, or from the blazing look on his face as he took her in, his silver eyes transfixed.

He descended two steps to meet her at the bottom, his stare burning as he took her hand and walked with her back up onto a dais. Draco turned her towards him, and then tugged softly on her hand, so that Hermione moved closer to him. He grinned down at her before he leaned in, bringing his mouth to her ear.

"You look devastatingly beautiful, love," Draco murmured quietly to her, "I can't wait to call you my wife."

As he leaned away from her, she glowed under the look on his face, like he wanted to love and devour her forever. After today, Hermione knew that he would.

She bit at her glossed lip, perfectly rapt with Draco, waiting impatiently for the ceremony to begin, his warm hands encasing both of hers. Hermione couldn't wait to marry this man.

Someone was speaking to her left, and the word 'blood' floated through her ears, finally capturing her attention and Hermione turned her head.

She choked on the scream that threatened to tear from her throat at the person that stood there, and Hermione instinctually threw her body forwards into Draco, seeking comfort and protection.

Bellatrix Lestrange stood beside them, baring her teeth in a false smile which had Hermione shivering with trepidation. Something silver glinted and Bellatrix was holding up a small, sharp dagger.

Her heart stopped, and she felt her hands clutching at Draco's lapels.

His arms were around her, tight and comforting. Hermione looked up to him with wide eyes, but he looked so calm and unconcerned.

"Draco..." she whimpered.

"It's okay, love," he said, brows finally drawing together as he met her eyes, "you knew that blood-sharing was part of this ceremony... it will only hurt for a moment."

"Blood-sharing..." She did know that was part of it. That was true... so why was she so upset? Hermione looked back to Bellatrix. The sight of her sallow cheeks and dark, lifeless eyes had her pulse pounding in her chest.

"Does... does she have to do it?" Hermione asked shakily.

Draco patted her on the back. "She's family, love."

Hermione swallowed and even though it all felt wrong suddenly, she pulled away from Draco and looked to Bellatrix, who waved the blade around nonchalantly, her grin widening.

"Bride first," Bellatrix said, and then took Hermione's left wrist, tugging it towards her roughly so that she stumbled slightly in her heels.

She sucked in a sharp gasp as Bellatrix held up her left arm, and instead of moving for Hermione's palm, was beginning to press the blade down into the inside of her forearm.

"Wait!" Hermione choked, as the sharp edge touched her unmarred skin.

Draco gripped her other hand tightly. "It will be over soon, love."

"But—" Her words cut off as a cry left her lips, the blade sinking into her flesh, tearing her skin apart. She tried to yank her arm free, to stop the burning pain of the knife, but Bellatrix held her firm, continuing to carve into her.

Hermione screamed, a guttural sound that scraped up her throat. It echoed through the room while the guests stayed seated, barely moving, saying nothing. Draco stood next to her, holding her other hand in a leisurely grasp as though nothing was amiss, as though Bellatrix hadn't just carved the letter 'M' into her arm.

She whipped her head to the man she loved, he tilted his head at her, as though not understanding her distress.

"Draco!" Hermione pleaded, and then gasped and cried out again as the blade pressed in once more. Her next words left her mouth with a raw desperation, voice hoarse. "Draco, please! Don't let her hurt me anymore!"

Draco barely moved, his face becoming neutral, no emotion, almost lifeless. Hermione's eyes widened further, her panic rising infinitely. She swung her head back to Bellatrix, her focus

on the arm she was slicing apart, finishing a crude-looking 'U' and moving to start yet another letter.

Hermione couldn't take it. The pain, the panic. It overwhelmed her senses, her entire body locking into place. She felt like she couldn't breathe. She wanted to scream again, but the ability to seemed lost, the desire to expel her anguish becoming trapped somewhere inside of her. Her wild eyes went from her mutilated arm and down, seeing the white edges of her wedding dress dotted with red... her own blood.

She felt violently ill all of a sudden, and a whimper escaped her.

"Granger!"

Hermione's gaze shifted to her fiancé, but Draco stood there apathetically, not moving, eyes glazed over as if he simply weren't real. Her vision was darkening, feeling like she might faint, unable to process any of it for much longer.

"Granger, wake the fuck up!"

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Draco was roused from his sleep by a soft noise from next to him. It confused him for a moment, still so unused to having someone in the bed with him.

He blinked his eyes open slowly, and saw Hermione in the soft glow of the moon in the bed next to him. She was on her side, facing him, a piece of her curly hair was sitting across her face, moving with her soft breaths.

Draco's lips twitched into a small smile at the sight of her. She was so achingly beautiful, he could hardly stand it.

He was about to reach forward, to shift the hair away from her face, when her face changed, flinching and brows drawing together, a soft gasp coming from her mouth.

"Draco..." Hermione said in a soft, shaky tone.

His eyes, half-lidded, flew wide open at the sound of his name. Draco would have loved to have heard his given name on her tongue, except... why did it sound like she was pained to say it? Like she was afraid of something?

His attention suddenly clear and wholly focused, he saw Hermione's bottom lip tremble as her breath started to quicken.

"... does she have to do it?" Hermione mumbled before her face pinched once more and she rolled onto her back with a soft intake of air.

Draco pushed himself up on to his elbow, looking down at her, her chest rising and falling quickly, a flush crawling up her neck, which had looked so pale in the moonlight.

“Wait!” she said suddenly, loudly, her head thrashing to the side. Draco flinched at the quick movement, the intonation of fear.

“Granger,” Draco said worriedly, pushing himself up to sit beside her, his heart thrumming madly in his chest, realizing what was happening.

“But—” Hermione started, before her back arched clear off the bed and her scream ripped through the dark room.

Draco felt the panic flood his system all at once at the sound of her screams, immediately taking him back to those moments in the Drawing Room all those years ago. He shot his arm out and grabbed at her shoulder, trying to shake her gently, so uncertain how to wake someone from a nightmare without making it worse.

“Draco!” Hermione said imploringly, and his heart turned over in his chest at the desperation in her voice. Her body bucked wildly under his hand and he shifted so that he towered above her, knees digging into her side as he took her by both shoulders. “Draco, please! Don’t let her hurt me anymore!”

“Mother of *fuck*,” Draco said frantically as Hermione writhed and arched underneath him, sweat dotting on her brow, cheeks rosy with a deep flush. “Granger!”

She screamed again, raw, and agonizingly heartbreaking. Draco couldn’t take another second of her anguish, so real and potent.

“Granger, wake the fuck up!” he shouted down at her, before he wandlessly summoned a glass of water from his bedside table and the moment it touched his fingertips, he emptied the contents over Hermione.

Her eyes flew open with a stuttered gasp, the water soaking across her hair and the front of her shirt. Draco threw the glass aside and it thunked off the edge of the bed. He leaned back so that he wasn’t crowded over her, but placed his hands on both of her shoulders, gripping her firmly, feeling her tremble.

Hermione blinked a few times and then she was sitting abruptly, her hands coming forward to sit against his bare chest.

“Oh, Gods,” she whispered in between heavy breaths. Draco couldn’t tell if it were the water he had tipped over her, or her tears that he could see clinging to her eyelashes.

“It’s okay,” Draco said as calmly as he was able while his heart still pounded, “you’re okay—you’re safe—you were having a nightmare.”

Her cloudy eyes found his while her chest heaved with her gasping breaths. Hermione blinked quickly as she stared at him, lips moving soundlessly before she finally uttered, “is it really you?”

Feeling his brows pinching together, he swallowed, the sound clicking in his throat. “Yes,” Draco said firmly, “I’m right here with you.”

An exhale shuddered out of her, her fingers trembling against his chest. Draco could hardly stand the sight of her like this, his heart aching for the evidence of fear on her face, head throbbing with the lingering echoes of her screams. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled Hermione in close, and she came, curling herself into him with a small sob, her head tucking underneath his chin.

Draco held her quietly, his fingers absently brushing over her curls, waiting until she was ready to talk.

After a while, Hermione made the first noise in several minutes, a small sniff and then she was straightening herself up and leaning away from his chest until Draco could see her face. The look of terror loitered somewhat, but she seemed more even, more relaxed. He heard her deep breath.

“Are you alright?”

Hermione’s eyes looked between his, her hands still curled up against his chest. “Yes, I think so. Thank you for... waking me.”

Draco just nodded, uncertain what to say.

“I... it was Bellatrix... she was...” Her eyes fluttered closed, and Hermione ducked her chin with a shaky breath. “I’m sorry,” she said softly into the darkness between them.

Draco swallowed. His arms were still wrapped around her, and he brought his hands to her shoulders before letting one slide up to her neck, his thumb pressing in under her chin, bringing her eyes back up to his. He kept her gaze as he shook his head at the apology.

“Please don’t,” Draco said, his voice sounding rough around the edges, “there is nothing to say sorry for. I’m the one who should apologize—this is only happening because of the Malfoy’s, because of *me*. I had wondered...” He broke off to sigh and glance away from her piercing eyes. “I knew you ending up in Malfoy Manor was going to bring up terrible memories for you, and it’s part of the reason we should have kept a healthy distance from one another yesterday—”

“No,” she said firmly, “I... we don’t know that has anything to do with it, and I don’t... I don’t want us to stay away from one another.”

Draco’s heart leapt at the admission, while his brain whirled with thoughts to negate her. To convince her what a terrible idea that was because... well, because he couldn’t stand the idea of her coming to harm. Waking to her screaming had been dreadful, the sounds of terror shook his entire world.

He pulled in a deep breath, before he looked down towards her hands against the bare skin of his chest. Draco reached for her left one and pulled her fingers open carefully in between them. A deep slice sat across her palm, blood staining her fingers, a fresh rivulet starting to run down the inside of her wrist. Draco blinked at the dark smears and then he opened his own palm. Hermione sighed quietly and touched his undamaged skin with her right hand, fingers running across the skin he had cut with his wand yesterday.

“It hasn’t reopened your cut,” she murmured quietly, “perhaps it didn’t work in the way we had thought.”

“No,” he agreed, letting his hand fall again. Draco looked back up to her, finding her eyes already on him. They were soft and vulnerable. “Granger... I don’t want to stay away from you, either,” he admitted softly, “I just want to make sure you’re safe.”

She shifted closer to him. “I feel safe with you.”

Draco studied her carefully. He felt certain that her words and the sentiment that she felt safe with him, was born in the wake of her nightmare. That if she weren't practically forced to be near him, that they might never have formed this newfound connection between them. He searched her sober gaze, feeling his heart thrumming with an unfounded sense of longing.

He swallowed uncomfortably and began to shift away from her.

“We should get some more rest,” Draco said as Hermione let him remove her from his lap silently. He shuffled to the side of the bed and turned away from her.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep again,” she said in a low voice.

His eyes fell shut for a moment before he turned his head to gaze at her again. Hermione sat unmoving in the center of his bed where he had left her, watching him sadly.

Draco tried for a small, reassuring smile, hoping that it was convincing. Her return smile was wobbly.

He held out a hand for her, and she wriggled over to him.

Draco took up his wand from the nightstand and without saying anything, he healed over the cut on her hand and vanished the stains of her blood. Then they each laid back under the covers, and although something told him it was wrong, that he was taking advantage in some way, Draco pulled Hermione into him and held her close.

They lay quietly, wrapped up in each other, until the sun crested the distant mountains and banished away the darkness.

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Hermione had been right.

Sleep had not come for her again, and instead, she had listened to the soft breathing of Draco above her and the rhythmic thudding of his heartbeat when she pressed her head into his chest. He had not slept either, she was certain, because every few minutes, his arms would tighten around her, pulling her firmly against him, before he would slowly relax, only for it to happen again, over and over.

Hermione hadn’t lied to him earlier. She felt so safe in his arms.

She didn’t know what to think about her nightmare.

Obviously being in the Drawing Room had stirred up old terrors, conjuring Bellatrix Lestrange into her vulnerable, sleeping brain. But... for her to have also been dreaming about marrying Draco had been... bizarre. And yet, she couldn't shake the surge of feelings when she thought of herself in a bright, white dress, walking up the aisle towards Draco Malfoy dressed in his fineries. He *had* looked utterly handsome and ravishing... up until the part where his aunt had appeared and carved into her like a turkey.

The sun was rising, a soft grey glow lighting Draco's room. Hermione bit at her lip, her eyes roaming over the skin of his chest that was directly in front of her gaze, their fronts pressed together in their embrace, his chin atop her head. The hard planes of his pectorals looked both firm and soft all at once. The pale fissures of old scars skated across his skin like a macabre, yet stunning piece of art.

He was warmth and comfort.

He was beautiful and divine.

Hermione released her lip from between her teeth and shifted forwards slightly to graze her nose and her lips across his skin. She knew for certain he was awake now because he jerked slightly under the soft touch. Hermione then pressed her mouth more firmly against him, setting a kiss to the warmth of him. Draco let out a breath above her and a strong hand skated down her spine slowly until she shivered.

The next kiss against his skin was accompanied by her fingertips trailing down the muscles at his side, finding the delightful divots in his abdomen that trailed inwards towards his pajama bottoms and below—

“Granger,” Draco said in a low, warning tone.

Her hand paused at the waistband of his bottoms, and she tilted her head back, finding his silver eyes in the early morning light.

His gaze was full of both heat and trepidation.

She watched him swallow.

“We shouldn't... what Halpert said about the blade when we were in the Archives...” he looked pained as he said it, his words warring directly with the way his hand pressed in at the base of her spine and the way his hips shifted towards her. Hermione's soft gasp escaped before she could help herself. She could feel that he was already hard, his erection sitting hot and firm against her hip.

Hermione felt her breath stall in her chest at the thought of it, of him, filling her. Heat pooled in her core with a speed that astonished her as she fought not to moan at the feel of his hard length sitting between them.

She held his fiery gaze as she shifted the hand that had been by his waistband and began to trail back upwards, her fingers gliding over every dip of his abdomen. His eyes flashed at her

as her palm skated over his collarbones until she stopped at the side of his neck, her thumb brushed briefly over the hard line of his jaw.

He swallowed again.

“I know,” Hermione whispered to him, and decidedly burying all of her common sense, she said, “but I want you.”

Draco groaned, brows pinching together as his eyes fell shut at her words.

“Granger,” he said again, voice tight, “please don’t test my self-control this early in the morning.”

A heady feeling washed over her. A small part of Hermione knew she should back off, but a much larger part wanted to give in. To give herself to Draco entirely. She had wanted him for a long time, a lot longer than she would have ever admitted before the curse. Those feelings had intensified, becoming much larger than she would have thought possible, until Hermione was bursting with it now. She hardly felt in control of herself as she wound her fingers around to the back of his head, sifting through his soft hair. His eyes reopened to pierce her with a heated glare just as she shifted her leg to drape around his hip, opening her pelvis so that she could push herself against him. Her lips parted on a breathy moan at the feel of him against her, her core throbbing with need.

Draco’s eyes pinched closed again, his neck straining for a moment, and then his hands were tightening around her, and in a quick movement that had Hermione gasping, she was flat on her back, and he was on top of her.

He pressed her into the mattress with the delicious weight of his body, her legs open on either side of him as he nestled against her.

His hand came up and his fingers were suddenly around her throat, gripping enough to make her lungs stutter without being painful.

“What did I just say, Granger?” Draco growled down at her, his fingers pressing in right at her pulse point. She didn’t know if he meant to warn her off, but Hermione felt the exact opposite as she felt the flush spreading across her chest and up her neck, body swamped with heat. She could feel her nipples tightening, sensitive against the fabric of her shirt. She shivered with excitement, body desperate with need. Her back arched and her hips bucked against him, and they both groaned at the same time.

“*Fucking...* have mercy, Granger...” he said, voice strained and desperate. His fingers loosened around her throat and wound into her hair instead as his head dropped onto hers, eyes tightly closed. “You have... no fucking clue how much I want to lose myself in you right now, to bury my cock deep inside of you, making you scream my name until you’re ruined for any other man...”

Hermione’s eyes fluttered shut as she trembled beneath him, arousal flooding her at his words. Have mercy, indeed.



“I want to see every inch of you,” Draco groaned as he jerked his pelvis against her, his hardness rutting against her clitoris and sending pleasure shooting through her body. Hermione gasped breathily, her nails digging into the muscles on his lower back, demanding more. “I want to *taste* every inch of you. I want you coming on my fingers, my mouth, and then my cock until you can barely stand... I want... *Gods* I fucking want you so badly, Hermione...”

Her eyes flew open, the breath leaving her lungs at the sound of her name.

Hermione felt the moment he realized what he had said, his body freezing in place for a prolonged moment. Draco’s forehead shifted away from hers suddenly, putting space in between them so they could look at each other, both of them completely still.

His eyes flicked between hers, and he looked startled.

Despite the closeness that had mounted between them since the first night, the intimacies they had already shared... there was something infinitely more intimate about this moment. About the use of her first name. It was a series of syllables that she had never once heard uttered from the mouth of Draco Malfoy. She felt breathless and hot all over. She wanted to hear it again, a million times over. Wanted it whispered against her skin.

His mouth opened like he wanted to say something, then he closed it, clearly undecided on what to do, what to say.

So, Hermione took the reins.

She smoothed her hands up the taut muscles on his back and whispered, “Draco...”

Something warmed behind his eyes, his hand tightening in her hair.

Hermione didn’t know why, couldn’t explain it, or fathom it... but this moment... it felt more profound somehow than an admission of love or other all-encompassing feelings. It felt greater, overwhelming, and intense. It was everything.

Something shifted in him, the fight seeming to leech out of him all at once. Draco descended on her, his mouth taking hers in a hard, searing kiss that both shocked and delighted her. Hermione moaned hotly into his mouth, desperate to pull him closer, to have him touching her *everywhere*.

Hermione was so utterly eager, that she had no interest in foreplay in this moment, she needed to feel him pushing up into her until she was full with him.

With Draco’s mouth working over her lips in a frantically punishing kiss, his tongue hot against hers, Hermione worked her hands back down and took her own pajamas and knickers, pushing them quickly down over her bottom as far as she could while he was atop her.

The shift of her hips had him groaning, and his hand trailed down to her hip, and when he found it bare under his touch, Draco’s mouth left hers to glance down in surprise.

“Draco,” Hermione whispered urgently as she tried to shift further.

He swore roughly and moved his weight to the side. The absence of him almost physically hurt her, but it gave her the ability to kick her pants and knickers off.

Draco held himself up on his side next to her body, his gaze roaming over her bare legs and over her core, now bared to him. His hand landed on her thigh, and she jumped, thrilled by the touch and the slow drag of his palm upwards.

But it was too slow, too measured.

Hermione shook her head, both loving and hating how desperate she felt.

“No time,” she whined and grabbed his hand, tugging at him until he was back on top of her. He came willingly, a feral grin on his face as he settled against her bare cunt and the shockwave of him pressed against her had a moan eliciting from deep in her throat, even with his pajamas still in the way. Draco kissed her again as Hermione reached for the waistband of his bottoms. “Please...”

Draco took her by the wrist, stopping her and he brought her hand up and pressed it into the mattress beside her head.

“Patience, love,” he said against her mouth before his tongue swept across her bottom lip, “I want to taste you first.”

The idea of his mouth between her legs sent another thrill through her. Though that wasn’t enough to deter her.

Hermione shook her head, feeling wild and out of control. “Not yet, please... Draco, I need you... please...”

Draco was pressing a kiss against her jaw, but her words stalled him, and he groaned against her skin. “Fuck, baby... how can I resist that...”

Hermione, in any other iteration of this moment with any other person... would have hated a pet name like that. So why, in Gods’ name, did her body writhe beneath him, heat swallowing the entirety of her, her cunt pulsing and aching to be filled with him.

Draco released her wrist and she felt him reaching between them, pulling himself out of his pants, until she felt the hot length of him against her. She gasped and shuddered as he rubbed himself over the wetness between her legs.

Hermione was reaching to grab at his arse, wanting to urge him forwards, when a bright streak of light shot across the room, and she jerked with surprise.

Her head turned as a patronus materialized next to them. Draco didn’t seem to realize that there was a retriever made up of brilliant white lights near their heads until it spoke with Halpert’s voice. His head then finally whipped towards it.

*“Good morning, Malfoy... and I assume Hermione, given the current state of the magic—again, it’s very bright and I do hate to wear sunglasses inside—I arrived at the Ministry this morning to find that the magic is disrupted once more, fractured again in the same place.”*

*Our little trick with your blood seems not to have worked, unfortunately. Another disconcerting item of note this morning is that there seems to be some sort of dark tendril inside the gold infinity. I couldn't tell you what it is, but that's my current concern. I don't like the look of it... I'll see you shortly. Clothes on, preferably.*" The patronus chuckled slightly before it disappeared.

Draco groaned loudly as he rolled off Hermione onto his back, his hands coming up to press his palms into his eyes. "Fucking cock-blocking *bastard*..."

Hermione was still breathing heavily, her body as wet and ready as it was moments ago, but the warmth had leached out of her after Halpert's words of warning.

She sat up, tugging at the edges of her long shirt to cover her private bits as she glanced over to Draco. He dropped his hands and pushed himself up so that he was sitting and stared at her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his face suddenly anxious, like he had been doing something wrong.

Hermione nodded. "Yes... just extremely frustrated. In a few ways."

Draco's lips tipped up for a moment but fell back down as he frowned. "Granger, I don't think..."

She sighed at his return to her surname. Clearly, whatever moment they had shared was now over.

"I know," she said quickly and then pushed herself to the edge of the bed, grabbing her knickers and pajama bottoms to slide them back on, "yes, I know."

When Hermione stood, she felt defeated. This curse was stripping away all of her free will, piece by piece.

And then she felt light-headed, suddenly swaying on the spot as her vision swam. "Woah," she said, sitting back onto the bed quickly and putting a hand to her head.

Draco was in front of her in an instant, a hand on her shoulder. "Granger? What is it? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she said, although nausea was spearing through her gut, "just felt dizzy for a second."

"I'll grab you some water," Draco said, concern in his voice, "you've had a tough night."

She nodded and then waited on the edge of the bed as Draco left to fetch her some water.

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Draco descended the stairs outside of his bedroom and turned left into the kitchen, his brain buzzing with a thousand thoughts.

He was frighteningly worried about the witch upstairs in his bedroom and what this curse was doing, but they didn't seem close to breaking it. No... they seemed to be making it worse, like he had feared.

But he was also frighteningly addicted to the witch upstairs in his bedroom. The way she had clung to him, *begged* for him...

*Fuck.*

His eyes fell shut as the glass filled with water, picturing her and her ungodly soft, perfect skin. Blowing out a breath, he grabbed her a light snack from the cupboard and moved to leave the kitchen once more.

As he reached the door, it opened before he could touch it, and his mother stopped at the sight of him.

"Oh, Draco," Narcissa said in surprise, "I didn't think you'd be up so early."

"Good morning, mother," he said swiftly, "yes, just grabbing some breakfast and then I'll be off to work. Have a big case I'm working on..."

Draco started to move around her, but she spoke again.

"Does your case have anything to do with Malfoy Manor?"

He paused and turned to face her. She stood, looking regal and put together, even at 6.30 in the morning and dressed in a bathrobe.

"Why would you ask that?"

Narcissa frowned at him. "Because the wards were disrupted yesterday."

Draco narrowed his gaze at her. "How do you know that?"

She let out an irritated sound. "Darling, it is my house. A number of the wards set were my own. Of course I'd be aware if they had been destroyed."

He sighed. "Yes... part of the case had some Aurors going to Malfoy Manor for a brief visit." Something flashed in her eyes when he had said 'Aurors'. Draco's head tilted to the side, his senses clinging on to that detail. "Why does it matter? The wards were reinstated as they left."

Her face relaxed, but Draco could tell it seemed strained. Then she waved a hand through the air. "No matter, I just wondered who was skulking through my home. There are still a number of valuable items we hadn't had the opportunity to sort through. I hoped it wasn't a thief."

He slowly nodded to her, though something told him she was lying. Draco would have to pursue this another day. He had someone upstairs who needed him.

“All is well with our ancestral home, mother, now if you’ll excuse me.” He nodded his goodbye to her and then left the kitchen, his suspicions of Narcissa’s behavior fleeing his mind quickly at the thought of Hermione.

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Hermione sat at her desk hours later.

She felt quite a bit better since leaving Draco’s Estate earlier that morning to head back to her shared flat. She continued to feel slightly shaky and nauseated for nearly an hour, but it had finally passed.

When Hermione had walked through his doorway towards the floo, it hadn’t been until she was standing inside her living room that she had realized... the magic had let her leave. It had let Draco leave to go to the kitchen before that.

She hadn’t... they hadn’t...

It was mystifying her, how the confines and rules that seemed to have been set kept changing and morphing until Hermione had absolutely no clue what was going to happen next. As someone who liked order and routine, this was particularly vexing.

Draco had been so concerned and caring while Hermione felt unwell... but he had seemed careful not to touch her properly again.

As she sat, hardly being productive, at her desk, Hermione kept envisioning their heated moments together on his bed. They had been... so close. She had wanted it, body and soul, and she still did. But at what cost?

She’d already had two memo’s from Halpert that morning, explaining the changes he had noticed in the magic. Hermione knew she should be there, to have a look herself, but she was also afraid to. Halpert had described a darkness in the grains of light, something that he had disconcertingly said had the potential to grow. That didn’t sound very good, to put it lightly.

So, it took Hermione until it was nearly lunchtime for her to pluck up the courage and enter the elevators to head up to the cursebreakers departments.

When she entered Halpert’s office, she was surprised to find it empty.

The blade hovered in midair as usual, the streaks of light creating the infinity symbol flew about it in spiraling arcs, bright and mesmerizing. Hermione moved towards it and inspected the tiny particles that moved, noticing the fractures that Halpert had pointed out, and also the newest addition—a slithery, dark tendril shifting and undulating inside the golden stream. It certainly looked dark and evil, and it set her teeth on her edge, the hairs on her arms lifting with a shiver.

“Hermione,” came Halpert’s cheerful voice from behind her, and she turned to see him walking through the door, a box held in his hands. Draco strode in behind him, and he paused momentarily at seeing her there. They held gazes for a moment, and something swelled in her

chest at the sight of him. It was embarrassing, almost, how Hermione felt like she couldn't get enough of him, and that all she wanted to do was fling herself into his arms and kiss him in greeting.

Something behind her flared with brightness, and she squinted, turning away from Draco to find the magic lines around the blade burning intensely. She stepped away from it, bringing her hand up to shield her eyes as it seared her retinas. She felt the beat of her heart thud quicker in her chest as she moved away.

"Ah," Halpert said, "here we go again, it seems." He set down the box on a table to his left and then pulled something out from his pocket, before placing a pair of dark sunglasses over his eyes.

Hermione continued taking steps away from the blade and the flaring brightness, trying to calm herself, and then there was a hand on her shoulder, pulling her away until Draco was stepping protectively in front of her.

Her sudden panic subsided with Draco near her, shielding her, feeling safe next to him. That same feeling as before somersaulted in her chest.

The brightness only got worse, until the entire room was nearly engulfed in nothing but whiteness. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, pressing herself into Draco's back.

"Whatever it is you're thinking—either of you," Halpert said, drawing her attention, "I suggest you stop. Think of something else."

Hermione squinted over to the cursebreaker, who had his arm over his face and covering his eyes. She swallowed, realizing it was her... she was causing this. Her deep feelings for Draco were causing this. Panic clawed at her.

How was she supposed to control how she felt?

Pulling in a deep breath, she moved hurriedly away from him until her back crashed into the wall, her head hitting the wood painfully. Draco turned at the noise, seeing her cowering by the wall, his brows pinching, concern etched on his features. He started to move towards her again.

Hermione held a desperate hand up, shaking her head. He stopped, but he had that same look on his face, like he would do anything for her, do anything to protect her.

It only made things worse.

She looked away from him, closing her eyes tightly, breathing in deeply. She tried to focus on anything else other than the feelings for this man that felt like they were bursting out of her.

She thought of Harry, her best friend in the entire world.

She thought of Theo, someone she had never known properly until he started to date her best friend, and was now one of the people closest to her.

She thought of her parents, memories of Hermione lost, living comfortably and happily in Australia without her.

She cycled around her love for these people until Draco was pushed entirely from her mind, and like someone flipped off a light, the brightness went away. Her eyes fluttered open slowly and she looked around the room. Both men were staring at her as she panted against the wall. The room almost seemed dark with its normal lighting.

“That was...” Hermione began, but that same light-headed feeling overcame her with a powerful force, and the breath left her lungs, “oh, shit—”

Her knees buckled underneath her and her back slid down the wall until her butt hit the ground hard. Her vision and hearing went dark, and she felt rather than saw or heard as hands gripped at her. Noises tried to push through into her mind, but it was all fuzzy. She didn’t know if her vision was gone, or if her eyes were just closed, but Hermione had lost control of her body momentarily.

“Hermione, open your eyes!” she heard someone yell, the sound of her name pushing through her ears, and she gasped suddenly, her eyes popping open.

She saw Draco on his knees before her. He had her head gripped between both of his hands as he stared at her with a wide, fearful gaze. The moment their eyes met, something eased in Draco’s, relief clear on his face. He swallowed roughly as he moved closer to her, thumbs sweeping across her cheeks.

“Fuck... are you okay? What happened?” he asked in an unsteady voice.

“I... I don’t know. I felt dizzy again, and then... I don’t know,” she answered honestly. Assessing herself quickly, she felt weak and odd. There was a tickle in her chest, in her throat, like she needed to cough. Her brain felt a bit fuzzy. “I think I need a Healer, I could be sick.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed. “Halpert,” he said, his gaze not leaving Hermione, “could this have anything to do with the curse? With the darkness that showed up this morning?”

Halpert didn’t answer right away, and before he could, the tickle in her throat intensified, and she did cough. Bringing her hand up to her mouth, forcing Draco to release her face, Hermione coughed roughly into her palm. The feeling scratched unpleasantly up her throat, and she coughed until her head started to pound from the force of it.

When she was finished, she let her hand fall away.

Draco made a small noise, something like a wounded animal and her eyes flew back to his. His face was morphed with confusion, with panic, his eyes set to her mouth.

Puzzled, Hermione lifted her hand back to her mouth, but didn’t need to. When her palm came into her line of sight, she saw the flecks of blood all over her hand. Sucking in a sharp breath, she wiped the back of her other hand across her lips, and it came away smeared with red.

She had coughed up a whole lot of blood.

Her hand shook as she looked to Draco, who hadn't moved a muscle, his face the same, pulled taut with fear.

"Halpert..." Draco said, voice sharp as a knife.

They both looked over to him. He was scrutinizing Hermione but looked quite calm despite the circumstances.

"You... you said this could kill me," Hermione said plainly to Halpert, her voice sounded ragged after the coughing fit. Draco's gaze swung back to hers sharply. "Is that what's happening here?"

"No," Draco said firmly, but when Halpert said nothing, he looked back over to the cursebreaker, "isn't that right, Halpert?"

Halpert stood, eyes still assessing Hermione carefully. Finally, into the deadly silence of the room, he said, "this is unprecedented. I've never seen something like this before. Sure, curses can cause harm or death if the intended purposes weren't fulfilled, or if there is a clear nefarious drive imbued into the magic, but never so quickly. Usually months, even years. Days, however... it's unheard of."

"Guess I'm special then," Hermione said morosely, trying to push herself away from the wall, but failing, her body still feeling weakened.

"You aren't dying," Draco growled, then he took her under the arms and lifted her to her feet. She swayed dangerously, so he set his arm under her knees and swept her up until he had her against his chest. "I'm taking you to a Healer, and you—" He swung his darkened gaze back to Halpert. "—Figure this out. Today."

Without waiting for answer, Draco left the room, carrying Hermione with him, both of them decidedly ignoring the stares and whispers of the Aurors they passed by.

\*\*

Hermione had been given a clean bill of health. According to all diagnostics and spells, there was absolutely nothing wrong with her.

Despite the symptoms she had described, the Healer and even her superior, had declared her healthy and well.

They had left the hospital bereft and frustrated, knowing with certainty that it was the blade, the curse, that was causing Hermione's sudden issues.

Draco didn't know what to do.

It was a feeling he wasn't at all used to. He always had an answer, a path, for everything. There was always a way to solve a case, to get the answers from a perp, to break the curse on a nasty object... there had *always* been a way.



But with this... he had no bloody clue.

Draco had known from that very first day that this curse was beyond him. It was why he'd handed it over to the cursebreakers to begin with.

He paced through the corridors of the Ministry after hours, having left Hermione with Potter and Theo, knowing they would take good care of her. She seemed better, having not had another coughing fit since the first, and said the dizziness and weakness had passed. But Draco knew this wasn't the end. He had a terrible, sinking feeling that it was so far from the end.

He couldn't let Hermione be hurt... he couldn't let her...

Draco shoved open the door to Halpert's office. It was empty. He knew Halpert had a meeting with the cursebreaker department for the next hour. He was briefing the entire team with insistence from Potter himself that all other cases were to be dropped until this curse was solved and Hermione was safe.

Draco closed the door behind him and strode straight up to the blade.

With clenched teeth and steely resolve, he reached up, plucked the knife from the air, pulling it loose of the magic that had suspended it and stepped back. The golden arcs of magic disappeared, the glow fading from the room.

He swallowed his sudden indecision, but then shook his head. There was no time for hesitation, not when Hermione could possibly be back in her flat, coughing up more blood.

Draco brought the blade to the palm of his left hand, and without overthinking his next actions, he sliced a clean line down the inside of his palm, the sting making him flinch for a moment.

He sucked in a sharp breath, watching his blood welling in his palm, before he suspended the blade back in the air, and cast a quick enchantment to return the imbued magic to swirl around the blade once more, the golden light shifting around it.

Not bothering to heal his hand, Draco left the way he had come.

\*\*

Hermione sat on the couch in front of the fireplace, holding a mug of tea between her hands. Theo was asleep next to her, his head lolling on to the back of the couch. Harry was dozing in the single armchair to her left, trying valiantly to stay awake.

It was 11.30pm, and Hermione felt anything but sleepy. Her day had been rather strange and harrowing.

She hadn't felt ill again since her moments in Halpert's office, but there was an undercurrent shifting through her body that she was all too aware of. She didn't feel... right. There was no other way to explain it. Hermione knew something was wrong with her.

Hermione hadn't seen Draco since he had left her at home after the hospital. Though he and Harry had exchanged several patronuses to check in with each other about her.

She longed to see him, to be comforted by his presence, his embrace.

She sighed into her mug before taking a sip of the lukewarm tea.

Harry roused at the sound.

"You okay, 'Mione?" he asked groggily.

She nodded, giving him a reassuring smile. "Fine, just thinking."

Harry nodded, running a hand through his jet-black hair. He let out a long sigh. "Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you."

"No new symptoms?"

Hermione started to shake her head, but then considered. "I suppose I just feel... odd. A bit prickly and shaky. I feel fine... but there's something there, inside... it's not really bothering me, but I *know* it's there. Does that make sense?"

Harry was staring at her, green eyes scrutinizing her with puzzlement. "How long have you felt that way?"

Hermione shrugged. "I think since this morning, but I can't be sure. It's getting worse, though."

Harry nodded slowly, deep in thought.

In the next moment, the fireplace brightened with a green light, and Draco was stepping through into the living room. Hermione's heart leapt at the sight of him, her spine straightening.

His eyes found her immediately, and something relaxed around his shoulders when they locked eyes.

"You alright?" he asked.

Hermione smiled and nodded.

Theo jerked awake next to her, and it made her jump slightly. "Merlin's tits!" he exclaimed at the sudden awakening and finding Draco in front of them. "What time is it?"

She rolled her eyes at Theo. "It's late—you should go to bed."

Theo looked over to his husband before settling his eyes back on Hermione. "You doing okay? Is it after midnight yet?"

“I’m fine, and no... it’s coming, though,” she answered.

Draco knelt in front of her and searched her gaze. “Halpert thinks I should take you home, to my bed. So that the magic has no chance to pull you there. We want to avoid the magic having any control over you at all... he’s hoping that will stall... whatever’s going on.”

Hermione swallowed nervously and then nodded. She placed her cold tea aside and stood, pulling the blanket from her lap. Draco straightened and looked over to Harry.

“Potter... thanks. I’ll keep in touch overnight if anything changes.”

Harry stood with a nod of his head. “Okay. I’ll head into the Ministry then—I assume they’re still working?”

“No, Harry—” Hermione started to object, but Draco cut her off.

“Yes, they’ll be working until they sort this out.”

Harry gave a grave nod of understanding, then moved over to Theo to bid him farewell before leaving through the fireplace.

Draco looked to Hermione. “You ready?”

She sighed but nodded. “Yes, I suppose,” she said, and then glanced over her shoulder to Theo who was watching her with a frown, “go to bed, Theo, I’m okay.”

“Update us,” Theo said, speaking to them both.

They each nodded, and then they were stepping into the fireplace and arriving at Draco’s Estate.

Within another few minutes, Hermione was settled against the headboard of Draco’s bed, a pillow tucked behind her back, and blankets draped comfortably over her lap. He sat next to her, and they were both quiet as they waited.

Her heart was thudding, and she could feel some panic pulsing through her veins. Hermione didn’t know what to expect tonight, what the magic might have in store for her... but she was nervous. Things had escalated today, and her health had suffered. So, the thought of tomorrow was... worrying, to say the least.

She swallowed her nervousness, blinking quickly as she stared at the patterns on the blanket. A warm hand took hers, fingers threading between her own.

Hermione pulled in a deep breath and turned her head, finding his silver eyes on her.

“It’s going to be okay,” Draco said softly, squeezing her fingers comfortingly, “I’m right here with you.”

She nodded, his touch and his words soothing something within her.

They both looked over to the clock at the same time. The hand was nearly at midnight, perhaps only seconds to go.

Hermione's next breath was shaky as she tightened her grip on Draco's hand.

Midnight inched closer.

She wanted to—

With a gasp, she was whisked away, darkness enveloping her in the same way it usually did every night at midnight.

When Hermione reappeared into a room swathed in only shadows, she knew with a sickening clarity exactly where she was. The black tiles beneath her unmistakable yet again. She was back in Malfoy Manor, in the Drawing Room.

With a deep, shaky sigh, Hermione pushed herself onto her feet, hugging her arms around her middle as she stared around at the darkened room, the same white sheets covering furniture. There was still debris all around her from when Draco had blasted his way through only days ago. Hermione pulled her wand out from her pocket, gripping it tightly, and looked over to the double doors. They hung open, the exit clear before her.

She let out a breath of relief, that at least, she could leave the Drawing Room while she figured out how to get out of the Manor.

Hermione began stepping towards the opening when a strange awareness rippled through her. She paused, the breath stalling in her chest as her ears perked and she felt an unpleasant tingle skate down her spine.

She whirled around, feeling eyes on her and urgently looked around the Drawing Room, squinting into the darkened corners.

She had hoped to find it empty, as she had the last time she was here. But with a jolt that had her feet frozen to the spot, her body seizing with fear, Hermione saw a figure standing at the edges of the room.

Her next inhale was sharp and gasping.

"Mudblood," said a cold, high-pitched, deranged voice. A voice that Hermione would know anywhere. The word, the voice, sent a bolt of pure panic flooding her system. "What brings you to my dwelling yet again, hmm?"

Her body pulsed with her fear, unable to reconcile that this was real. Was she dreaming again?

Raising her shaking hand, eyes never leaving the dark silhouette, Hermione whispered in a trembling voice, "Lumos maxima."

Hermione's wand ignited with a terrible light, one that illuminated the entire room, and there the witch stood, her identity revealed without question.

Bellatrix Lestrange.

Hermione whimpered.

Then she screamed.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your patience, I've had a nice, healthy break after finishing my other full length fic (The Animagi Effect), and I had needed it - so thank you so much for allowing this fic to have less love from me than it deserved over the past few weeks.

But here it is, the next chapter, and I'm feeling fresh on my feet again to write and post more frequently again!

Hope you enjoy this one, drop a comment to let me know your thoughts :) Looking to update once per week on a Tuesday around 4-5pm (NZST)

xx

Forawhile

# WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY AND BLOODY HOW?

## Chapter Notes

TW: brief depictions of assault (no SA occurs / assault is not between D and H), tread lightly if this concerns you.

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

Twice.

Twice now this had happened to Draco. One moment, he was with Hermione, and in the next, she was gone, with not even a stir of wind left in her wake.

Her warm hand had been clasped in his, and now he was left cold and alone.

His heart jumped the moment she had disappeared, and he sat up straight in bed, glancing around with astonishment. Draco hadn't expected this. She had never been pulled to anywhere other than his bed at the stroke of midnight.

The other time she had been whisked away from his clutches had been after midnight, and after she'd... well, he'd been touching her in much more intimate places than her hand. And she'd been taken to...

Draco swore roughly and leapt from his bed, striding briskly towards his door, grabbing his cloak on the way out and throwing it quickly over his shoulders. He sent a hurried patronus to Potter before he ran out his front door towards the apparition point.

He cracked back into existence outside the gates of Malfoy Manor, glancing up at the looming sections of the ominous façade that was the large home which he had grown up in. He broke through the gates' wards with a few carefully worded spells, and then he was running up the pathway towards the front doors.

He heard another crack behind him, and Draco wheeled around when his foot hit the first step. Potter and two others were jogging up the pathway towards him.

"Potter," he said, clutching his wand tightly in his anxiety, "she's only been gone a few minutes, but I'm betting she's inside."

Potter, flanked by two other Aurors, ran up the steps with Draco until they were at the front double doors, which were the most heavily warded doors of the home. Potter and Draco worked together to break through them, every second that passed as they swiped their wands across the doorway, had Draco's urgency increasing.

When they were finally through, Draco raced towards the Drawing Room, leaving Potter to trail hurriedly behind him, apparently unable to keep up with his hasty, long-legged strides.

A sudden thundering noise met his ears, and the ground shook beneath his feet. Only Draco's instincts and impeccable training kept him on his feet, even as he heard the other Auror's behind him stumbling with the force of the quake. His world shook, both physically and mentally, as he was seized by panic and desperation.

His feet moved quicker, feet pounding on the hardwood floors until he wheeled around a corner towards the doors of the Drawing Room, but he needn't have gone further.

With a small, frightened squeal, Hermione collided with him as she ran around the corner at the same moment as Draco had.

The breath left his lungs at the force with which their bodies had struck each other, his arms coming up to steady her on instinct when she nearly toppled at the impact.

Hermione was breathing heavily, and it was as she pushed herself away from him with wide, wild eyes, that he noticed how panic-stricken she was.

"Granger?" Draco said, searching over her to be sure she was unharmed, "what's wrong—"

"I... oh, Gods... Malfoy?" she said, voice hushed and breathless as she seemed to finally see him there in front of her, and she reached out to clutch at his forearms, her fingers pressing in with a punishing grip.

"It's me, Granger, what—"

"I'm so sorry," she said hurriedly, her eyes darting everywhere and stopped on Potter as he reached them. Hermione looked incredibly pale. "I think I destroyed part of your house. Harry, I... I don't know..." She was speaking in between small, stuttering breaths, shaking her head with a wild fervor.

"What happened, Hermione?" Potter asked, brow furrowed with concern.

Hermione released Draco's arms and took an unsteady step backwards as she looked between Potter and Draco before she pressed her lips together and shook her head again. "I thought I saw... but now I don't know..."

"What did you see?" Draco asked, the frenzied look on her face sending spirals of unease shifting through him.

She met his eyes. "Bellatrix."

His heart dropped.

"Mione... Bellatrix Lestrange is—" Potter started.

"I know," Hermione said, reaching up to her head and running her fingers through her curls, clutching at them for a moment, "I know she is, Harry. But I saw her—" she looked at Draco

once more, “—but I wasn’t asleep this time, and I swear... I swear she was...” she trailed off, before she whispered the final words, “she was right in front of me... she spoke to me...”

Potter was quiet and contemplative next to them, flanked by the other two Auror’s who had each remained quiet and unmoving, waiting for orders.

Draco just nodded because there was no mistaking the sincerity in her voice. Hermione believed what she saw, and he believed her.

“We’ll check it out,” Draco insisted, nodding once at Hermione before making eye contact with Potter, “the whole Manor and grounds will be scoured, top to bottom.”

Potter took in a deep breath, blinking his confused, green eyes before he turned to the other Auror’s and issued his orders. He heard the muttered *Homenum Revelio* spell, which garnered no results beyond the people that stood around them. Still, the Auror’s each disappeared in different directions with their wands out. It seemed to be a silent agreement between them that Draco would remain with Hermione.

“Malfoy...” Hermione said, and he looked back down to her, “the Drawing Room... I cast a spell... I think the whole room above collapsed into it. I’m so sorry...”

Draco raised an eyebrow and smirked lightly at her. “You bombarda-ed my home? Granger, I know you *hate* this place, but really...”

Something eased around her shoulders, a modicum of tension leeching from her as she huffed at him. “Well, what can I say? The name Malfoy itself is rather rage-inducing.”

“Hmm,” Draco hummed with a playful quirk of his brow, hoping to ease more of that tension from her, “then it’s a wonder you can spend any time with me at all without causing bodily harm.”

She sent him a small smile. “You *should* consider yourself quite lucky to still have both testicles, really.”

He chuckled lightly and moved closer to her, placing a tentative hand on the side of her arm. Her smile faded away, and the darkness behind her eyes grew as she looked up to him.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Hermione gave the smallest shake of her head, eyes casting low. “I don’t know if I’m hallucinating, or going crazy, or...” she broke off to huff and scrub ferociously at her eyes, “I mean there isn’t really any other option, right? Because your aunt is dead. So, it’s one of the two.”

“You saw what you saw, Granger,” Draco said, bringing her vulnerable gaze back up to him, “whether it’s the curse... or whether something else is going on, I believe that you saw my aunt tonight. You aren’t crazy, Granger—you’re the sanest person I know.”

Something shifted on her face, flickering behind her eyes and she collapsed forward into him, her arms winding around his waist tightly, head falling to his chest. Draco hugged her to him,



eyes falling shut as his heart thudded. She breathed deeply into his chest, her exhale shuddering out of her.

Draco's next inhale was also a deep breath, his mind awash with nothing but confusion and frustration. The entire situation was as fucked up as it could get, and he was desperate to resolve it. For her.

"I am sorry for the damage to your house," she mumbled into his cloak.

"Fuck this house," Draco said earnestly, arms tightening around her, "honestly, I would have had it condemned and reduced to rubble years ago if it weren't for my mother—"

He broke off, a synapse firing in his brain and bringing the conversation with Narcissa from that morning to the forefront of his mind. Her odd questions and cagey responses about Malfoy Manor had tickled his Auror senses in a negative way. She was hiding something, something about this house. It had seemed harmless, nothing to concern himself with in the moment, especially with Hermione feeling unwell and the curse they were battling.

But... something now told Draco that he needed to speak to his mother once more.

"If it weren't for your mother?" Hermione prompted, her voice still muffled as she burrowed even further into his chest.

"I, uh—" Draco's mind was elsewhere as he tried to return to the present, "—oh, well, Narcissa was quite adamant we keep the house intact. This home is important to her and father, so I agreed, as long as it remained warded until the Aurors were able to catalogue every item inside the Manor to rid the place of dark magic and objects. A very low priority task for the Ministry, so it's stayed boarded up until now."

"Dark objects," Hermione said and pulled back to look up at him, "like the ceremonial blade?"

He frowned at her. "Perhaps, but... it wouldn't have come from here—the department hadn't managed to scope out the Manor yet. Do you know how the blade ended up at the Ministry?"

Hermione paused to think for a moment before she shook her head. "I don't, actually. The department have been filtering through thousands of objects from wartime that came from varying locations. It was part of a group that had been catalogued as 'unknown'."

Draco sighed and looked over her head, eyes roaming over the ornate frames that held empty portraits, the occupants long having abandoned the Manor also.

Hermione shook her head with weariness, taking a few steps away from him, her fingers coming together to fidget absently. She sighed through her nose. "I don't know what to think anymore. Nothing about this curse makes sense. It's almost as if..."

Something seized him as he watched her nervously grip and pull at her fingers, eyes on the floor. Draco could not have put voice to the feeling, could not have accurately described it to anyone if they asked him to. He was overcome with the urge to have her back in his arms, to

feel her warmth against him, to convince himself she was safe. Draco wanted to never let her go.

And then he was flooded with a profound feeling of disbelief. At the beginning of the week, they had been nothing more than acquaintances who tolerated one another's company because of their respective friends. They did nothing with each other except match wits with a fast-paced repartee and a desire to render the other unable to respond. They had just teased each other, relentlessly.

But now...

Draco found himself wondering if there had always been feelings, cloaked beneath their bickering. If their teasing had been thinly veiled flirting that neither of them had been willing to admit, whether out loud or even to themselves. He certainly hadn't realized, until she had been thrust upon him, quite literally, by this strange magic. Now, as Draco looked at her, a hand firmly around his heart, he didn't know how he had possibly missed it.

Hermione... was *everything*.

And the only thing he truly understood in that moment, was that he would do anything to keep her safe. That he would end the next person who would threaten her. That he would make anyone suffer that even thought to harm her. That he would watch the world burn, so long as she was unscathed, protected, safe.

Draco took a sudden step away from her, like he had been shoved, the feeling overcoming his entire being. He felt disarmed and unmoored.

Hermione glanced back up to him, her fidgeting ceasing as her head tilted to the side. He didn't know what she saw on his face, but Draco quickly worked his expression to hide whatever she was witnessing.

Because he was fucking terrified by it, by the strength of it, the force with which Hermione made him *feel*.

Swallowing, he registered her last words to him, and forced the next words out. "As if, what?"

Hermione continued to search over his face, as if he were a puzzle she was meticulously trying to solve. He worked harder to keep his expression neutral. Finally, she said, "I don't know," she said with a resigned sigh, looking away from him. Draco finally felt like he could pull in his next breath. "I just feel like there's something else going on here. Like it's not just a marriage binding or curse, but something... worse. Something darker than that. I can... feel something dark inside of me..." she broke off to sigh roughly. "It's difficult to explain, I'm sorry."

"Granger, I've never heard you apologize so much. It's very unsettling—do stop," Draco tried for a teasing tone to cut through some of the tension, but he meant the words. Hermione had nothing to be sorry for. If anyone needed to apologize, it was him. She would never be in

this situation if it weren't for his family and their archaic tendencies towards pure-blood marriages, bound by blood.

She huffed on a quiet laugh and opened her mouth to speak when footsteps sounded to Draco's left. Both of their heads whipped towards it. Potter was striding towards them, an unreadable expression on his face. Hermione turned to face him, her hands returning to their anxious fidgeting. Draco clenched his hands into fists to stop from reaching out to take her hands in his own.

"The Manor is clear," Potter said, and he was clearly trying to send Hermione a reassuring smile, but it came off as more of a grimace, "though the Drawing Room is a mess—your spell must have been quite powerful."

Draco saw from the corner of his eye that Hermione had turned her head towards him, but he forced himself to keep his gaze on Potter. "Any updates from the Cursebreakers while you were at the Ministry?"

Potter was fitting his wand back into his holster as he spoke. "Nothing of great use. Halpert and two others were musing on the blade's history, wanting to trace exactly where it's come from. The darkness in the magic was..." he turned his somber eyes to Hermione, "... it had apparently grown since the morning. He thinks we might be on the wrong track about the marriage or consummation caveat causing all these issues, and until we find the right one..."

"I'm screwed," Hermione finished, voice low and devoid of emotion. That had Draco turning his head to look at her. She stared at the ground by Potter's feet, her hands now crossed tightly across her chest, covering over the same 'Savage Garden' t-shirt she had worn earlier in the week.

His need to pull her against him was so strong that he actually swayed on the spot.

Potter's furrowed brow left Hermione and went to him as though catching Draco's subtle movement towards his best friend, like he saw that invisible magnet between them.

Potter's knowing gaze slid back to Hermione. "We're working on it, 'Mione. I suggest you get some rest, you've had a massive week and another scare tonight." Hermione opened her mouth, probably to protest, if Draco were to place a bet, but Potter held up a hand to stop her. "You need to rest, alright? Keep your strength and leave it with us for the night. You can re-join us at the Ministry in the morning."

Silence descended for a moment, and Potter looked again to Draco, as though expecting him to back him up. Draco said nothing.

Finally, Hermione deflated with a small nod. "Fine, I guess I'm a bit low on sleep." Then she turned to Draco, took a step towards him, and looked to him expectantly. He realized that she wanted to go home with him... sleep in his bed.

His fingers twitched, itching to reach for her hand and lead her there. Tuck her into him, safe beneath his sheets and between his arms. But his brain was seizing with his revelations of what he felt for her, and Draco was entirely uncertain how to deal with such large emotions.

His mouth opened, then it closed. Then it opened again. “Uh, Potter, do you think you could escort Granger back to her flat? I’m sure Theo will stay with her while she rests. I’m going to join Halpert at the Ministry.”

Draco tore his gaze from Hermione to regard Potter, pretending that he didn’t see the way Hermione’s brows drew together at the way he addressed her friend instead of her. He pretended he imagined the hurt flashing across her face. Pretended that the way her fingers fidgeted yet again did not affect him at all. Not one single bit.

Potter’s eyes hardened on Draco. “Fine,” he said, “but I’d like a word before you head to the Ministry. ‘Mione, do you mind?”

She said nothing, not even a ‘good night’ as she sighed softly and then walked away from them both.

Potter watched her leaving, making sure she was out of earshot before he rounded on Draco. His green eyes narrowed on him. “What is it you think you’re doing?”

Draco merely blinked at Potter, unsure what he could say. “What do you mean?”

Potter’s eyes rolled, arms folding across his chest. “I mean, I think you’re being utterly ridiculous. You clearly care about Hermione—so why are you bothering to pretend like you don’t?”

Draco’s kneejerk reaction was to deny, but the knowing green stare of Potter felt pointless to argue with. He shifted on his feet with a sigh. “I’m not pretending, Potter... I’m avoiding.”

Potter’s brows lifted, as though he hadn’t expected Draco to admit it. “Why?”

Draco gritted his teeth with frustration. “If I knew the answer to that, I probably wouldn’t be avoiding it, now would I?” Potter remained silent, scrutinizing him. Draco shook his head. “I’m lost about it, alright? I don’t have a lot of experience with this...”

Potter quirked an eyebrow at him. “With what? Caring about someone other than yourself?”

Draco clenched his fists back together, a desire to break Potter’s stupid glasses flashing through him. His overwhelming feelings felt like a weapon he could wield, the sharpest blade he could ever own. He wanted to strike Potter and his words down into a bleeding mess on the ground before him.

This.

This was the problem. Draco felt volatile and adrift.

Potter, obviously clueless to Draco’s violent thoughts, just smirked at him.

“Yes,” Draco ground out, and the admission had Potter’s smirk faltering, “after the war, I chose a life for myself very carefully, Potter,” he said, his anger making his voice tremble, “and it was a life where I could finally focus on myself and not what others expected of me. I never *wanted* anyone in my life I needed to think or care about.”

Potter was silent for a long moment, chewing on Draco's words. "Well, clearly you care about someone else, now. What are you going to do about it—because I can tell she cares about you, too. And she doesn't deserve someone who's going to play hot and cold with her. She's going through enough right now, don't you think?"

"Precisely," Draco said vehemently, "she has enough on her plate to need to deal with my fucked up emotions, too."

"Malfoy..." Potter said, shaking his head at the self-deprecation.

Draco pinched at the bridge of his nose. "Look... let's just get Hermione through this. Let's figure this curse out, and then..."

"And then?" Potter prompted.

"And then I'll fucking figure it out, okay? Fucks' sake, Potter—get Granger home and stop grilling me about this."

Draco whirled on his heel and stalked away from Potter, all too aware that he was acting like a petulant brat who was out of touch with his feelings. He wanted to bury these feelings, push them so far into a tomb and slide the heavy lid over it, encasing them so he didn't have to deal with it. But the tomb wouldn't close, like a gaping, festering wound.

As he walked away, his blood boiled with a desperate anger, and Draco knew, frustratingly so, that he was only angry at himself.

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Hermione would have liked to have woken slowly and warmly, comfortable and rested. She would have liked to have had Draco next to her, probably surrounded by him, whether it was by his sturdy, safe arms, or simply enveloped by his scent.

She had none of those things as she woke in the small hours of the morning on the sofa of her living room.

It had taken her a long time to fall asleep after she had arrived home. Theo had been right next to her, and yet Hermione had felt so alone. She had been taken aback that Draco had just dismissed her yet again. Sent her home without even looking at her, not bothering to bid her farewell, either.

Her thoughts had spiraled uncontrollably as she tried to get comfortable on the sofa. Between ending up back at the Manor, seeing Bellatrix, blowing up a section of the house, and then Draco... well, Hermione felt beyond the realm of confusion.

Harry had good intentions, making sure Hermione went home to rest, but she felt anything but rested as she trudged down the hallway to the bathroom to brush her teeth and scrub wearily at her face.

Looking at herself in the mirror, Hermione couldn't help but cringe at the darkened circles beneath her eyes. Her eyes were wide despite her fatigue, but they looked crazed, wild. She

stared into her own hazel gaze, wondering if that what was happening—if she was crazy.

Hermione knew what she had seen. But her analytical, sensible mind screamed at her that what she had seen was impossible. Bellatrix was long dead.

Her analytical, sensible brain had been silent and vacant in that moment, staring at the woman who had tormented her, tortured her. Hermione had been incapable of responding in any way other than pure, unadulterated panic which brought forth a powerful bombardment, bringing the roof collapsing towards them both and shaking the ground beneath her feet. Hermione had only just avoided the falling debris as she stumbled backwards and broke into a run.

The relief she had felt when she had run straight into Draco's arms had been visceral, intense. She could have stayed in his arms forever, begging to avoid everything happening around her, and just soak inside his warmth, listen to him murmur to her with his deep voice, breathe in the scent of him until she could finally relax.

Hermione sighed at her reflection. "How did you get here?" she muttered to herself sullenly, genuinely concerned at her own absurd feelings for Draco. She should be focused on the curse, on not bloody *dying*, and yet she was so consumed with thoughts of him.

In the next thirty minutes, Hermione was dressed and gently rousing Theo on the couch to tell him she was heading into the Ministry.

But first: coffee.

It was already warm outside as the morning sun glinted off the windows of the buildings that she passed by on her way down the street near the Ministry entrance. Hermione decided some fresh air would do her good, as well as a professionally made coffee.

She stood inside a small café, enjoying the scents around her mingled with the lulling noises of gentle chatter and the coffee machines.

Hermione was waiting for her coffee when someone touched her on the shoulder and she jumped slightly, whirling around.

"Granger," Cormac said with a wide grin, "lovely seeing you on the weekend."

Hermione sighed with resentment, hating that he was here to destroy the one peaceful moment she had been having.

"McLaggen," Hermione said by way of greeting before turning back around, "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Nor I you," he said from behind her, and she felt him draw closer so that she could feel the heat of his body near her shoulder. She suppressed a shudder and shuffled forward a step.

"What brings you downtown?"

"Just getting some caffeine before I head into work."

“On a Saturday?” he asked incredulously.

“Yep,” Hermione said, watching the barista carefully and hoping her drink would be next.

“Why are you working on the weekend?”

She sighed but forced herself to answer and remain civil. “Just a time-sensitive job I’m working on.”

“Ah, I see,” Cormac said, and she could hear the smug smile in his voice, “nothing keeps you away from work, eh? You’ve always been so... dedicated.”

Hermione’s face collapsed into a cringe, unable to miss the way his voice dipped suggestively. Thankfully, she was saved from answering when the barista called out her name and gestured towards her. Hermione gratefully moved forward and took up her coffee with a smile.

“See you, McLaggen,” Hermione said and moved past him without making eye contact.

A hand twisted around her elbow, stopping her. Hermione swallowed her desire to snap at him as she was forced to turn back towards him. Cormac looked down at her with a frown.

“What’s going on between you and Malfoy?” he asked.

Hermione’s stomach swooped at his words. “Nothing.” Certainly not nothing, but it was none of his damned business.

Cormac scoffed. “He seemed pretty intense about you in the elevator the other day.” Then he leaned closer to her, smiling in a conspiratorial manner. Hermione cringed away from him, leaning backwards, and gripped her coffee cup with discomfort. “Is he pressuring you for something?”

Hermione looked at him incredulously.

“Because if he’s making you uncomfortable, or—”

Hermione scoffed and wrenched her arm out of his grip before taking a much-needed step away. “If anyone’s making me uncomfortable, it’s you. What’s going on between me and Malfoy is none of your concern, so why don’t you just order your coffee and leave me be.”

She whirled away from his suddenly angry glare and left the café with her skin tingling unpleasantly. By the time she was walking through the lower levels of the Ministry, she was still buzzing with irritation and feeling like she needed another shower after Cormac had touched her.

Hermione sat down at her desk and mulled everything over as she finished her coffee, waiting for the caffeine to hit her bloodstream.

Feeling capable of focusing, Hermione started to sift through her paperwork from earlier in the week until she found what had come into the Ministry for. Pulling out the sheet of

parchment with the details she had scrawled on the blade on Monday morning. Hermione glanced over the brief details she had written before cutting herself: the appearance of the blade, the likely heritage of the blade, the likely current owner, the inscription on the metal. She licked at her lips as her eyes darted over the numbers at the very top, telling her the section of the archives the blade had been pulled from before it had landed on her desk.

Hermione stood, pocketing the piece of parchment, and walked through the maze of aisles and shelves. The archives were enormous. She could walk for fifteen minutes in one direction and still have room to keep on going.

She followed the numbered and lettered signs on the aisles until she found the one that she had been looking for and moved deeper into the archives, the darkness and dust only growing as she walked so that she needed a low Lumos to see where she was going.

Finally, she came upon the section where the blade had sat on a shelf for years before it had been sent to her for processing. The section of shelf before her was sparse, only a few boxes were scattered on varying levels of shelving, the clear indentations of dust showing where things had recently been removed.

Hermione reached for a box and pulled it down, kneeling with it on the ground and opening it. She found random items inside including a shoe, half of a wand, a small stone, a textbook, a bracelet, and a very dirty looking set of robes. She pushed it aside and stood, grabbing the next box.

This box was full of more mundane items, nothing denoting a time or place that might hint at where the ceremonial dagger had come from.

Sighing, she looked around at the things she had pulled out, hoping some kind of connection might be made. Hermione reached for the textbook, smiling with nostalgia as she recognized it as a grade two charms book. She flipped open the cover, remembering the first time she had opened this very book at the beginning of her second year of Hogwarts. Such a simpler time.

A small sheet of paper fluttered out from between the pages, and Hermione picked it up, seeing writing on it.

*Mum and Dad,*

*I don't know if this will find you, but I also don't know if I'll ever see you again. There are Death Eaters in the castle and Voldemort is attacking the school. I'm hiding in the dorm. Bea is with me, but I'm scared. She said she saw Harry Potter, so we're safe, but I don't know. He's just a kid. He isn't that much older than us. How is he supposed to stop them all? I just want you to know that I love you, if this is the last thing I get to say. Please tell*

The writing on the letter became sloppier as it went on, until those last words “Please tell” where it was clear the writing had been cut off with a suddenness that had been unexpected. And it had never been finished.



Hermione swallowed a lump in her throat as she stared at the words, at that final, unfinished sentence and wondering if the student had made it. If they made it back to their parents.

With shaking fingers, Hermione folded up the letter and tucked it away in the textbook once more.

She looked around at the filthy, dusty items she had surrounded herself with and frowned. These must have all come from Hogwarts castle... possibly from the day of that final battle against Voldemort if the letter was any indication. Is that where the dagger had come from, too?

A noise sounded somewhere in the darkness beyond her wands' light and Hermione glanced upwards, the unmistakable sound of a foot scuffing on carpet drawing her attention. She grabbed up her wand and held it high, feeling unease sliding down her spine.

Rarely did anyone come down this far into the archives, let alone on a Saturday.

"Hello?" Hermione called into the darkness. Only silence greeted her query. She frowned warily before she placed her wand back down and hurriedly returned the items back into their boxes and replaced them onto the shelves. She had a sudden desire to get back to her desk.

Hermione gripped her wand tightly as she moved back down the aisles on quick feet, ears perked and body stiff with a tension and awareness she didn't entirely understand. Her eyes darted down every aisle she passed by, suddenly sick in her gut at the thought of seeing Bellatrix looming in the darkness. Fear gripped her as she walked as quick as she could without running, her breath coming in quick pants.

Just as she was convincing herself she had been hearing things, that what had happened the night before had her mind conjuring fear out of nothing, when she rounded a corner, and a figure was in front of her.

Hermione came to a halt with a quiet squeal, her heart suddenly thundering as adrenaline pulsed into her.

The breath left her lungs as she saw who it was, and anger started to quickly replace her surprise and shock.

"McLaggen... what the hell are you doing?" Hermione asked, pressing a hand to her heart as it thundered with the remnants of her fright.

Cormac stood, blocking her way, with his arms folded across his broad chest. He looked at her with a raised brow, lips slightly pursed. With her initial shock subsiding, Hermione started to take him in, and her unease grew once more.

"Why... are you down here... on a Saturday?" she asked guardedly, fingers tightening around her wand.

His eyes roamed over her, in a way that felt like a sleazy touch and Hermione shivered uncomfortably.

“I didn’t appreciate your insinuation that I was making you uncomfortable, back in the coffee shop.”

Her mouth fell open. “Well, you were,” Hermione seethed, “and you are right now. Sneaking up on me and cornering me in the archives? Don’t you think that would make me uncomfortable?”

Cormac’s eyes shifted between hers, but he just tilted his head her. He took a step towards her, and her heart rate kicked up as she raised her wand automatically at the unwanted advance into her space.

He paused, eyes flicking to the end of her wand which was still lit with her Lumos. He squinted at it before glaring past it at Hermione.

“To be honest, Granger, I’m done with this little game between us,” he said, voice low.

Her face screwed up with her confusion and incredulity. “Game?”

“Yes,” he said, and his lips lifted in the corner, “the one where you pretend you don’t want me.”

Hermione swallowed her disgust as she took a step away from him, keeping her wand levelled at his throat. “Please understand me, clearly: I *don’t* want you. I am *not* interested in you. Now please... leave me alone.”

He shook his head. “It’s been fun, but like I said... I’m done, now.” Cormac moved for her again, and Hermione’s eyes widened, her heart pounding as she acted on instinct and sent a stinging jinx at him before a gasp could even leave her throat.

The spell left her wand and shot at him, striking him in the shoulder. Cormac took a stumbled step back and hissed, his other hand coming up to his injured shoulder.

“*Fuck*, Granger—”

Then she caught the manic grin on his face before he lunged at her.

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Dracos’s eyes were beginning to strain from the sheer amount of times that he had rolled them so far that morning.

He understood it was part of Halpert’s process to go over and over every aspect of a case in excruciating detail, to try to shake loose anything that might have been overlooked or lost in translation. But boy was Draco tired of hearing it for the tenth time without anything changing, especially when he started speaking on the new darkness and the likely connection to Hermione coughing up that blood and what he was now calling ‘hallucinations’.

So, when Theo entered the room full of Cursebreakers and Aurors, it was a welcome reprieve to finally have Halpert *shut the fuck up*.

It had been a frustrating day so far, in so many ways. Starting with the fact that his mother was not at home when he went to question her about the Manor, and ending with Draco's revelation that he might just be in love with Hermione bloody Granger.

Potter perked at the entrance of his husband and stood to greet him. Theo held cup holders in both hands, laden with cups of coffee.

"Thought you could all use a pick-me-up," Theo said with a small smile, setting the coffees down on a nearby desk. Almost everyone groaned with naked delight as they surged forwards to take a cup of coffee.

Draco moved over to Theo and Potter, picking up a coffee on his way. He wouldn't ask, but he wanted to hear how Hermione was doing.

They were talking softly. Theo was grabbing Potter's arm with a reassuring smile and Potter seemed to relax a little. Draco wondered if that's what partnership looked like—instant relief and calm in the presence of the person you loved. He felt a strange envy over the ease with which they portrayed it.

"... going?" Draco caught the end of Theo's question as he neared.

Potter blew out a rough breath. "Honestly? We're going round in circles and I'm about ready to tear my hair out," he noticed Draco coming to stand with them, before he asked Theo, "how's Hermione doing?"

Draco tried not to look too eager as he waited for Theo's response.

"She was fine this morning, but she left to come here about an hour ago. I thought you guys might have seen her," Theo said, suddenly looking a little put out.

Draco set his slow, narrowed gaze over to Theo, processing his words. "You let her go alone?"

Theo opened his mouth, realizing the anger behind Draco's tone. "Um... I thought she was coming to work with you lot?"

"We haven't seen her," Harry said, and the worry in his voice was unmistakable.

"*Fuck*, Nott," Draco said, setting the coffee down quickly and pushing past him to stride for the door of the office, "she could be bloody anywhere, and could get sick again—you know that!"

"I'm sorry," Theo was saying, but Draco was already shoving open the door and exiting into the hallway.

That's when he stopped dead.

Hermione was striding purposefully in his direction, her arm raised as a figure hovered along in front of her, arms and legs dangling.

“Granger?”

That’s when he noticed that the figure was Cormac McLaggen. That’s when Draco noticed everything else. A dark bruise along her collarbone, one side of her hair was mussed where the curls had clearly been disrupted by rough hands, the sleeve of her dress was ripped and hanging off one shoulder.

Hermione stopped the moment she had seen Draco entering into the hall before her. The rest of the office around them was empty. The only people working were still stuffed inside Halpert’s office behind Draco.

Hermione had stopped. So had Draco’s heart.

And he saw it.

Relief lit behind her eyes the moment she had locked eyes with Draco and something dark and sinister seemed to drain from her, so much like how he had just watched Theo calm Potter with his presence.

They said nothing for a long moment as they took each other in, drinking in the presence of one another. Then Draco came to his senses and moved his gaze to Cormac.

“He... tracked me down in the archives and attacked me,” Hermione said, and there was a fragile strength in her voice that brought his attention back to her.

Her chin was tilted upwards, eyes hard and full of fire. But she was shaking.

Draco ignored the lightning ripping through his veins, demanding that he string Cormac up and disembowel him while he shrieks in agony, and instead he moved past the fucker until he was in front of Hermione.

He pulled her into his arms with a trembled exhale, feeling like he was breaking apart with remorse as Hermione let out a small noise and let herself fall into his chest. Draco didn’t know which one of them collapsed first, but he certainly felt his knees buckling beneath him, and then they were both kneeling on the ground as he encased her within his arms, crushing her to him.

“Fuck,” he whispered into her hair, “*fuck*... I am so sorry... I’m so fucking sorry...” If he hadn’t left her alone...

“No, you don’t—”

“Hermione? Are you okay? What’s—is that Cormac?”

Hermione moved in his grasp, and he relented his grip on her enough that she could look past Draco’s shoulder towards Potter.

“Yes, Harry—he just attacked me in the archives. He’s out cold, and probably bleeding internally. Please, can you... deal with him?”

Draco heard a commotion behind him as more Aurors poured into the narrow hallway. He heard as Potter swore viciously. He heard something thump into the ground, and Draco hoped it was Cormac, and hoped he would have *more* internal bleeding.

After a few more moments where he breathed in her scent, Draco stood, taking Hermione under the elbows to help her back to her feet.

He looked down at her, smoothing his hands over her hair, fixing the curls that had been tangled. "Are you alright... did he...?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, we tussled for a moment, but I got him with an Everte Statum, and then I stunned him."

Draco blew out a ragged breath, eyes closing in horror for a moment of what happened, and what could have happened. His head dropped down to rest on top of hers as he shook his head. "Gods... I—"

Then Theo was next to them and taking Hermione's shoulder, forcing Draco to step away from her. "Hermione... shit, are you okay? I'm so sorry, I never should have let you go out alone."

"What are you talking about Theo?" Hermione said as she turned towards him, "this had nothing to do with the curse... I would have been fine if it weren't for McLaggen."

They spoke together as Draco looked over his shoulder, seeing Potter and another Auror disappearing around the corner with Cormac. Fury overcame him, and he started to move away, to stride with a deadly directive towards the man who thought he could put his hands on Hermione. Cormac was a dead man.

"Draco," came Hermione's voice from behind him.

He paused at the sound of his name, his eyes still on the hovering figure just moving out of his sight, his desperate desire to put his fist through his face coursing through him.

Draco swallowed and with great effort, he turned.

Hermione and Theo were both watching him carefully. Draco knew he looked murderous, that his fists were clenched with white knuckles.

Hermione held out a hand for him. "I need to speak with you."

Draco's jaw was tight, eyes flashing with malevolent need.

"Draco," she said again, extending her hand further.

Blowing out a breath angrily through his nose, Draco walked stiffly towards her, and ignored Theo's wide eyes as Hermione grasped his hand and pulled him away.

Draco barely paid attention to where she was leading him, his mind still on his vengeful thoughts, until Hermione pulled him into an empty, dark office and closed them inside.

She released his hand to close the door behind her, and then she turned to face him, her eyes roaming across his face.

“You look ready to commit homicide,” Hermione mused.

No point in denying it. “Yep.”

She licked at her lips and regarded him carefully, eyes tracking down over his white oxford before rising back to his eyes. Draco realized that she was breathing heavily, her chest rising and falling against the bodice of her summery dress. He felt his focus shifting away from thoughts of Cormac.

“I... Draco, I feel... um, odd,” Hermione said, still panting, before her eyes fell shut as though embarrassed of her words, “I feel out of control.”

Draco stared at her. He could understand not feeling in control right then. “So do I,” he admitted.

Her eyes flew back open, and she blinked at him. “I know you do,” she said breathily, “I could see it in your eyes. You would kill him, wouldn’t you?” Hermione asked it, so casually, that Draco paused as she took a step towards him. “For... hurting me?”

He took in a calming breath as he set his glare on her, which was not directed at her at all. “Yes,” he gritted out between his teeth.

Hermione’s eyes fluttered closed for a breath and then she shook her head on a shuddered exhale before meeting his gaze once more, hazel eyes sharp and intense. “I could see you about to lose control,” she said, taking another step towards him as she bit down on her lip, “and fucking hell, Draco... that’s making me feel out of control.”

He felt his eyes flash down at her, felt something stir in his lower abdomen.

“I... Gods, I don’t want you to hurt anyone... but...” Hermione moved into him, raised her hand and set it against his chest. Draco felt his muscles twitch under her gentle touch. “... something very unhinged inside of me *loves* it.”

Draco felt the breath leave his lungs at what she was saying, and the way she was looking at him. Like she wanted to fucking devour him.

“So, if you need to lose control—” Hermione whispered between them as he watched her intently press herself even closer to him, “—lose it with me... please.”

Draco felt his head shaking even as he felt his cock harden in his trousers. “You don’t know what you’re asking of me right now.”

She bit at her bottom lip again, and he watched the movement with a desperate hunger. Hermione released it and said softly, “yes, I do...”

Draco’s hand, a mind of its own, shot out and took her waist with a firm grip. Hermione sucked in a breath at the contact as he used his hold on her to pull their lower bodies firmly

together. “No... you don’t,” he ground out, “Granger, you were just... Gods, you don’t want to be doing this right now.”

Her fingers curled into a fist against his chest and she stared at him defiantly, heat in her eyes. “I know *exactly* what I want. I know what just happened. But when he accused me of playing a game with him, saying that I wanted him to touch me...” Draco’s body tensed rigidly as the words spilled from her mouth, “...all I could think was how I only want *you* to be touching me. How nothing and no one has ever felt like the way you touch me.”

Desperate.

That was the only word to describe how he suddenly felt.

His other hand rose with lightning speed to grasp at the side of her neck, his thumb sweeping around to cage in underneath her jaw as he tilted her head back. A breathy sigh escaped her, a noise that was almost his undoing.

Draco swallowed, his throat clicking with it.

He didn’t know how he was looking at her, but the way Hermione looked at him was intoxicating. It unraveled him. It set flames coursing across his skin until he burned with need. He felt a possessive need to claim her, even if a part of his mind told him that now was not the time for it.

Draco’s eye twitched and then he was pushing her backwards until she was against the wall, and he was pressing his hands firmer into her waist and neck. His fingers twitched as he tried to relax his grip against her warm flesh, not certain he succeeded even a little bit.

“Hermione,” he said her name like a plea, a promise, “I don’t have it in me to be gentle right now, and I don’t think you—”

Hermione’s sigh was almost a growl as she suddenly reached up and shoved at his shoulders. Draco’s hands left her immediately and he stepped back, his chest heaving, his body feeling cold with the absence of her.

“Stop treating me like I’m made of glass,” Hermione fumed, hazel eyes flashing dangerously at him, “I know exactly what I’m asking for, Draco—and I want it, I want *you*. Stop thinking I’m some naïve virgin who will only enjoy sex if I’m safely tucked up in a bed with perfect timing. The where and how doesn’t matter—it’s who I’m with. And I know I’m safe with you,” she continued gesturing at him with a frustrated wave of her hand, “the moment I made any indication I wanted you stop, you moved away from me.”

Draco didn’t move as she spoke, his eyes fixed on her, and he didn’t think he would be able to look away from her even if the world started to burn around them.

“So, either put your hands back on me... or we can leave this room and pretend this never happened. It’s your choice, Draco.”

He was transfixed, watching as Hermione took a step backward until she was leaning back against the wall and raising a brow at him questioningly. His chest rose and fell as they watched each other.

Draco considered himself a strong man.

A stronger man might have been able to stay sane amid what she offered him. But if saying no was sanity, Draco didn't want it.

He would gladly declare himself insane.

Draco spent every ounce of his remaining strength to move towards her with an assured slowness, stepping carefully back into her while keeping her gaze. Hermione watched him prowl at her, breathing heavily, her hands fiddling with the hem of her skirt near her thighs. When he stopped directly in front of her, Hermione's eyes were blown wide, her pupils dilated, cheeks flushed.

Draco blew out a rough breath, his body buzzing with a singular awareness of the towering heights with which he wanted this woman. When he raised a hand to brush at a curl that had fallen in front of her face, Hermione reached up and took his wrist, her grip tight.

"Draco," she breathed, fingers pressing even firmer into his skin, her other hand snaking out and closing around the belt around his waist, tugging him closer towards her, "you don't have to be so careful, please, *please*... lose control with me."

That was it.

The end of the tenuous measure of control he still held.

It snapped.

Draco crashed into her, grasping the sides of her face and taking her mouth with a hard kiss that had Hermione breathing in sharply through her nose, as though surprised he had snapped. As though she thought he would have protested against her request. As though he wouldn't want to fall into her for every moment until he pulled in his final breath.

The ferocity that he came for her had her head pushed back into the wall, his body moving into hers, his thigh quickly nudging between her thighs until he felt swallowed by her heat, until he couldn't possibly get any closer to her.

Her arms were around his shoulders, fingers pushing up into the hair on the back of his neck. The feel of her fingernails scraping against him, the hot warmth of her mouth, had Draco's sanity crumbling further.

Growling, he took her under her chin again and lifted her face until her eyes fluttered back open and she looked up to him. His thumb and finger pressed in at the sides of her jaw as he watched her hungrily.

"Open your mouth," Draco demanded gruffly.



He hardly waited for her lips to part before he descended back to her, his tongue pushing into her mouth and dragging across hers. Her moan was deep and lingering as he fucked her mouth with his tongue, still holding her face under her jaw, keeping her at the perfect angle to taste every inch of her.

Hermione's body writhed underneath his, her hips undulating against the thigh he had nestled between her legs. She felt so utterly perfect, rocking hard against him, seeking her own pleasure amid her breathy whines into his mouth.

His hand slid down the long expanse of her throat and stopped at the edge of her dress beneath her collarbones. Impatient and needy, Draco murmured a wandless spell against her lips and felt the material of her dress split apart.

Hermione seemed to barely register what he had done until he tugged away the cup of her bra and palming the naked flesh of her breast. She moaned and shook against him, her chest pushing forward into his touch as he kneaded her, thumb circling the hard nipple.

Her thighs clenched tightly around his leg. Her hands were suddenly at the buckle of his belt, fumbling to unclasp it, the metal clicking as she worked it open. Draco let her, his mind only half-focused on her touch as he played with her breast and slid his mouth hotly over hers.

He didn't even realize his trousers had been shoved down around his hips until Hermione had her hand around the head of his cock, pulling him out of his briefs.

They both moaned at the same time, the sounds pushed into each other's open mouths. Her hand squeezed him gently, but it was enough that Draco moved his hand between them and removed her fingers away from him. She whined a little, but when he reached underneath the skirt of her dress and shoved her underwear to the side, Hermione's head fell back, becoming pliant beneath his touch.

"Yes," she breathed, eyes shut, chest heaving before him, "please."

Her beseeching words had shivers coursing down his spine, his erection straining uncomfortably between them. His fingers slid into her folds, finding her soaked and achingly warm.

Draco tilted his head back to watch her face, clenching his jaw tightly as he moved his fingers around her entrance. The first swirl up and over her clit had her mouth dropping open, throat moving with a low moan that he felt all the way to his core.

He dropped his head to nip at the edge of her jaw, his tongue flicking out to taste her salty skin. "You want this, Hermione?" Draco growled against her cheek, "you want me to lose control with you, fuck you against this wall?"

To punctuate his question, he pressed two fingers inside of her, and felt her clench around him as she pulled in a shuddered gasp of air.

She seemed unable to speak as she jerked her chin in a quick nod while he pumped his fingers in and out of her.

“Yes?” Draco said, his voice thin and frayed at the edges, “you want me to take you right here? Fill you with my come?”

Her hips pushed forwards in time with his fingers as she whimpered and nodded. Her eyes opened and found his, and Draco saw the desperate, hazy need in them. “Yes,” she breathed, “Gods, yes... *please*.”

Draco withdrew his fingers from her warmth, only to take the edges of her knickers and tug roughly at them, ripping them away from her. Hermione cried out a little as the fabric cut into her skin before it tore away, but it morphed into a heady moan. He bunched her knickers into his fist and shoved them deep into his pocket before he took her under the backs of her thighs and lifted her, the skirt of her dress bunching around her waist.

He fitted her to himself easily, pressing her back into the wall, lining his cock up to her entrance. Draco might have wanted to relish the moment before he entered her, to truly appreciate the magnitude of what he was doing, and who he was doing it with. But his control was long gone, and the moment he nudged the tip of him into the wetness, he pushed his hips forwards and sunk right into her, using his grip around her thighs to pull her onto him at the same time so that she swallowed every inch he offered.

Their matching groans rivalled one another's with volume. Draco paused inside of her momentarily, reverently taking in the immense pleasure of the feel of her. Of being as close to her as was physically possible, that she would give him this gift. He had the sudden desire to press his head to her chest, to her sternum, so he could feel, *hear*, the beat of her heart. To be so completely, irrevocably close to her.

Hermione moved against him, just the slightest wriggle of her hips, and all thoughts fled his brain. Draco gripped her thighs in a way he was sure would leave bruises as he started to move within her, pulling out and then snapping back in quickly. He soaked in every breathy moan and desperate gasps for air from her as he thrust in and out of her.

Surprise lit within him as he realized how quickly he was coming apart, and he tried to slow himself down, tried to calm himself down somehow.

“More,” Hermione pushed out between gasps, “take me harder.”

Draco's face fell into a grimace as need pulsed through him at the command, the plea. His grip tightened around her thighs, angling her hips so he could sink himself into her deeper, rutting faster, desperate to give her what she was asking for. The increased tempo of her tiny moans told him this was what she wanted.

But he could feel it coming for him. Could feel it shooting through his abdomen, tightening in his balls, and pulsing at the tip of his cock. He was going to explode within another few breaths at this pace.

Draco dropped his head into the crook of her neck and groaned wildly.

“*Fuck*,” he gritted out between his teeth, his entire body straining to hold back his orgasm, his thighs burning with the need for his release.

The quiet, dark office was filled with their heavy panting and unadulterated moaning. The feel of her flesh beneath his palms, the hot press of her body and the tight grip of her cunt around him was incomparable to any other feeling. It was sharp and intense, and his pleasure shot towards him quicker than he thought possible as he frantically continued to fuck her into the wall.

Just as it barreled into him, he felt Hermione's fingernails bite into the skin of his neck as she threw her head back against the wall. She pulled in a loud, gasping breath and Draco felt it. Felt the orgasm ripple through her body, her walls fluttering agonizingly around him. The feel of her, the noises she made, the sight of her—the whole of it had Draco's release tearing through him with a force that made him cry out roughly, his thrusts becoming shallow and stuttered as they rode out their shared pleasure together.

His orgasm was drawn out as he filled her, so by the time he was coming back from the edge of the cliff, Draco realized his head had burrowed into her neck as he breathed heavily into her damp skin. They stayed that way for a while, their bodies still and pressed into each other, the only movements from their pulsing chests as they regained control of their breathing.

Draco let out a long, slow exhale before he placed a soft kiss to the side of her neck before he straightened and regarded her questioningly.

Hermione's head tilted backwards, leaning against the wall as she looked back at him. A quiet, sated smile was on her face as she brought her palm to his cheek and guided him towards her for a long, slow kiss.

Draco was relieved as he let her control the pace of this kiss, relishing in the measured movement and the soft, playful shift of her tongue against his. He had been terrified that he might find regret on her face when he had emerged.

But she held him to her as desperately as he wanted to hold her, kissing him in a way that conveyed a thousand more emotions than words ever could.

He sighed contentedly against her lips, and she hummed back in response, before she leaned away. They looked at each other, and he held her gaze as he carefully lifted her away from him and slid out of her. She let out a rough breath and then he was setting her back on her feet, her skirt drifting back down around her thighs.

Draco lifted a hand up to her face and brushed a thumb across the arch of her cheekbone. He shook his head as he considered the witch before him, and the things she was making him feel.

"I don't like to lose control, Hermione," he said, voice still frayed, "but I fear I have no choice when it comes to you."

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It was late in the evening when Hermione sat dazedly in the corner of Halpert's office, brain filtering through the whirlwind of the days' events.

She hadn't seen Draco for several hours, not since they had parted ways shortly after leaving the secluded office where Hermione had experienced the most mind-blowing sex of her entire life. And what Draco had said to her afterwards... it made her heart tumble over and over pathetically as she thought of his strangled confession.

She itched to be back in his presence, but after returning to the room full of Cursebreakers and Aurors, it was soon recommended that they be separated while they commence some testing.

Because during their tryst... well, they had apparently blinded the lot of them, with the way the blade had "*shone with the power of the sun*". Those were Halpert's words, spoken with both humor and a severe seriousness.

So, Draco had sent her a lingering look, before he disappeared to another section of the Ministry to theorize and research, while Hermione remained in Halpert's office to assist with some practical elements.

So far, Hermione had watched Halpert and his colleagues try several incantations to attempt to dispel the darkness that continued to wend its way around the golden flow of the infinity. It proved to be as immovable as the original magic appeared to be. She had briefly contributed when they made a concoction of hers and Draco's blood to dip the blade into, which seemed to have done absolutely nothing.

It was after this attempt that Hermione had gasped out loud, realizing something, and informed Halpert that her cut had not reopened that day so far, despite the numerous times she and Draco had touched one another. Not long after this revelation, Halpert returned from speaking with Draco, to tell Hermione that Draco had intentionally cut himself with the blade the day before.

She had been flabbergasted that he would have done that, especially without telling anyone, but no one could decipher what it meant that neither of their wounds had reopened.

Hermione had also told Halpert what she had discovered down in the archives—that the blade had been on a shelf grouped with items that she thought had come from Hogwarts castle, possibly from the day of the last battle of the war. That information had Halpert and his colleagues descending into a long, thoughtful discussion about the implications, but continued to glean no real answers of how that was impacting Hermione.

By the end of the day, Hermione was exhausted, and all she wanted to do was curl up somewhere warm and comfortable and drift off into oblivion.

"Halpert?" Hermione finally said when she felt she could barely keep her eyes open, "I might head home... could you tell Draco for me?"

Halpert glanced up from his intense scrutiny of a scroll on the desk before him. "Hm? Oh, yes sure—you must be tired. Go on home, but... come back first thing in the morning, yes? I have something here I think might help us understand the blades origins."

Hermione stood from the desk and moved over to him, glancing down at the scroll. “Oh? What is it?”

Halpert pointed to a series of drawings, where Hermione saw a sketch of a pensieve, and underneath it was an opulent looking necklace. She frowned at the pictures, not understanding.

“This is very old magic, and it hasn’t been used for possibly hundreds of years—but I think we can extract essence from a magical object to place into a pensieve and possibly see images of where it’s come from.”

Hermione’s frown only deepened. “A pensieve is a way to watch memories of a living, breathing person. How can that work for something that can’t hold memory?”

“Ah, but see—a magical object can have memories imbued into it. It may not have a brain, but the magical currents can be imprinted with specific instances of its past, likely only things of significance to its current standing.”

Hermione hummed as she nodded, eyes narrowing as she read the sloping, faded text beneath the pensieve, an incantation of some sort.

“Fascinating,” she said quietly, “and certainly worth a shot.”

Halpert nodded. “I think so, too,” he said, and there was a tiredness behind his voice.

Hermione glanced at him. “Are you going to head home soon, too? I know how hard you’ve been working on this. You need a break.”

Halpert set the scroll down and sighed, leaning back into his chair. “I’m alright, Hermione. There’s a few more things I want to research about this before I head home.”

Hermione frowned at him. “It can wait till morning,” she insisted, noting the darker circles underneath his eyes, “I’m feeling fine, and I haven’t even had any more issues with light-headedness or coughing today, so... I don’t know. Perhaps Draco cutting himself helped in some way?”

Halpert met her eyes, lips thinning while he nodded slowly, though something on his face told Hermione he didn’t quite believe that.

She left with a final goodbye and an insistence that he head home soon. On her way down the empty corridor, Hermione sent a patronus towards Theo, letting him know she was on her way back to the flat, as was her agreement with Harry. In another few minutes, Hermione was in the atrium and headed for the fireplaces lined against the wall ahead of her, pondering what would happen at midnight that evening.

*“Hermione Granger!”*

She paused at the sound of her name, her foot stalling in front of her on the black tiles of the atrium as unease trickled down her spine. Hermione whirled around, eyes searching around the cavernous, empty room for the source.

A stilted breath ripped from her as she realized she was alone, even though the voice had said her name as though they were standing right next to her.

Hermione blinked, her heart suddenly racing as the palm of her left hand throbbed. She looked down to it, almost expecting to see the cut reopen, but her skin remained unblemished, even as she felt it pulse with discomfort again.

*“Here, on your land!”*

Hermione cried out as the voice ripped through her like it was shouted in her ear, and she turned again, back towards the fireplaces, seeking out the source.

*“The mudblood—”*

*“Stop it,”* hissed another voice, and Hermione jumped, eyes wide as she turned in a full circle, her blood pounding through her veins with a relentless force.

“Who’s there?” Hermione said aloud, demanding the ghostly voices materialize so she could make sense of what was happening.

No one answered her, and she couldn’t be certain that the bodiless voices hadn’t spoken again, because in the next moment a feverish chill spread across her skin and a dizziness enveloped her within the space of her next breath. Hermione needed help, she needed... Draco. She started to remove her wand from the pocket of her dress, but the moment she had it out, her grip slackened, and she heard the vine wood clatter to the tiles before her vision went black. Her head lost all sense of direction, and her body toppled painfully to the hard flooring. She was on the ground, her body trembling and weak, trying to push herself up unsuccessfully, when a round of coughing burst from her.

The wracking coughs were relentless, a burning in her throat that demanded reprieve.

Then she was retching, and something dribbled down her chin.

Then she was vomiting, and the metallic taste told her it was blood expelling from her body.

Then there was darkness, edging into every inch of her being.

Then there was nothing.

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to any and all readers - I'm a day early on this update, but I'll be away tomorrow so won't have the chance to post and I'd rather be early than late! Hope you all enjoy, she's a long chapter, but hopefully an enjoyable one - even as things turn a bit darker as we go along!

Next update anticipated Tuesday 17/09 around 4-5pm (NZST)

xx

Forawhile

# A PERFECT MORNING FOR DISCOVERY - WAIT, WHAT?

## Chapter Notes

Amazing Beta credit to: MyPrivateInsanity

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

A week of recurrent terrible sleep had done quite a number on Draco.

He had never fallen asleep in his office before, and yet here he was. Slumped over his desk, Draco lay with his head cradled on his folded arms, his torso obscuring a sprawled pile of documents denoting hundreds of years' worth of text on ancient ceremonial magic.

He had told himself, two hours before, that he was simply going to rest his eyes, which had begun to itch and burn from not sleeping at all the night previous.

So when a bright light flashed in front of his eyes and Draco jerked awake, leaping from his seat, wand in hand, he had a decidedly sore and stiff neck. Not to mention a little disorientation.

He groaned from the sudden awakening, breathing raggedly as he peered into the spaces of his office. It should have been dark at this time of night, but the darkness was heavily punctured by the small fox patronus leaping about in front of him.

Draco lowered his wand as the patronus spoke to him with Theo's voice.

*"Get to the atrium now, it's Hermione."*

He allowed himself the space of a single heartbeat to let the words sink into his mind, and to expel several thoughts of what might have happened alongside his growing sense of dread.

Then he was moving, his hawthorn wand still clutched tightly in his fist as he sprinted down the hallway.

Draco felt numb as he flew through the Ministry, shutting off his brain to stop himself from trying to interpret the panic-stricken voice of Theo and what that could mean for Hermione. If he thought on it, what that panic might mean, he might just lose it.

The elevator finally reached the atrium, and Draco pushed himself through the doors as they were still opening, his feet pounding across the dark tiled flooring. It was late at night, the torches running low.

Unusually for that time of night, a group of people stood just ahead of him. Draco swallowed as he ran across the atrium floor until he reached the small crowd. He was all elbows and



rough shoves. Draco skidded to a halt as he stepped through them. The light from multiple wand tips illuminated a dark shape on the floor, motionless, pale... and surrounded by a pool of something dark and sticky. It shone grotesquely in the wandlight.

Hermione lay there, eyes shut, hair splayed around her and stuck to the blood she lay in.

Draco couldn't move. His feet were rooted to the spot as he took her in, ice freezing in his veins. He choked on an attempt to speak, to say something, perhaps her name.

Potter was next to her, on his knees. There was a disruption in the pool of blood next to him, like he had skidded through it rushing to get close to her, creating a strange pattern across the tiles. Draco's eyes moved to the pattern, his breath coming out of his lungs in quick bursts.

People were speaking. Loudly. Someone else was on Hermione's other side, running their wand tip over her and muttering something. Draco could only stand and breathe and blink.

His brain was stalling, doing something strange that he didn't understand. It was refusing to fully comprehend what was right in front of him.

A flurry of movement happened around him; people were shouting and moving with an urgency that spoke of something serious.

*Of course it was serious, his brain demanded he understand, Hermione is lying on the ground, covered in blood. She isn't moving.*

Yet Draco couldn't move, think, *feel*...

Couldn't, or perhaps, didn't want to.

"Malfoy!" a voice pushed through into his brain and his eyes finally swung away from the smears of red on the ground to find a pair of green eyes directly in front of him. Hands gripped at his arms, and he was being shaken.

He finally registered that it was Potter in front of him, and that he had a red streak across his cheek and on the edge of his glasses. Potter's hands, covered in the same sticky, red blood, were staining the white shirt Draco wore. Staining it with Hermione's blood.

*Hermione.*

He gasped in a startled breath, sensation returning to him.

*Hermione!*

His hands came up and took Potter's elbows with a vise-like grip. "Potter! What the fuck happened?"

Potter was visibly trembling, blood across his face. The sight sent Draco's brain reeling, his stomach swirling with the need to be sick. He shook his head. "I don't know, she's alive, Malfoy... but in bad shape. No wounds, but she's lost a lot of blood."

Draco exhaled a strained breath; using his grip on Potter's arms, he shoved him to the side. He was greeted with the painful sight of Hermione being lifted with magic, her arms and legs dangling lifelessly, her body arching back at an unnatural angle as the Auror hovered her. Blood covered one side of her face, and it dripped sickeningly from clumped strands of her hair.

"Hermione," Draco choked out, moving towards her, but someone grabbed at his arm, stopping him. He wheeled towards Potter.

"They're taking her straight to St. Mungo's, we can't delay her," Potter said, looking pale and wrecked. He let go of Draco again.

Draco turned back, seeing Hermione being moved towards the fireplaces, half of his heart going with her. His eyes flicked down to the shining pools of her blood. He swiveled back to Potter.

"What time is it?" Draco asked.

Potter furrowed his brow, like that was the most inane question Draco could have asked. "A little after 10pm."

Draco blew out a frustrated breath and then turned towards an empty floo grate, moving for it at a hurried pace.

"Oi," Potter growled, "where are you going?"

"I need to get something," Draco said unhelpfully, not wishing to pause to explain himself. Time was of the essence here. He stepped into the grate, speaking his address. Before he was whisked away, he turned and caught a final glimpse of Potter, still furious, with a worried Theo coming to stand next to him.

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Darkness.

A flash of a deranged smile, framed by tight, black curls that were a backdrop to a pale face in a mirror.

A sense of deep longing and a need to right a wrong.

An image spilling forth, of Hermione Granger standing in front of her, looking shaken and afraid. It was a pleasing sight.

A conversation, hurried and clipped, irritating her greatly. Boiling her blood. Setting her teeth on edge until she longed to hurt someone.

A gasp.

Hermione woke in a flash, like someone had doused her in icy water; she flew upwards in her haste to exit her subconscious mind.

She was sitting upright in a bed. Crisp and scratchy linens were underneath her, pale green walls all around. Hermione swallowed against a dry throat and squinted against the harsh lighting of the hospital room.

“Hermione,” came a voice next to her. She jerked, turning her head towards it, “you’re okay, you’re at St. Mungo’s.”

Her shoulders relaxed at once, seeing her best friend leaning out of his chair towards her with a relieved expression on his face.

A quick breath flew from her lungs. “Harry, what happened? Last thing I remember...”

Talking to Halpert. The atrium. A phantom voice...

Hermione shuddered as she remembered hearing that voice from someone who had not been there.

“You must have passed out in the atrium,” Harry said, sounding uncertain, a definitive crease between his eyebrows, like all he had done was frown for several hours. “You were covered in blood. We don’t really know what happened.”

Hermione placed a hand to her chest, assessing how she felt. Her body felt thankfully quite normal, though her head pounded with a headache behind her eyes and her mouth felt like she had ingested a bowlful of sand.

“Theo found you when you didn’t come home after you sent him your patronus,” Harry explained, taking Hermione’s hand away from her chest and gripping it firmly. “We were all so worried.”

Hermione smiled at him. “No need, I’m alright, where...” She looked around the room, half expecting someone else to be there, even though she knew it was only Harry and her. Something like disappointment sat heavily on her chest as she realized Draco wasn’t there, which was closely followed by a feeling of frustration. With herself. Because she and Draco were not *together*; they hadn’t made any promises, and yet something pinched sharply at her soul nonetheless.

Hermione sighed and met Harry’s knowing green eyes.

“He disappeared not long after we found you,” Harry said with a hint of irritation in his voice. “That was over an hour ago. I have no idea where he is.”

The door of her room opened, and Hermione’s head jerked towards it. She was both happy and sad to find Theo poking his head into the room.

She smiled at Theo, whose face blossomed into deep relief at finding Hermione awake. He bounded inside, closing the door again behind him before coming to take up Hermione’s other hand.

“Bleeding Salazar, ‘Mione—you have to stop scaring us like that,” Theo said.

Hermione gave a short laugh that held not a single ounce of real humor. “I’ll do my best. Though I have a feeling that if we don’t find a way to end this curse, that could be a very empty promise.”

The two boys grimaced.

“Halpert was just here,” Harry said, “he’s having a potioneer make a concoction for the pensieve. Apparently, they can extract some of the magical essence from the dagger to see some of its history. We’re hoping that will give us the answers we need to figure out what curse it is, and how to stop it.” Hermione swallowed, recalling the brief conversation with Halpert before she blacked out. “The potion takes twelve hours to brew.”

She opened her mouth to speak when the door opened once more. Her eyes flitted to it and her heart stopped in her chest as Draco moved through the open door. He was a bizarrely macabre sight, with his usual Ministry wardrobe of the same black trousers and white oxford shirt, a brown leather holster strapped across his chest. But his white oxford had bloodstains across both sleeves and a small smudge near his navel. Hermione took in a shuddering breath, realizing he was covered in *her* blood.

He stopped dead at the sight of her, their eyes locking on one another. His posture seemed stiff while simultaneously looking hunched over. Hermione had no idea how he managed that paradox, but he did. Draco’s silver eyes flashed as he took her in, hands clenching by his thighs as he visibly swallowed.

“Hi,” she said dumbly, supremely relieved to see him.

Draco cleared his throat. “Hey,” he responded, and gave her a pained smile. The smile dropped as his eyes moved over to Harry. “Potter, I need a word—urgently.”

Harry sighed next to her before he released Hermione’s hand and stood.

Draco sent her a small nod before he turned on his heel and strode back out the door without another word. Harry turned to Hermione, giving her a sad smile before he followed Draco, closing the door behind them both.

Hermione slumped back against the end of her hospital bed. She didn’t know what she had expected from Draco, but a ‘hey’ followed by a hasty exit hadn’t been on the list. Not after what had happened between them earlier.

“Ugh,” Hermione said, scrunching her face, “what a fucking day.”

Theo chuckled darkly next to her, squeezing her fingers in his. “What a fucking week, I imagine.”

Hermione turned her head to him and did laugh properly this time. “Yes, quite right.”

“He cares a lot, you know,” Theo said suddenly. Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. “Draco.” He clarified, “You might not want to hear this, but I’ll tell you anyway—when he saw you on the atrium floor... he kind of went into this catatonic state. He didn’t see me

there, and I was practically yelling at him. He only came to when Harry physically shook him.”

Hermione’s lips thinned, brows pulling low as she processed the information. Her heart thudded painfully at the thought of causing his or anyone’s distress.

“I know he cares,” Hermione finally managed to answer slowly, “sometimes he can be difficult to interpret, but I know he cares.”

“A lot,” Theo emphasized, “as a person whose known Draco for a long time... trust me when I tell you that he—”

The door opened once more, cutting Theo’s words off, and they both looked over to watch Harry and Draco re-enter the room. Harry was slightly red in the face, as if he had been yelling, while Draco’s face was perfectly unreadable.

They both came to stand on opposite sides of Hermione’s bed. Theo released her hand and stepped carefully out of the way, Draco taking his place next to her. She looked up at him uncertainly.

He cleared his throat awkwardly before he sat, the linens crunching under his weight. “We have only ten minutes until midnight,” Draco said, and Hermione sat up straight once more, having entirely forgotten about the possibility of the magic whipping her through time and space once more at the stroke of midnight.

Hermione let out a frustrated sigh. “Fantastic.”

Draco reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled something out. “I have something that might help,” he said, and then Harry let out a choked-sounding cough. Draco sent him a glare before settling his gaze back on Hermione.

Hermione frowned, looking over at Harry. He worked to school his expression, but his arms were folded tightly over his chest, and he looked on edge.

“Granger,” Draco said, pulling her focus back to him, “these are going to magically link us, so I can find you anywhere in an instant, no matter the wards or any kind of magical restriction.”

Hermione felt her brows raise high in surprise as she looked down to his open palm. Two golden bands sat side by side on his hand, winking and shining in the light of the room.

She swallowed as she looked at them and then back up to Draco, meeting his eyes. His face remained inscrutable, and Hermione longed for him to outwardly portray some kind of emotion.

“How is that possible? That kind of magic is very—”

“—Illegal, yes,” Draco said with a stiff nod, eyes flitting to Harry, “and Potter is quite unimpressed with this, but it’s the best way for me to find you no matter where you get taken at midnight, with no delay.”

Hermione glanced back to Harry, his jaw tight before returning her eyes down to the golden rings.

“How did you get them?”

Draco sighed through his nose. “They’re my parents’.” Hermione’s eyes snapped up to his, surprise coating her. “They created them during the war, wanting a way to always find one another no matter what. It takes a serious set of charms and other ancient magic to make them work to disregard wards and protection, but Lucius was...” he drifted off, thinking for a moment, “protective,” he finished, his eyes dropping away from her.

Hermione’s gaze flitted between the rings and Draco, but ultimately she saw no harm in the gesture. He wanted to be able to follow her, no matter where the magic took her. The thought relieved her greatly, seeing as she might very well end up back at the Manor in a few scant minutes. She shivered at the thought.

“All right,” Hermione said, and held her hand out for the ring.

Draco regarded her with a cool expression, but a muscle ticked along his jaw. He gave a stiff nod, his eyes flicking to Harry for a quick moment, and then he took one of the rings, and slid it onto a finger—her ring finger. Then he slid the companion one onto his own.

Hermione heard Harry grumble before he muttered something. She turned her head to frown at him, wondering why he was so against something that could help her bizarre situation, but Harry’s lips just moved almost soundlessly, his face flushed red, and then he was turning away, not meeting Hermione’s eyes at all.

Draco let out a rough breath, and then he looked up at the clock on the wall.

There were barely a few minutes left until midnight. He looked back to Hermione. “Your Healers have given you blood replenishing potions and checked you over again,” he explained, “they found nothing wrong with you, beyond a loss of blood. Do you feel alright?”

Hermione nodded. “Just a small headache, but otherwise I feel fine.”

Draco blinked for a moment, eyes flashing as though remembering something, before he shook his head to clear it. He then leaned forward and, despite their audience, pressed a brief kiss to her lips. It was so fast, Hermione barely had the chance to register that he had kissed her, and then he was leaning away again and speaking.

“You have clearance to leave, but from now on, you aren’t going anywhere alone—do you understand?” Draco’s silver eyes were menacing as he waited for an answer.

Hermione knew it was pointless to argue; besides, she felt too afraid to be anywhere alone after all that had happened over the past few days. She nodded her assent.

Every head in the room turned back to the clock, watching the final seconds ticking down towards midnight.

Draco’s hand took hers, tightening almost painfully against her fingers.

“You’ll be—” Harry was starting to say, just as the room and everything in it were pulled away from her.

Hermione’s reality shifted in a way she was now used to, her body flying through darkness, until...

With a soft hiss of expensive feeling sheets, Hermione landed on her back atop Draco’s bed. She lay for a brief moment, staring at the canopy of the bed, relief cascading over her body that she was somewhere familiar and comforting, and not in the dark cavernous Drawing Room that held only horror.

With a sharp cracking noise just as she pushed herself into a sitting position, Draco was standing next to the bed.

He looked at her, taking her in for a moment, before his eyes fell shut and he blew out a deep breath and sank onto the edge of the bed, facing away from her.

Hermione just sat and watched as his head fell into his hands, his shoulders hunching over. She could see his left hand from where she sat in the middle of the bed, the gold of the ring glinting in the low lamplight of Draco’s room. She pulled her eyes away from him to extend the fingers of her hand and look down at her own ring. On her ring finger. Like wedding bands. She swallowed, her vision blurring a little as she regarded it.

“Draco,” she said in a slightly strangled voice. He straightened and half turned towards her, not meeting her eyes. “Are these... were they your parents’ wedding rings?”

He sighed loudly through his nose before he turned his head and looked at her. “Yes. Lucius’ was taken from him upon his arrest. My mother has held on to them both since.”

With a sharp breath, Hermione looked back at the band and immediately reached to pull it from her finger, a feeling of horror racing through her. She couldn’t wear someone else’s wedding ring. It was so wrong.

Draco reached for her and clasped her hand before she could.

“No, Granger,” he said firmly, “I have no idea anymore where or when you’re going to be taken away. And with the curse ramping up and impacting your health, you need to be found as quickly as possible. This is the best way I can manage that.”

She stared at him incredulously. “These are *wedding* rings, Draco!”

He nodded and released her fingers but watched her carefully as though she would move to remove it once more. She didn’t, but she itched to.

“Yes, they are, and they’re going to help me protect you.” He stood from the bed and withdrew something from his pocket. A small vial, which he held out for her.

“Your Healer approved a dreamless sleep, so you can get some proper rest tonight,” Draco said, the vial offered to her between two fingers. Hermione reached for it and pulled it

towards her, but she stared down at it with a vacant expression. She didn't know what to think, or feel, or say.

Everything felt so... fucked.

Draco moved away from her, and she could hear him opening the drawers of his bureau. Hermione just kept her gaze on the small vial in her hands, ignoring the shine of gold on her finger. She fidgeted with the small glass bottle restlessly, her mind awash with a hundred memories and thoughts.

The edge of the bed sank down again as Draco took a seat once more. He held something else out for her. She finally looked up to find him offering her a shirt.

Hermione looked down to the pale hospital gown and cringed. Right. She would need to get changed. Sighing, she accepted the dark-blue shirt made of a rich, soft material.

"Thank you," she said quietly before shuffling to the side of the bed and standing. Within a few minutes, Hermione was dressed in Draco's shirt and wriggling under the covers of his bed and sinking her head into a pillow. She was exhausted, thoroughly. Before the lights were even off, she felt her eyes starting to droop low, her body sinking into the warmth and softness of his bed. His scent was everywhere and it calmed her racing heart.

A gentle hand nudged her shoulder, and Hermione's eyes opened. She hadn't even realized she had closed them.

"The potion, love," Draco murmured quietly, and he held the dreamless sleep in front of her once more.

"Right," she mumbled, and raised herself up sluggishly onto one elbow. She didn't need to reach for it. Draco unstopped it and held it to her lips. Hermione's eyes lifted to meet his as she swallowed the contents. His look was soft, yet sharp.

Always such a paradox.

Hermione's head fell back to the pillow and her eyes closed at once. The lights suddenly winked out and she could hear Draco climbing into the bed next to her.

"Draco," she whispered with the last vestiges of her energy.

"Yes?" he answered quietly.

She took a while to answer. Her exhaustion seemed to stick her jaw together, her brain and mouth not cooperating with one another.

She finally spoke. Her words sounded jumbled even to her own tired ears, and she wasn't certain she'd spoken aloud. "Sometimes I wish you would look how you feel, and that you would say what you mean. You can be so confusing."

When the silence stretched out before her, Hermione was certain she hadn't actually said the words. She fell into sleep quickly, warmth enveloping her.



Right before oblivion took her, she felt a soft brush against her cheek before she heard his quiet mumble, "I'll try to be better, Hermione."

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Sunday morning dawned with brilliant hues of pinks and oranges. The tapestry of the sky beyond Draco's bedroom window slowly became a clear blue. His eyes flicked between the slowly rising sun and the sleeping witch next to him.

Despite his fatigue, he had barely managed to rest. Even with Hermione safe and sleeping peacefully next to him, and the security of the rings firmly around both of their fingers, he was still on edge, still waiting for the next horrific disaster to ensue. His nerve endings felt frayed beyond repair with constant unease, making sleep nearly impossible.

Hermione had barely stirred for several hours; her long, slow breaths told Draco that the dreamless sleep potion was working, and no nightmares were disturbing her.

He wanted to pull her into his arms, hold her close to his body, but he didn't want to disturb her peaceful sleep. She needed the rest.

It was past 9am before Hermione stirred, and Draco watched with rapt attention as her lips gently parted on a soft sigh before her eyes flickered open. He was the first thing she saw in front of her, and it was a deep fascination that warmed every facet of his being to see her lips shift into a sleepy, soft smile, the hazel in her eyes twinkling in the morning light. Hermione looked so very pleased to be waking up beside him, like she could do it every morning for the rest of their lives.

Draco couldn't lie to himself. That sounded fucking fantastic.

"Morning," she said in a scratchy voice.

"Morning, Granger," Draco said, reaching forward to nudge a curl away from her cheek, tucking it away, "how did you sleep?"

Another soft sigh escaped her. "Really good," she said happily, "I haven't slept that well for a while."

Draco smiled, enjoying her contentment. "Would you like to shower? Theo brought you some clothes earlier this morning."

She groaned happily. "I'd love to," she said, rolling onto her back and stretching her arms over her head. Draco watched the material of his shirt that she wore pull taut against her movements. When she relaxed once more, her head turned back towards him, a devilish smile on her face. "Would you like to join me?"

Draco paused. The small smile he'd had fell away from his lips at her suggestion.

An image, vivid and powerful, flashed through his mind. Hermione, naked and wet in his shower. Draco, pressing his equally naked and wet body against hers, his hands sliding over delicious, slippery skin.

He cleared his throat and tried very hard to clear his mind.

“I... that would be—but, uh... Halpert owled in some papers this morning...” Draco rambled as he sat up in the bed, and then seethed at himself for rambling. He was not a rambler, for pity’s sake. “That is to say, I’m going to check over his work about the pensieve while you shower, because we’ll be needed in the Ministry shortly. The potion should be brewed and ready, so we can’t delay.”

That was better. Draco silently congratulated himself on not being a complete buffoon in front of this woman as he pushed himself to stand.

“Right, but,” Hermione said from behind him, and the suggestive lilt in her voice had his head turning back to her. She knelt on his bed on top of the covers, her bare legs visible, the edges of his shirt brushing against her thighs. “I’m sure we have a few minutes, don’t we?”

She was going to undo him. Draco just knew it.

His jaw flexed as he leaned over the bed, pressing his hands into the soft covers as he held her heated gaze. “Granger, as much as I would love to lose myself in you right now, I would very much like to save your life first. So, I’m going to need my blood up here.” Draco tapped against his temple and gave the disappointed twist of her lips a small smirk before he pushed away from the bed and strode resolutely over to his desk.

She didn’t argue with him, though the small huff from behind him told Draco she was frustrated as she moved away from the bed and towards the shower.

Hermione was dressed and ready within fifteen minutes. In that time, Draco had glanced over the faded documents that Halpert had sent over. It was an interesting concept, that a magical signature of an object could be extracted and placed into a pensieve in order for the viewer to see snippets of its history. He had never heard of such a thing before.

As she came to stand next to him, her hand brushed over his arm as she pressed into his side and looked down at the papers.

She pressed so close into him that he could feel the wand in her pocket against him. Draco turned his head and looked down at her. Hermione had wrangled her head of curls back into a tight braid, and was wearing the clothes Theo had sent through the floo, a comfortable set of jeans and a red sweater.

“Is that your wand, or are you happy to see me?” Draco said, grinning stupidly down at her with how cozy and warm she looked next to him.

Hermione wrinkled her nose and glanced up at him, a hint of a smile on her face. “Hm, not your best, Draco.”

Draco laughed as he shrugged. He moved to gather the papers he had sprawled across his desk and fitted them together. “Yes, well, can’t be in fine form at every moment, can I?”

“You usually are,” she said, her hand shifting to sit in the middle of his lower back, “I’ve never known you to be off form, ever. Especially not with me.”

He turned towards her then, and they stood facing one another. “Are you saying you miss our usual snark battles, Granger?”

Hermione pressed her lips together in a thin smirk, staring up at him. “Perhaps. Despite myself, I would look forward to trading insults with you. It was... fun. And you were the only person I’d ever met who could match words and pace with me.”

Delighted, but trying hard not to reveal it, Draco reached forward to tug on a stubborn curl that had escaped her braid. “Well, I’m sure that’s only because you tend to spend your time with people who couldn’t hope to reach your level of wit. Don’t get me started on Potter—the closest he ever came to a brainstorm was a light drizzle.”

Hermione’s mouth popped open, and then a startled laugh escaped her. “Don’t say that about Harry!” she admonished, despite the grin tugging at her lips, “He’s your superior.”

“In title, yes... but, intellectually?” Draco trailed off and tutted, shaking his head.

Hermione placed a hand against his chest, her fingers brushing over the strap of the holster near his shoulder. He suppressed a shiver at her touch.

“Harry has many talents,” Hermione said as she bit at her bottom lip, eyes on her fingers as she brushed across the leather on his chest, “applying himself to theory has never been a strong suit, however.”

Draco scoffed. “Don’t get me started on the number of times I’ve practically had to explain things to him with fucking finger puppets and crayons.”

Something wicked glinted in her eyes. “Does it bother you that much? To have an inferior ranking to *The Boy Who Lived*?”

He raised an eyebrow at her, his thumb brushing reverently against the arch of her cheekbone. “Using those titles again, are we? Alright *Golden Girl*, let me explain how little Ministry rankings mean to me—hang on, I’ll wrangle some crayons so I can explain it clearly to you.”

Another huffed laugh and her eyes lifted to meet his, the hazel in them sparkling with joy. And Draco knew her joy had nothing to do with him belittling her best friend, which he did not entirely mean, but everything to do with trading banter. Like things were normal. Like the curse had never happened, and they were just two people, enjoying trading words in the way they had been doing for years.

He had missed this, too, with the seriousness that had plagued them recently.

Her smirk deepened as they pressed slightly closer to one another. “I suddenly understand deeply why everyone always changes the subject whenever you come up.”

“Most people can’t handle my brilliance, such a shame. For them.”

Hermione looked at him through her lashes, heat flashing in her eyes. He could see her brain whirring for a response.

*Go on, love*, Draco thought eagerly, *eviscerate me*.

Evisceration had always been their love language.

She pushed up onto her toes, bringing their mouths closer together. “Mmm,” she hummed, the sound making its way all throughout his body, “has that wit of yours followed you around your whole life?”

Draco tilted his head at her, not understanding entirely what she was saying. He opened his mouth to respond, but she pressed even closer until her lips brushed against his softly, rendering him speechless.

Hermione pressed the lightest of kisses against his mouth before she whispered, “what a shame you were faster than it today, you’ve definitely lost your touch.”

Draco breathed a disbelieving laugh against her lips before she smirked and pulled away from him.

He didn’t let her get far.

Taking her hand before she had taken a step away, Draco pulled her back towards him with a fast motion that had her stumbling into his body. He barely let her expel her startled breath before he brought their mouths together in a hard, hot kiss.

Hermione melted into him, and she felt her grip at both sides of his holster, pulling him into her eagerly as her mouth opened for him. Draco couldn’t have held in the groan at the feel of her soft lips, firm against him. Her taste, the feel of her, the small sounds she made. All of it was exquisite.

He groaned again as he pulled her face away from him, using every ounce of his self-control.

Draco breathed roughly as he regarded her. Her cheeks were flushed, lips parted and eyes fluttering open before him. The visual of her demanded he close the distance between them and continue to ravage her.

But there were more important things they had to do.

Swallowing, he removed his hands from her and stepped away. Hermione took a quick step forward, stumbling with the loss of him holding her.

“Halpert will be eager to test the potion,” Draco said, working to keep his voice natural, “we should get going.”

He turned back to his desk and took up the papers once more, vowing that the minute this curse was over with and Hermione was safe, he would have her back here in his bedroom, and they would not leave for days.

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Hermione stood next to Draco in a small, dark room, a shimmering pensieve sat before them on a waist-level podium.

Halpert, Harry and three other Aurors stood in the room with them, the silver shimmer creating undulating patterns across each of their faces.

Halpert had finished explaining that this would work like a normal pensieve experience to Harry and another Auror, who would be testing the potion first.

Harry had nodded his understanding, and Hermione took in a deep breath and held it as Halpert moved to the pensieve and tipped a small amount of the potion into it.

The silver writhed with the potion contents for a moment, and then it turned to a bright, brilliant gold color.

Harry and the Auror strode to the edge of the pensieve and grasped at the sides of it. Harry raised his eyes and met Hermione's, giving her a small, reassuring smile, before he leaned forward and dipped his head into it, the other Auror doing the same.

Hermione automatically reached for Draco's arm, winding her own around it to pull him close. He let her.

They waited for barely a few breaths, and then both men were straightening once more, coming out of the pensieve. Much too soon, Hermione was sure. The pensieve returned to its usual silvery glow, the gold disappearing all at once.

"What happened?" Halpert asked curiously.

Harry was frowning. "Nothing, it was dark... blank. There was nothing there."

Hermione swallowed her disappointment, and she felt Draco tense next to her.

Halpert was inspecting the potion with a puzzled expression, and he was muttering something to himself that she couldn't hear. He turned and looked at Hermione, a look of deep thought on his face.

"Hermione," he said, and held out the potion bottle to her, "would you like to try?"

Hermione raised her brows, but stepped forward automatically, intrigue settling into her bones. She had only taken one step when Draco's arm tightened around hers and forced her to stop.

"This is experimental, Halpert," Draco said firmly, "she won't be testing this."

Halpert looked between them, the same curious expression on his face. "Of course, but I do wonder if the blade's connection to Hermione might be the key here."

Hermione turned to face Draco. His menacing eyes were fixed on Halpert, jaw set.

“Draco,” Hermione said, “I can do this.”

Draco didn’t look down to her, he just glared at Halpert and flexed the muscles in his jaw.

She heard Harry sigh behind her. “Why don’t you go with her, Malfoy?”

Draco set his deadly gaze on Harry before he finally looked down to Hermione. He softened imperceptibly, but she saw it. She nodded encouragingly at him.

“Fine,” he relented, and then they were both stepping toward the pensieve. Hermione took the potion bottle from Halpert, tipped the same amount she saw Halpert use into the basin, and handed it back. The golden glow returned, shining up at her, beckoning.

Hermione didn’t look at anyone, didn’t even check to see if Draco was ready to join her. She was pulled towards the pensieve inexplicably, and then she was dipping her head into it.

A falling sensation.

A gasp, eyes tight shut.

Hermione was standing suddenly, and her eyes flew back open.

There was darkness all around, beneath her feet and above her head. The black swallowed her. It was everywhere. She breathed roughly, almost starting to panic, until she realized Draco had appeared next to her, quickly reaching out and grasping at her hand. They both looked around. Nothing had direction and it was disorienting and frightening. Only Draco’s grip on her hand kept her grounded, kept her knees from buckling from the lack of stimulation around them.

They both turned, peering over their shoulders, but she saw nothing, only endless black.

“Draco,” she whispered, uncertain why she felt keeping quiet was necessary. “Should we—”

It was the moment she spoke that something flickered to her right. She whipped her head towards the movement as a wall suddenly materialized there. Hermione jumped slightly at the appearance of the wall, which spanned endlessly left and right and went up as far as her eye could see. It loomed, almost menacingly.

“Look,” Draco said, equally as quietly as she had been. His free hand pointed to something against the wall.

Hermione squinted at it, and they both moved slowly closer to the wall. As they approached, it looked to be a small piece of parchment, stuck to the wall by something.

It wasn’t until they were only a few steps away, that Hermione recognized what secured the parchment to the wall. It was the Malfoy blade, the tip embedded into the wall, holding the paper to the spot.

“It’s—”

“Yes,” Draco said, voice gruff and they both pressed forwards to inspect it further, “there’s something...”

Hermione tilted her head, having seen the writing on the parchment at the same time that Draco had. Her eyes flew open as she read the scrawling words.

“What...” she said incredulously as she read the words over and over.

*Destroy me.*

“What do you suppose that means?” Hermione asked, turning her gaze towards Draco, who was looking at the words with the same perplexed expression she figured was on her face.

His lips parted to speak, but something jerked around her navel. Hermione let out a bewildered squeak as she lost her footing, stumbling away from the wall and falling roughly. She had let go of Draco’s hand somewhere in the fall.

She was on the ground, blinking dazedly at a sudden outpour of light around them.

Hermione glanced upward as she sat up on the floor. She could see Draco shaking his head next to her as he also sat up, thoroughly dazed from the fall.

“Granger... you alright?” he asked, looking over to her.

She nodded as she looked around them. They were in a small room, a wooden floor beneath them. There were shelves lining every wall, covered in various sizes of jars and containers. The room was so busy and cluttered that Hermione found her eyes darting everywhere, uncertain what to take in.

A movement behind her had Hermione shifting around to find a man seated at a desk there. He was hunched over the table, clearly focusing intently on his task.

They both stood and moved gingerly over to the man. A wizard, Hermione realized, seeing his dark wood wand next to his elbow as both of hands worked on...

“The blade,” Hermione said, seeing the wizard polishing at the glowing emerald on the hilt. It was missing the ouroboros, and it was then that she understood. “He’s making it. This is the origin of it becoming a Malfoy weapon.”

Draco nodded next to her as he tapped at a sheet of paper on the desk. Hermione looked at what he pointed at. A sketch of the blade.

She started to move towards it, to see if the small writing around the edges of the drawing would tell her anything important, but—

The floor shifted beneath their feet once more, and Draco quickly grabbed at Hermione, taking her in his arms as their surroundings shifted violently.

The ground stabilized, and she looked past Draco’s arm to take in the new surroundings. A gasp left her lips as she realized they stood in the center of the Drawing room. Rows upon

rows of chairs were on either side of them, filled with witches and wizards in old-fashioned robes and suits.

Hermione turned in Draco's arms, and peered up to the end of the room, seeing a small dais set there. A couple stood atop, a bride and groom, and they were grinning wildly at each other.

Draco took her hand again and they moved quickly up the aisle, just as the couple were reaching for the Malfoy blade before facing each other once more.

Murmured words were followed by a thin cut on the inside of each palm. Hermione took in the groom's appearance. If the dazzling blond hair was any indication, this was one of Draco's ancestors.

Their cut hands were clasped together as the Minister waved his wand over them. A rope of magical light burst forth and wound around their hands.

Hermione watched the blade glow brightly from where it had been placed on a small podium, before a box suddenly appeared where it had lain— the very same box that Hermione had found it in when she had first seen it. The blade was now safely ensconced inside the box, magically hidden away.

They were announced as husband and wife, and they fell into each other, embracing in a passionate kiss.

Hermione swallowed and was about to look up at Draco, to see his reaction, when the scene shifted again.

She nearly lost her footing again, but Draco was quick, holding her steadily as their world shook roughly around them.

"Ugh," Hermione said when things righted around them. She placed a hand to her stomach, feeling ill all of a sudden, "Gods, I might be sick."

Draco's hand smoothed up her back gently, but then stilled quickly, and she heard his sharp breath, felt his fingers spasm against her spine. Hermione's head shot up, a feeling of unease gripping her quickly. They seemed to be in a bedroom.

Hermione looked around, but saw nothing denoting whose bedroom it was, and why Draco was stiff and still next to her.

"This is the house my mother grew up in," Draco said through his teeth, his eyes darting around uncertainly.

The door suddenly opened, and Hermione's body froze to the spot when she saw Bellatrix entering the room with a flourish and a piercing laugh. Narcissa entered behind her with a soft sigh.

Where Bellatrix was all dark edges and large, gratuitous movements, Narcissa was more refined and delicate, wearing subtle colored robes.



Draco pulled Hermione into his chest as they both turned slowly to watch the women move deeper into the bedroom. They looked much younger than Hermione remembered, perhaps in their twenties, or even younger.

Bellatrix flung herself on the edge of the bed. A familiar box was clutched in Narcissa's hands. She laid it delicately on the edge of the bed before primly taking her own seat.

"His mother will insist," Narcissa was saying, fingering the edges of the box with a frown on her face.

Bellatrix shrugged, clearly unfazed by her sister's melancholy. "His mother is a twit. I'm sure you can argue against it."

"If she knew the Blacks were against the blood magic, she may not bless our union," Narcissa said, and her usual calm voice became high-pitched, nearly choking on the last word as though the thought brought her a terrible sadness.

Bellatrix just scoffed. "No great loss."

Narcissa sent her sister a look of loathing. "I love him, Bella."

Bellatrix stood and took a step away, so that her eye roll was not seen by Narcissa. When she turned back, there was a manic grin on her face.

"No matter, dear sister," Bellatrix said, and snatched up the box, "I'll get rid of it. They cannot use what they cannot find."

Narcissa's eyes widened as she also stood from the bed. "That's a Malfoy family heirloom, Bella. They've had it for hundreds of years and used it in their marriage ceremonies for generations. We can't just—"

"Hush, Cissa," Bellatrix growled, cradling the box under one arm, and heading for the door, "you either let me get rid of this monstrosity, or let the family ruin your precious union with the Malfoy. Your choice."

Hermione saw Narcissa hesitate for one more moment, but when she said nothing, Bellatrix laughed wickedly again before she left her sister alone in her room, taking the blade with her. The moment she was alone, Narcissa's eyes filled with tears, and they began to silently course down her cheeks, just as the ground shuddered beneath their feet.

Hermione clutched at Draco until things became clear around them.

"Fucks sake," Draco growled from next to her, and then he was turning Hermione into him and grabbing at the sides of her face before she could take in their new surroundings. His silver eyes were filled with a tortured look, his mouth a thin line. The look frightened her. "Don't look," he urged, his fingers pressing into her face.

"Wh-why—"

"Just trust me," he ground out through his teeth, "just... just look at me, Hermione."

Suddenly, a piercing cry met her ears. And it was a familiar cry, a sound so intimate to Hermione that her heart broke inside of her chest at the sound of it. She knew exactly where she was, and who was screaming. A sob broke free from deep within her, and she kept her eyes latched onto Draco's. A darkness had crept into his eyes as he kept his gaze glued to hers unwaveringly, but his hands trembled, his lip twitching as the screams crescendoed around them. Draco's hands shifted to press against her ears, but there was no blocking those screams.

*Her screams.*

They filled the room—and took up every inch of her brain.

They were back in the Drawing Room once more, where Bellatrix was pressing a teenage Hermione into the floor while slicing through her flesh with... a blade.

Hermione sucked in a breath of realization.

“Draco,” she whispered, “is she using the Malfoy blade to cut me?”

Hermione couldn't hear herself speaking, but from the way his eyes widened, she knew that Draco could hear her. For the first time since he had turned her to face him, his eyes left hers. Something flickered across his face as he turned his head slightly to take in the scene, pain lancing in his eyes, his mouth peeling into a grimace.

He wrenched his eyes away from the younger version of Hermione writhing on the ground, a grating sound of agony leaving his throat as he looked back to her. Anger had replaced some of the hurt on his face. He nodded once, confirming Hermione's suspicions.

The ground trembled beneath them again. This time, Draco was not as steady on his feet as he had been previously, and they both stumbled to the side, nearly losing their balance.

They barely managed to remain upright as chaos erupted around them amid a new scene.

Hermione looked around, a million feelings rioting through her. Disbelief. Fear. Shock. Pain.

They were in the courtyard at Hogwarts Castle, a battle raging around them. Hermione let out a whimper as she twisted in every direction, seeing Death Eaters, Aurors, Order members, and students racing around the cobbled area. Flashes of spells erupted in every direction. Shouts and cries. Plumes of dust erupting as a section of the castle took a blow, rubble tumbling down. Bodies falling to the ground, taking their last breaths. Screams so guttural it was clear that they had just seen something so soul crushing that it was the only sound their bodies were capable of making.

Hermione should have known they would end up here. She had known the blade had somehow been found here, at Hogwarts Castle. The letter she had found in the charms book had indicated it may have been from this day, from this battle.

But she had not expected to ever be here again. To see such horror, death, and destruction.

Her body shuddered with memory, and she had to fight to keep standing, to not let the ghost of these memories that haunted her so viciously take control of her.

Draco swore roughly next to her, his hand clasping hers in a vise-like grip as they both took in the ravages of this battle.

“Bella—” he suddenly said, tugging on Hermione’s hand.

She spotted his aunt in the next moment, seeing the witch stepping callously over a dead body on the ground, wand raised and firing green spells off with a wide grin on her face. She laughed as one of her spells found a target, the body crumpling at once.

Hermione gasped as she saw Nymphadora Tonks racing up behind Bellatrix. She didn’t know where the Order member’s wand had gone, but Tonks, dirty and bloodied, merely threw her body onto her aunt with a venomous sneer on her face. Bellatrix growled as they went down to the cobbles together, landing so close to Draco and Hermione that they both took a reflexive step backwards. Bellatrix’s wand had flown from her grasp, skittering across the cobblestones.

Hermione fell into Draco’s side as they watched the two witches, two family members, grapple for control of the fight.

Even though Hermione knew the outcome for Tonks, she still felt herself crying out with warning as Bellatrix rolled on top of Tonks. The older witch pulled a blade from somewhere behind her and raised it high in the air. Hermione’s hand clasped across her mouth as she watched Bellatrix not hesitate for a moment to bring the blade down and sink it deeply into the chest of her niece, her grin as firm and steadfast as her vengeful aim.

Hermione fell to her knees, letting go of Draco’s hand. She heard Tonks let out a small gurgle as her aunt leaned down towards her face and began to whisper.

Hermione was set into her grief, watching the light leave Tonks’ eyes. She was so ensconced into the horror of what had unfolded in front of her, that she almost missed the words Bellatrix was uttering. But they pushed into her brain, and she caught them.

A spell.

Not just a spell.

An incantation.

An incantation that was so old, it had almost been lost to history. It was so lost, so deeply hidden, that there were only two books mentioning it that Hermione had ever found in her extensive searching.

Her world tilted as a horrifying understanding came crashing down around her.

Hermione wrenched against the vision of Bellatrix, leaning over Tonks, her hands still around the hilt of the Malfoy blade that was sunk into a now-dead body.

Hogwarts was suddenly ripped away, and Hermione was falling backwards, away from the pensieve until she was sprawled onto the ground of the small, dark room.

She lay on the floor, panting, staring up at the ceiling.

Someone was suddenly next to her; Harry, she thought. He was saying something, but Hermione stared unseeing at the ceiling above her.

No.

Fuck.

*No no no no no...*

Draco suddenly came to, taking a few steps back as he also left the visions inside the pensieve. He looked around, spotting Hermione on the ground and immediately came to his knees next to her.

“Hermione—are you alright? You just disappeared—what happened?”

She let Draco pull her to sit upright. Her body shook all over and she gulped in a rough, shuddering breath.

“I heard her,” Hermione whispered, her voice barely audible as she looked between Draco and Harry. She had no idea where the others had gone, but they had left the room. Perhaps they had been inside the pensieve for a long while.

“Who... Bella?” Draco asked in a strained voice. Hermione nodded numbly, and a tear she hadn’t realized had pooled in her eye escaped and rolled down her cheek. “What... what did she say?”

Hermione swallowed and then looked up and met his eyes. He was confused, concerned. She licked at her lips before she opened her mouth, but no words would come out, just a strangled sound. She looked at Harry wildly, because he would understand... he was the only person who might understand. Harry just blinked at her with wide, green eyes.

“Hermione,” Draco said, reaching up to brush at her cheek worriedly. She turned back to him. “Love, you’re scaring me.”

“Have—” she paused; the word had come out stuttered, grating through the thickness in her throat. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Draco... have you ever heard of a Horcrux?”

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks any and all readers! I'm so grateful to you.

I'll be back with another chapter hopefully next week on Tuesday

xx

Forawhile

# AN AFTERNOON FOR BEST LAID PLANS

## Chapter Notes

Beta credit to the lovely MyPrivateInsanity

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

“What?”

“*What?*”

Draco and Harry both spoke at the same time, though their tones were distinctly different. Draco’s was confusion and intrigue, while Harry’s was outright shock and rage.

Both men stared at her, waiting for an answer.

Hermione met Harry’s eyes first, and with a thin press of her lips and scrunch of her eyebrows, she saw that the message became clear to him. Harry’s face fell with disbelief.

“Whose?” he asked at once.

Hermione swallowed her fear. “Bellatrix.”

Harry stood quickly, a curse passing through his lips as he started to pace around the small, dark room. The silvery shimmer from the pensieve provided the only light in the room.

Hermione set her eyes to Draco. He frowned, watching Harry tread across the room agitatedly. She cleared her throat, and he turned his head back to her; the look on his face told Hermione that he knew this was a serious topic.

“What is it?” he asked in a low voice, “what’s a Horcrux?”

She let out a deep sigh. “A very rare and dark piece of magic,” Hermione began, “so dark and horrible that it’s hard to comprehend.”

Harry paused next to them and looked down at Draco with his hands on his hips. “It’s a vile way to attach a piece of yourself to an object. A part of your soul, like splitting yourself into pieces,” he said, and Hermione was concerned to hear the shake in Harry’s voice. She could only imagine what this was bringing up for him. “As long as that part of your soul stays hidden inside that object untouched, then technically... you can never be killed.”

Hermione watched Draco as he listened intently. The only sign he was distressed was the slight tugging between his eyebrows.

“So...” he looked from Harry to Hermione, “a Horcrux is an object with a piece of someone’s soul attached to it?”

“Yes,” she said.

Draco looked between the two of them. “You both seem to have intimate knowledge about this very rare, dark piece of magic. May I ask exactly how that is?”

Harry sighed and started to pace again. Draco tracked the movements.

“You could probably guess,” Harry said bitterly.

Draco was silent for a heartbeat. Then, “Voldemort.” It was a statement, not a question.

Harry paused mid-step and sent him a bland look. “Well done. Points to Slytherin.”

“He had a Horcrux. That’s how he came back after all those years?” Draco was asking the question, but as he sat back on his haunches and carded a hand through his hair, Hermione could tell he didn’t expect any answers. He was merely thinking out loud.

Harry snorted at that. “A Horcrux? As in singular? Oh no,” he said with contempt, “Voldemort would never have only one backup plan.”

Draco looked at Harry sharply and then glanced at Hermione. “He had more than one?” Hermione opened her mouth, but Draco’s eyes fell shut and he blew out a frustrated breath and then spoke again. “Of course he did. That’s what you three were doing, yeah? In seventh year when you disappeared? You were tracking them down.”

Hermione nodded. “The bits of soul need to be destroyed, before the owner of the Horcrux can finally be killed.”

Draco shook his head with clear disgust. “No wonder he was so deranged by the end... what must it do to you to have your soul split up like that?”

“Worse still,” Harry said, “is what it does to you just by making one in the first place. For each Horcrux made, a death must take place. You have to murder someone.”

Draco blinked slowly at Harry, and then turned his face to Hermione. Then he stood so fast it was like he had been electrocuted.

“Fucking... no,” Draco said, and then let out a disbelieving laugh, “no—you have to be fucking kidding me. That... in there—what we just saw?”

Hermione stood as his voice trailed off weakly. “Yes, Draco—”

“No,” he said, but the realization had dawned. He knew what it meant. “She’s actually alive? Bella is... and, *Gods*, she murdered my cousin to do it...” Draco took a few unsteady steps backwards and sagged against the wall, eyes falling shut, taking a moment to process the monumental news.

Harry swung his head to Hermione and their eyes met.

“Tonks?” he asked in a small voice.

Hermione swallowed a thick lump in her throat before she confirmed the query with a sharp nod. Harry’s lips pursed and he looked away, eyes glassy behind his spectacles.

“What does this mean?” Draco asked quietly. When Hermione turned to him, she found him still leaning against the wall, eyes still shut. “I assume it’s the dagger, then... that’s the object she turned into a Horcrux, yes?” He pulled his head away from the wall, eyes opening to show a sharp silver as bright as the pensieve behind her. “That’s what the blade wanted us to see?”

“Yes,” Hermione breathed, and with a sudden realization, she quickly added, “and it wants us to destroy it. Draco, remember the note on the wall? It’s asking us to destroy it...”

“Yes, I remember,” he said, a fierceness to his tone as he pushed away from the wall and closed the distance between them. His hands raised and clasped on either side of her face as he stared down at her. “But what does this mean for *you*? That you were cut with it, an object with a piece of my deranged aunt’s soul inside. That we found you lying in a pool of your own blood last night. *What does this mean?*”

He sounded angry, but Hermione knew it wasn’t targeted at her. The press of his fingers into her face was desperate, yet soft.

Hermione’s brain whirled with the thoughts raised by his question. Truthfully, she had no idea. But she needed to know the answer to that question. Draco had been cut with it, too, after all. She looked over Draco’s wrist to where Harry was watching them. Harry saw the silent question in her eyes.

“It’s not the same,” Harry said with a shake of his head, and before he spoke again, he sent a wary look to Draco, “I was one, but I was never injured by one, so it’s not the same.”

Draco’s brows raised at Harry’s words. He let go of Hermione to peer over at him but chose not to comment.

“Yes... it isn’t the same, but now that I know what we’re dealing with, I can see some similarities,” Hermione said thoughtfully, “I’ve heard her voice, like she was standing right next to me. Before I collapsed last night, I think I heard her having a conversation with someone, about me being in the Manor. Now that I know... I think the conversation was real, and I was tapping into it somehow.” She met Harry’s eyes. “I didn’t see them, not in the way you used to with Voldemort. But I heard them. I’m sure of it now.”

The revelation that she wasn’t going crazy was only a small comfort.

Harry’s eyes darted around the room, a sure sign that he was thinking quickly. “All right... all right, one thing at a time,” he said, and he reached up to play with his tie distractedly. “Let’s start by assuming the same principles apply here—that whatever is wrong with you is



stemming from the dark magic in the blade. That it infected you somehow when you were cut. So, destroying the Horcrux, destroys the infection. Would you agree?"

Harry was speaking to Hermione, but it was Draco who answered.

"Yes, but how is it destroyed?"

"Sword of Gryffindor, Basilisk fang or Fiendfyre," Hermione said at once, her brain always quick on the draw to provide information.

Draco swung his gaze to hers with a raised brow. "How efficiently specific."

A corner of her mouth lifted. "Would you have expected anything less?"

He reached out to tug gently on the sleeve of her red sweater. "Not from my swot."

Harry let out a disgruntled noise and they both looked back at him. "Let's focus," he said and then set his gaze to Hermione once more. "No one I know can cast fiendfyre. Do you know anyone?"

She shook her head and glanced sideways to see Draco's hardened expression. They had all been in the Room of Requirement when Vincent Crabbe had cast the powerful, volatile magic which he couldn't control, and which had ultimately killed him. Had almost killed them all.

Hermione took Draco's hand and gave it a comforting squeeze.

"And the sword of Gryffindor?" Draco asked, moving the conversation along and away from his old friend's death.

Harry frowned, looking into the corner of the room. "Last I saw it, a goblin who had sworn to help us had it. Haven't seen or heard of it since then."

Draco sighed with irritation. "Well, then, what are we going to bloody do? It's not like a Basilisk is easy to find!"

"Well..." Hermione said, before she paused to chew on her lip.

Draco looked down at her and made a face. "What?"

Hermione sighed and shrugged. No point in skirting around the truth. "Harry killed one in the Chamber of Secrets when he was twelve, and the skeleton and fangs should still be down there."

He looked at her blankly for a moment, as though he was waiting for the joke. When she didn't elaborate or yell "sike!" he just raised his brows and let out a quick breath. He took her by the hand and started leading her towards the door.

"Right, come on Potter, we need to brief the others and then apparently we need to put together a plan to storm the Manor to apprehend my aunt, and another plan to plunder Hogwarts for—" he shook his head as though his next words were going to be tough for him

to say, “—*a Basilisk fang*. Seriously, Granger—when this is all over, I’m going to need you to fill me in on all the unhinged things you and your pals got up to at Hogwarts.”

Despite the seriousness of the circumstances, she felt her mouth lift into a small smirk at the same time as she heard Harry snort from behind them. “Only if you have several days to spare.”

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Halpert was a rapt audience as they explained what they had seen in the pensieve. Draco left the explanation of Horcruxes to Hermione and Potter, seeing as his understanding on the topic was tenuous at best. Potter, it seemed, had a greater understanding on the subject—*had he said he had been a Horcrux? What the—*

No one in the room, save one very seasoned Auror, had ever heard of a Horcrux before. The explanation was sobering. Muttered words of disgust from around the room put voice to what everyone was thinking.

Then came the planning. The Aurors hunkered down to formulate a plan that was split into three parts:

Part one—apprehend Narcissa Malfoy for questioning, with force if necessary.

Because it was clear to Draco now. His mother knew that her sister was still alive. She had assured that the Manor remained standing, despite Draco’s callous wish to raze it to the ground after the war. She had set the wards herself, so that anyone entering would alert her. She had been cagey about Aurors setting foot on their land the other night. She knew something, at the very least.

Draco would lead this mission, with a fellow Auror to accompany him. Given their relationship, this was considered low risk.

Part two—locate and retrieve a Basilisk fang from Hogwarts and destroy the Horcrux.

Potter would be leading this mission, as he was the only speaker of Parseltongue and therefore the only person who could access the Chamber of Secrets. This was also considered low risk, and they had already received permission from the current Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall.

Part three—apprehend Bellatrix Lestrange. Both Draco and Potter would be involved in raiding the Manor; hopefully it would end in Bellatrix’s arrest.

Draco would prefer she was dead at the end of this, but as long as she couldn’t further harm Hermione or anyone else, an arrest would do.

Draco would leave for the estate in just over thirty minutes to apprehend his mother, going quietly to avoid tipping off anyone who might alert the Black sisters to what was going on.

He exited Halpert’s office, twirling his wand around his fingers as he walked down the corridor, the picture of ease to anyone who might glance his way. But it was far from the

truth. He felt miserable and apprehensive that he was plotting against his own mother, and in thirty short minutes, he would be arresting her. But, Narcissa had made this bed, if she truly was harboring a vicious murderer in their old home.

He felt like finding a solitary, quiet place somewhere inside the Ministry where he could just scream and let out his rising frustration and anger. It was something Draco had taught himself to do when he was much younger. When you grew up in a household where you had absolutely no voice, you had to learn to scream somehow.

He had only been able to express that kind of anguish when he was alone. Around others, Draco had learnt to compartmentalize, to hide it away.

Draco stopped into the small kitchen and quickly tipped back a glass of water, his mouth and throat suddenly dry while his heart beat with unsteady, sickening thumps.

He could feel it.

Parts of him receding into the farthest corners of his mind. Pulling away to hide and shoving forward a version of himself that he didn't like. But it was a version of himself that could cope with emotions he considered larger than he could rationally handle.

"Draco."

He tensed at the sound of her voice and placed the glass down onto the countertop.

Hermione had been rather withdrawn for the past several hours, while the Aurors made their plans. She had mostly spoken quietly to Halpert while they speculated on the magical infinity signature of the Horcrux. The darkness within the spinning golden arcs had only continued to grow, and it was this that Halpert now considered to be the mark left by Bellatrix's soul. A slithering darkness, battling to gain control of the marriage magic that had been triggered by Hermione's handling of the blade, growing in power each day.

The old magic which was pure and made to bring people closer. A magic for marriage and love. Togetherness.

Now that magic battled with something vile and truly evil, a fragment of soul that had sunk itself inside by way of murder.

Even the blade, the old magic, knew that it would lose this battle, that the darkness would eventually take over.

*Destroy me.*

The blade, the ancient magic, practically begged them to bring an end to this battle. To extinguish all of it, before the darkness consumed the light entirely.

Draco turned to Hermione; she stood in the entrance, leaning against the doorway.

They regarded each other quietly for a drawn-out moment.

“How long before you go?” she asked softly.

“About half an hour,” he answered, leaning back against the counter and folding his arms across his chest.

“Are you... prepared?”

He gave her a nod. “As much as I can be.”

“Good,” Hermione said, and her hands came together in front of her, fiddling with something. Draco realized she was playing with the wedding band he had put around her finger. “Are you alright?”

His gaze flicked back up to hers. “I’m fine.”

Hermione watched him for a moment, eyes narrowing. Then she held out a hand and beckoned for him. “Walk with me for a bit?”

Draco took in a deep breath and pushed himself away from the bench. He strode to her. Taking the hand that she offered for just a moment, he gave it a squeeze and then released her.

“I need to focus. I’ll see you soon, alright?”

Draco moved past her before she could argue with him. He was on edge, his nerves jittery, and he didn’t like the person he was when he was like this. He didn’t want to say something he would regret later.

Hermione, apparently, had other plans.

When he was halfway down the corridor, a hand grasped at his elbow and pulled him into a dark office. Draco knew it was Hermione by the quiet sigh she had uttered before grabbing him, so he went willingly, albeit with frustration.

She released his arm, and he strode deeper into the office before he turned on his heel and watched her close the door before facing him.

He recognized, with a start, that it was the same office they had found themselves in the day before. He swallowed at the explicit memory that flashed through his mind.

“Can we talk a moment?”

“Granger, I don’t have time—”

“You said you were prepared,” Hermione interrupted with a frown.

“I am, but there’s a lot happening, and I need—”

“You’re anxious,” Hermione said plainly, taking a step forward, “and you’re withdrawing. I’ve seen it over the past few hours. You’ve become quieter, and you can hardly look at me.”

Draco clenched his jaw, preparing his usual snarky excuses, but that's not what came out. "Yes," he said instead, acknowledging his own weaknesses, "this is how I handle stress."

Hermione's brows pinched together with worry. She stepped closer so that she could raise her hands and place them on either side of his waist, looking up at him. "Can I help? We could talk about it or run through it?"

He sighed and looked away from her, over the top of her head, staring at the wall. "No. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to think about it. The only thing that will help would be finishing the task and making sure you're safe."

She was silent for a while, before she whispered "alright" into the darkness of the office.

Draco kept his eyes on the wall as he nodded stiffly and then stepped away from her touch. He moved back towards the door.

For the second time, he only made it a few steps before Hermione was waylaying him once more. Before he could reach for the door handle, she stopped him with a firm grip on his forearm and tugged forcefully until he turned back around.

"Granger," he growled as he faced the darkness of the office and glared down at her, "I can't deal with this right now."

"Yes, yes," she said with a roll of her eyes, "big, scary Draco Malfoy."

Her grip on his arm hauled him to the side, and then Hermione placed her other hand flat against his chest and shoved him backwards into the wall next to the door. Draco, surprised by the forcefulness of her actions, fell back into the wall with a thud.

He let out a startled breath and met her fierce eyes. Hermione's face was set into a challenging glower. Her palm, pressed firmly into the center of his chest, moved upwards until her fingers grazed the top button of his shirt.

"Perhaps you've always had to deal with your stress like this," Hermione said in a low voice, "and maybe I'm overstepping because we're... well, we haven't exactly spoken about what this is, but perhaps, just this once, you can let someone help you. Someone that cares."

Draco held her fiery eyes, feeling her touch searing into his chest, her words pushing into his brain and beckoning for the pieces of himself that he had been tucking away.

"I—I don't know how to rely on anyone other than myself," he admitted.

She nodded and pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. Her fingers skated upwards and over his collar until she brushed against the skin of his throat. "Let me help," she whispered, fingers pulling apart the edges of his shirt to graze over his collarbone, "I can distract you for a few minutes, maybe release some of your tension."

Draco swallowed at the suggestion.

He couldn't pretend that wasn't incredibly appealing, his body already responding to her proximity and touch. His arms moved for her hips automatically, but Hermione was quick to grab at his wrists and pin them back to his sides.

"No, Draco," she said, "let me."

With a final squeeze of his wrists, she let go again and set her fingers to begin working open the buttons of his shirt before pulling the edges apart to reveal his chest. Draco pulled in quicker breaths as he watched Hermione run her hands slowly up his torso before she leaned forward with parted lips and nipped lightly at the edge of his neck.

Draco let his head fall back to the wall behind him, eyes falling shut just as he felt Hermione drag her tongue up the column of his throat. A low groan left him, his hands twitching to reach for her, to pull her body closer to him, but he refrained.

He could certainly get on board with this level of distraction. His mind was entirely focused on Hermione and what she was doing with her mouth as she kissed a hot path along the side of his upturned jaw.

Her hand shifted down, past his belt until she was covering the erection that had sprung to attention quicker than should have been possible given the state of his mind earlier. Draco twitched, clenching his teeth together tightly at the heavenly feel of her dainty hand against his cock.

"Mmm," Hermione hummed pleasantly against the underside of his jaw, "so hard already."

Her hand rubbed over him in slow, languid passes while she continued to press her mouth and tongue against his neck. It wasn't long before he was panting, eyes still shut, lost to the sensations.

Draco had never, *never*, given up control like this before. He might have thought he would hate it, purely because he was a man who enjoyed taking control far too much. But there was a freedom in this, in relinquishing himself. To just feeling and experiencing. And there was something sinfully sexy about Hermione commanding him in this way. He could not imagine having this feeling with anyone else.

Only with her.

"Hermione," he groaned, his eyes opening to stare at the shadows across the ceiling.

Both of her hands worked at the buckle of his belt, and he heard the metal clacking together as she undid it. Draco lifted his head then, looking down to watch her pull apart the edges of his trousers and reach inside to wrap her hand around him.

The only sounds in the office were his own harsh breaths mingled with these tiny sounds that Hermione made against the side of his neck as she pumped him in her fist at a steady pace that had his hips jerking, his neck straining.

"A week," she whispered against his skin.

Draco had hardly heard her, so absorbed was he on the feel of her hand working him so deliciously.

“What?” he ground out.

Her tongue flicked out, traced the line of his jaw until she was looking up at him, meeting his unfocused gaze.

“A week,” she said again in a low, husky voice, “it has literally been seven days since this whole thing started.” Her hand squeezed slightly at the tip of his cock before moving once more. Draco grunted and twitched against her with a rough exhale. Her hooded gaze was intense, captivating. “And it has only taken seven days for me to become entirely obsessed with you.”

Her words undid him.

Draco’s fingers whipped out and gripped at her hip, but she bit roughly at her own lip as she took his hand and pushed it back into the wall with a glint in her eyes. Hermione worked him faster, harder. His chest pulsed unsteadily, their gazes on each other unwavering.

“Patience, Draco,” Hermione said between her own ragged breaths, “you’ll have plenty of opportunities to have me at another time. If you want me, that is.”

His fingers curled inwards against the wall behind him, aching to touch her. “Want you?” Draco gritted out, his head falling back once more, his abdomen clenching with the power of his impending release. “It’s so much more.”

“Look at me,” Hermione demanded.

Draco did, utterly compelled by her.

His head tilted forward towards her. There was a fierceness in her gaze as she stretched up onto her toes and pressed her mouth against his. They uttered matching groans, pushing the noise past each other’s lips. Her tongue moved over his in a desperate sweep, and Draco was ruined.

His hands left the wall and grasped at the sides of her neck just as he felt his balls constrict. Draco’s throat vibrated with uncontrollable noises as something snapped inside of him and his release shot through his body. It was more of a catharsis than he could have hoped for, or would have ever asked for.

Hermione kept up her movements as his orgasm pulsed, her mouth pressed to his and swallowing each of his groans.

His fingers were pressed roughly into her skin, holding her face to his, needing the connection and comfort of her while the pleasure skated down his spine.

When it had passed, Draco sagged back into the wall behind him, bringing Hermione with him, pulling her into his chest and holding her close. His eyes roamed over the dark corners of the office, breathing deeply, his mind blissfully blank, body blissfully sated.

After a few silent minutes, he finally said quietly, “thank you.”

Hermione tilted her head back and looked at him, her fingers rubbing a small, comforting circle against the middle of his chest. “Any time you need me, Draco... I’ll be here.” Her lips lifted into a sly grin. “Obviously not just for *this*... but... anything.”

Draco’s lips twitched. He wanted to smirk, to make a joke in return. But he found that he couldn’t. There was an energy crackling between them, a profound sense of connection that he couldn’t shake off, couldn’t possibly make a joke of.

Before he could say anything, Hermione was pulling out of his embrace. Her wand appeared and she cast a cleaning charm and started to piece him back together.

“We were quick enough, but you should still get back,” Hermione said softly, a slight shake entering her voice, her confidence from moments earlier draining in the wake of what was to come. She started to do up the buttons of his shirt while he watched, gazing at her. She reached up, fixing his collar, and gave him one more small, tenuous smile before she stepped away from him and moved for the door.

Draco’s eyes narrowed on her, and taking a leaf from her book, he reached for her wrist and pulled her to a sudden stop, making her stumble. Before she could regain her footing, he hauled her backwards until her back was flush against his chest. His hands moved to rest firmly on her hips, holding her to him. He tilted his head towards her and spoke into her ear.

“Where do you think you’re going, love?”

He watched her chest rise with a deep breath. “I... don’t think we have time—”

He kissed at the sensitive patch of skin just below her ear and delighted in the sharp breath she pulled in. “I told you I’m prepared, Hermione. Did you truly think you could do that to me and expect me to not *need* to touch you?”

“That—that was for you,” she uttered breathily as his hands smoothed up the curves of her waist, “you don’t need to...”

Her words trailed off when Draco reached for the waistband of her jeans and flicked open the button. He worked the zipper down slowly.

“Are you saying you aren’t nervous? That you don’t need a distraction just as much as I do?” Draco said next to her ear, his hands pulling open her jeans.

“I—” Hermione breathed, but her words cut off when he dipped a hand straight into her underwear, fingers sliding into her folds and discovering how delightfully wet she was. Her back arched against him as she gasped. Draco’s eyes fell shut at the feel of her, and he wasted no time, sinking two fingers inside, her body welcoming him.

“Fuck,” she whined, her head falling back against his shoulder.

Draco kept his hand still, fingers seated inside and palm flat against her clit. He flicked his tongue out, roaming over the shell of her ear. Hermione let out a breathy moan, and he felt



her cunt contract around his fingers. He almost groaned at the feel of it.

“You like taking control, love?” he asked in a low voice.

She was breathing heavily, and her hips shifted, as though begging him to move his fingers. She finally nodded slightly, a quick jerk of her head.

“Go on, then,” Draco whispered against her skin, brushing his lips up and across her temple, “take what you want from me.”

She let out a few stuttered breaths before she seemed to understand what he was telling her. Her hips rolled, his fingers sliding out and back in with the movement. Hermione’s answering moan had Draco’s heart thundering wildly.

“That’s it, Hermione,” he growled as she moved against him again, taking her pleasure from him, “ride my fingers.”

His other hand came up, palming at the exposed skin above the collar of her sweater, her neck stretched out before him and giving him a perfect view of her face. Eyes shut, brows slightly pinched, lips parted as she breathed heavily in time with the undulating movements of her body.

Gods, she was perfect.

“Good girl,” Draco murmured to her. A sinful noise escaped her throat and her pace increased. “Take what you need, baby. Take everything—I would give it to you without blinking.”

Her face was already flushed, but he watched with fascination as it deepened across her cheeks. Her lashes suddenly fluttered open and caught his hungry gaze on her, their eyes meeting.

“Draco,” Hermione said in a strained voice, her hips rolling against his hand over and over.

His hand at the bottom of her throat smoothed up the graceful column to hold her under the jaw, keeping her gaze locked on him. He felt an inexplicable need to claim her, in a way he had never experienced before. It was a sharp feeling, like a knife being shoved through his ribcage and piercing into the center of his heart.

“When this is all over, Hermione,” Draco said, almost growling the words to her, “I’m going to lock us in my bedroom for days—and I’m going to make you *mine*.” Her eyes were glazed, her mouth opening silently as she rode his hand relentlessly. His fingers pressed into her face harder. “Do you understand me?”

He could feel her movements become more frenzied, could feel her inner walls start to pulse against his fingers. Draco knew she was close, but he needed her answer.

“Hermione,” Draco demanded, actually growling this time, “do you—”

“No,” she gasped out, shaking her head as much as she could with his firm grip on her. His eyes flashed at her, and his fingers tightened further against her jaw. “No, I don’t understand,” she uttered, and her eyes pinched shut once more and she groaned before she said, “because I’m already yours.”

The breath left his lungs and his hand slackened around her face as he realized what she was saying. And Draco understood how utterly true that was, at least for him. He didn’t want or need anyone else but Hermione, in all things.

He licked at his lips, watching her possessively. Words he could not have held back left him. “Yes, you fucking are.”

Her entire body suddenly shuddered against him, an explosive sound escaping her mouth. Draco clenched his teeth together to hold back his own groaning as he closed his hand over her mouth, muffling her noises, lest anyone realize just how they were passing their time before a very serious mission.

Hermione rode out her orgasm against his hand as her pleased noises dissolved into low, lingering moans against the palm of his hand.

Draco let his hands slowly slide away from her when he was sure she was finished. He carefully did her jeans back up, took her by the hips and turned her to face him. She collapsed into his chest, her palms flat against him as her forehead dropped into the side of his neck. He wound his arms around her and gently smoothed down the stray pieces of hair that had escaped from her braid.

“I mean it,” he said softly after a quiet moment, needing her to understand that his words had not been conjured by the heat of the moment.

Draco heard her deep breath before she nodded against him.

“So do I,” she said.

His arms tightened around her, emotion surging through him in a way he was unused to. It made him feel equal parts euphoria and terror. Draco needed to protect Hermione at all costs.

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Hermione watched Draco disappear into the fireplace, closely followed by another Auror, Benson. His eyes had lingered on her, a silent moment passing between them, before he was gone in a flash of green flame.

She knew this was the least threatening part of what was to come. He was simply going to his own home to bring his mother in to be questioned. Yet, she still felt her stomach rolling unpleasantly as he disappeared, her heart beating a little too quickly.

Hermione turned to Harry next and gave him a hug, wishing him well on his trek into the bowels of Hogwarts. There was a glint behind his green eyes that she hadn’t seen in many

years. It was the old spirit of adventure shining through, reminding Hermione so much of how he had been in their youth.

When the atrium was nearly empty once more, Hermione sighed and headed for the elevators with Theo next to her.

He blew out a long breath when the doors of the elevators closed them inside.

“That snake thing is proper dead, right?” he asked, looking over to Hermione nervously.

She huffed out a laugh. “Yes, Theo. Extremely dead. Ron and I saw its bones many years ago. Harry will be perfectly safe. You don’t need to worry.”

He nodded, but the worry line between his eyebrows remained. “I sometimes hate that this is his job,” Theo grumbled, folding his arms tightly across his chest.

Hermione nodded, only just starting to understand what that must be like. She reached around his waist and tugged him into her side in a hug. “Harry is, quite literally, made for this kind of thing. He is as competent as they come. I know you worry for him—but he’ll be fine, Theo, I promise.”

Theo let out a rough sigh. He uncrossed his arms and slung one around her shoulders. “I know. So will Draco.”

Hermione smiled and let her head drop to the side against his shoulder. “Yes.”

The elevator doors slid open, and they released each other to step forward to exit the lift. They made their way down the corridor quietly, each descending into their own thoughts.

Hermione looked up at someone approaching them. Halpert.

“Each team have just left,” Hermione confirmed for Halpert as they approached each other.

He stopped for a moment, eyes moving between her and Theo before he nodded. “Great, I suppose we wait now.”

Hermione lifted a shoulder. “I guess so. Are you having a break?” She knew he had been working almost day and night for several days. He should use this downtime to rest.

He bobbed his head. He did look exhausted.

“Good—I can send you a Patronus if there’s news.”

Halpert smiled gratefully, though something flickered behind his eyes, like he was hiding something. Hermione frowned slightly, but decided not to press the matter as he moved around them and kept walking down the corridor.

Theo followed Hermione the rest of the way to Halpert’s office. It was empty now. Any Aurors not assigned to the first two missions were strategizing for the raid on Malfoy Manor,

which would happen as soon as both parties returned to the Ministry. There was no time to waste.

Hermione dropped into a chair with a deep sigh. “I wish I could have gone, too,” she grumbled, sinking her head into her hand, elbow resting on the table.

Theo took a seat next to her. “With whom? Harry or Draco?” His smile was teasing, and she rolled her eyes at him.

“I wouldn’t be much help to either, I suppose.”

“Of course you would be,” Theo said, “just not when you might suddenly collapse or become ill. How are you feeling, by the way?”

Hermione quietly assessed herself. Her body was still slightly warm from her stolen moments with Draco, otherwise she felt relatively normal. There remained that edge of darkness within her that she had begun noticing over the past few days, a tendril of something she knew didn’t belong. “I’m tired and I can feel something is off, but I don’t otherwise feel unwell. It’s strange and hard to explain.”

“Well, that’s—”

His words cut off abruptly, and Hermione heard him suck in a sharp breath, his shoulders stiffening.

Hermione looked at him, puzzled. “Theo, what is it...?” She saw him staring off into the corner, and she turned, frowning. Following his gaze, her eyes caught onto something strange on the floor near Halpert’s desk. A shape was there, jutting out from behind the desk.

“What...” she stood and shifted closer, and she saw that the shiny thing Theo had noticed was a well-polished shoe. She licked her lips nervously and inched around the desk.

Her heart stopped and her blood ran cold.

The shoe belonged to an inert body lying on the ground, which had been mostly hidden by the desk when they had both entered the room.

She felt a scream threatening as she looked at the slack face, head lolled to the side, but she swallowed it down just as her body started to shake. A small sob leaked out instead as she fell to her knees.

Halpert lay before her, eyes shut and body unmoving. Hermione couldn’t be sure if he was alive or not without checking for a pulse, but there was something about him, about the chalky paleness of his face and the utter, complete stillness of him that told her what she didn’t want to know.

He was dead.

She jerked as she felt Theo coming up behind her.

“But we just saw him,” he breathed in a shaky voice.

Hermione pulled in another rough breath, and turned her watery eyes up to Theo. She didn’t even know when she had pulled out her wand. But she suddenly felt it gripped tightly in her fist.

Her head throbbed, her breath coming in short gasps as she looked past Theo. Her eyes searched for something that they would not find. Hermione could see no bright golden light of the infinity. No swarming magic lighting up the room. How had she possibly missed that?

She had only known it the moment she had recognized it was Halpert on the floor and realized that the person they had walked past in the corridor had been an imposter.

The blade, the Horcrux, was gone.

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A feeling of triumph soaring.

A reconciliation with what was considered something utterly precious, something she had not seen for many years. Had thought it had been lost forever.

A sharp, piercing cackle as she took in the inert form of her nephew on the ground.

Sneering as her sister screamed.

Hermione’s eyes opened, and she felt her body bowing with a jerk against cold flooring beneath her. A wracking sound reached her ears, and as she felt the burning in her throat, she realized she was coughing.

Someone spoke next to her, a hushing sound of comfort. A hand ran over her forehead.

Hermione blinked against a spring of tears in her eyes and turned her head, expecting to see Draco there, to find him holding her and whispering murmured words of comfort. But it was Harry, and he was looking down at her with a pinched expression, green eyes flicking between hers and then past her, at something else.

“Harry,” she croaked hoarsely, “did I pass out again?”

“You did,” came another voice, and Hermione’s eyes moved around, finding Theo sitting on her other side, “right after we found—”

Theo grimaced and averted his eyes, frowning at the floor instead.

That was when she remembered.

Hermione hurriedly pushed herself to sit, a gasp flying from her throat. Harry tried to stop her, but she pushed his arm away. Breathing heavily, Hermione looked around the office, seeing it filled with bodies once more. Auror’s hung around everywhere. Leaning against the

walls or sitting in the seats sprawled around the office. Every face was somber, drawn into deep, sorrowful looks.

“Halpert,” Hermione said, voice thick with emotion, “Harry—”

“He’s gone,” Harry confirmed. He paused, swallowing before he took in a deep breath. “They took him away not long ago.”

Hermione felt her body trembling as she glanced over her shoulder, eyes finding the spot behind Halpert’s desk where he had lain. Where he had been murdered.

Halpert hadn’t deserved this. Hermione hadn’t known him for long, but in that short time, she had known a good man. One who was so quick to smile and joke with everyone around him. He had worked so hard to help Hermione, and now he was...

She looked back to Harry and forced away the emotion rising in her throat. “Theo and I saw someone. They must have been polyjuiced—”

“Yes, I know,” Harry said, “we were briefed the moment we returned.”

“The Horcrux?” she asked in a shaky whisper.

“Missing,” came another disgruntled voice from an Auror Hermione didn’t yet know by name.

Hermione looked around the room, gaze swinging across all the faces, but not finding the one she desperately wanted to see.

“You’re back?” she asked, “did you...?”

“We got a few, yes,” Harry nodded, but he didn’t look pleased at all. What good was a Basilisk fang without the Horcrux?

“If you’re back already... where is Draco?” she asked.

Harry breathed out through his nose and exchanged a wary look with Theo before meeting Hermione’s eyes once more.

“They haven’t returned yet.”

Her spine shivered with renewed panic.

“How... how long have they been gone?”

“Over an hour now,” Harry said gravely.

Hermione sucked in a sharp breath as a memory speared through her brain and she winced at the sharpness of it.

“Oh, Gods,” Hermione whimpered, “she has him.”

“What?”

Hermione stared at Harry but didn't really see him. Instead, she recalled a memory, or a dream of a memory. But it hadn't been hers. It had belonged to Bellatrix.

“Before I woke up, I remember feeling *her* again. She was happy about something—I think that was because she has the Horcrux. And then... and then she was looking down at him.” Her next breath stuttered out of her lungs. “Bellatrix was looking down at Draco, and she was pleased. He was... he wasn't moving.”

Just like Halpert.

But Draco couldn't be...

Hermione gripped at Harry's arm with desperation. “Harry.” It was all she was capable of pushing between her lips, but it conveyed every bit of emotion that swirled through her like a tornado.

Harry's hand covered hers for a brief moment, then he nodded and stood with a swish of his long cloak.

Theo helped Hermione stand on shaky legs. Her body felt exhausted, but at least there didn't seem to be extraneous amounts of blood involved in this collapse.

Hermione watched Harry move through the room of Aurors, issuing orders and discussing strategy. She wished she had something useful to add, some way to help. As it was, all she could do was stand at the side, her body quaking with equal parts rage and despair.

She hated Bellatrix, with every corner of her mind and body. If she had harmed Draco... Hermione didn't know what might spill forth from her. But she did know, at the very least, that it would be wrath first.

She fidgeted restlessly with the ring on her finger, touching the cold metal over and over.

With a thought, Hermione lifted her hand and looked at the ring, the gold winking merrily at her.

“Harry!” she said suddenly and shot forwards just as her best friend turned around to face her, “the ring—the tracking ring Draco gave me.” Hermione pulled it off her finger and almost shoved it at him. “You can find him with this, right? It would go both ways, right?”

Harry didn't reach forward to take it from her. A resigned look passed over his face as he glanced between her and the ring. Then, he shook his head, and her heart sank.

“No,” Harry said, “it doesn't work like that.” He shuffled his feet, and a nervous, almost guilty look, settled on his features. “Hermione... I—” Harry let out a quick sigh. “The rings only work if the two wearers are connected. By, er, marriage.”

Hermione's hand dropped back to her side, the ring clutched in her fist. She didn't entirely understand the look on his face. “Alright, so it worked because I was cut by the ceremonial

blade?”

Another sigh. “No—well, maybe,” Harry said with a grimace, “but the exchanging of the rings may have solidified it, followed by a kiss. The only way the magic would have worked—that Draco could have followed you with it—was if you were married by magical law.”

Hermione recalled Draco kissing her, a brief peck as she sat in her hospital bed.

She looked down and opened her hand. The ring sat innocently on her palm. “So. Draco and I are married? Actually, honest to Gods married?”

“It would seem so.”

Hermione glanced up to Harry, who was a bit red in the face. Just as he had been at the hospital last night, entering the room with Draco before he had presented the rings.

“You knew that might happen?” she asked, her head tilting to the side.

Harry cleared his throat. “I told Draco he should talk to you first, but it was so close to midnight, and he—”

Hermione shook her head, reeling with the fact that she was *married*. To Draco Malfoy. It was unfounded, the feeling that soared through her. It was a sharp, intense feeling of possessiveness and unfettered pleasure at the thought of being so irrevocably bound to that man. A part of her knew it was insanity, but she couldn’t help it. She had already told him earlier. She was his. And he was hers.

The feeling was brief, souring immediately at the thought that Draco could be hurt, or worse. Panic flared anew.

“I want to discuss this more, I do, but—” she held up the ring and slipped it back onto her finger, “does that mean I could find him? That I could apparate to him, no matter where he is and what magical barriers there might be?”

Harry’s lips thinned as he considered her. “Draco only mentioned him finding you, but the magic could have a cyclical connection. I don’t see why we couldn’t try. But if it was Lestrage, Hermione, you could very well be heading into a trap.”

Hermione nodded, brain working quickly, a plan formulating.

It took perhaps three minutes for her to explain the plan, and for Harry to get on board, however hesitant he was to have Hermione in the field like this. She was not a trained Auror, but Hermione was the only one who could go to Draco. Not to mention, she was a fierce fighter when those she loved were at risk.

She gripped her wand in one hand and tucked away a Basilisk fang with her other.

Hermione kept Harry’s eyes as she went through the plan one final time, her heart pounding with both fear and desperation. She had to get to Draco. This had to work.



She focused on the ring, thinking of its partner—on her *husband*—and as she felt the magic flowing through her, Hermione twisted to apparate and she felt her body squeeze through time and space.

Gasping in a lungful of air, Hermione landed, her wand already raised before her feet had even hit the floor.

Her eyes stared at the fireplace in front of her, confused. She was in the Entrance Hall of Draco's home, on his Estate. Hermione turned slowly on the spot, finding the Hall empty and quiet. Hermione's wand arm slowly lowered, a sinking sensation in her gut.

Did the ring's magic not work? Where was Draco?

Hermione looked down, holding her hand out to glance at the golden band on her finger with frustration, and that's when she saw it.

Past her hand, something sat on the floor in front of her feet. She bent down to reach for it, a sob already forming in her throat, knowing what it was before she had touched it.

It was a golden ring.

Draco's ring.

## Chapter End Notes

Welp. Thought it was Draco's turn to damsel a little.

Thank you so much to any readers on this journey with me. Drop a comment if you're so inclined, I'm always so grateful to have some thoughts or reactions :)

Hoping to update again next Tuesday as usual.

xx

Forawhile

# MEET ME AT MIDNIGHT

## Chapter Notes

Beta credit to the ever wonderful MyPrivateInsanity x

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

Her footsteps echoed across the empty hallway of the Ministry as she walked, a golden ring clutched tightly in her hand.

Hermione's body moved mechanically as her mind focused intently.

Draco was missing. He could be hurt, or he could even be...

*No.*

Hermione needed to save him.

She was going to save him.

There was no other outcome that Hermione was willing to accept. She would do whatever was needed to be sure of it. She knew Draco would do the same for her, so she was quick to forgive herself for the vicious, vengeful thoughts that manifested almost immediately when her brain conjured images of Bellatrix.

"Hermione."

Her eyes blinked back into focus as she realized that there were people gathered just outside of Halpert's office.

Her mind ascended out of the deep chasm of her concentration to return to the present.

"Harry."

Her best friend had walked to meet her, his hands coming to her shoulders, green eyes tracking over her face. "Are you okay? We never got a Patronus. Where did the ring take you?"

Hermione's lips pressed together solemnly, and she held up her hand, unfurling her fingers to produce Draco's ring. "Not to him. His ring was on the floor of his home. No one was there—it was empty."

Harry's face fell at once. "It's... it'll be alright. We'll be going to the Manor as soon as we can. We've been going over a possible plan of attack while you've been gone. The wards make it tricky to—"

“You’ll include me in these plans,” Hermione cut in. Not a request. A demand.

Harry opened his mouth, but whatever he saw on her face seemed to cause him to hesitate. He winced slightly and then said, “come into the office. We’ll run through it together, alright?”

Hermione nodded, grateful that he wasn’t immediately excluding her. She would have followed regardless if he’d tried.

As she walked into the office next to Harry and saw all of the Aurors gathered around, she was surprised that her heart seemed steady, her mind clear. There was a sense of focus taking over her body, quelling the panic that had been consuming her since the moment she had seen Draco’s ring.

Her sense of alarm abated as her focus narrowed to one single thing: save Draco.

She found herself wandering over to Halpert’s desk, running her hand over the back of the chair. It was the only chair in the room unoccupied. So, with a deep breath, Hermione pulled it back with a scraping noise, and sank into it. With effort, she pushed aside thoughts of the smiling face of the Cursebreaker she had come to deeply respect and brought her gaze up to sweep around the room.

The Aurors were huddled in groups of twos and threes, swirling chatter mingling so that she couldn’t make out a single conversation. Harry stood at the front of the office with his head bowed, and was flipping through a notebook, a furrow between his brows and hand on the back of his neck as he concentrated.

Her eyes drifted over the papers on the desk by her hands. Hermione saw the research Halpert had found about the magical extraction of an object for the pensieve. It caused a pang of terrible sadness to slice across her chest. Halpert had truly done everything he could to help her. Now he was dead.

Hermione sucked in a sharp breath at the reminder, at the callousness of the words that flew through her mind. He was dead. Just gone.

Swallowing a lump that threatened to choke her, Hermione blinked the dampness away from her eyes, and let her gaze move away from the papers. It landed instead on two small vials sitting side by side. One with a familiar golden liquid swirling and writhing. The essence of the Malfoy blade, the vial they had used to tip into the pensieve. The other held a small silvery tendril that undulated gently within the vial. Hermione frowned at it. It looked like...

She leaned forward, and it was in doing so that she noticed that it was sitting on a piece of parchment with Halpert’s handwriting upon it. What stood out about the writing on the parchment is that it was not as neat as Hermione knew it to be from the memos he had sent. It was more haphazard, almost rushed.

She didn’t even register that Harry had started speaking, addressing the room at large to discuss the mission to Malfoy Manor. Instead, Hermione reached forward and gently shifted the two vials away from the parchment. Their removal revealed her name at the top of the

parchment, underlined so many times that the quill seemed to have broken through the thick paper.

Hermione pulled it towards her, eyes widening with shock at the disjointed, clipped sentences she read.

Hermione

*Pensieve memory. Return to blade. Killing you.*

*I'm sorry.*

*H*

She had perhaps read it ten times over when Harry finally managed to snatch her attention back. Harry was in front of the desk, knocking on it loudly until Hermione snapped her eyes up to him. He was looking at her with confusion, his mouth moving, like he was speaking.

He *was* speaking.

“—alright Hermione? What’s wrong—”

Her breaths were quickened, heart thudding as the noise in the room returned to her. It was silent except for Harry’s voice in her ears. Everyone else was looking at her, staring.

Hermione stood quickly and swiped the two vials from the desk, her head turning towards the clock on the wall. There were just less than two hours until midnight.

“Harry,” she said, cutting off his worried words, “how long before you leave?”

He paused, eyes narrowing on her. “No more than an hour.”

Hermione nodded, shoving the vials into the pocket of her jeans, and moved around the desk. “Don’t leave without me.”

“Where are you going?” Harry asked with frustration as she started to walk towards the door.

She paused and looked over her shoulder, meeting his eyes. “Research in the pensieve. Halpert had... a few more thoughts for us, I think on the Horcrux. If we want any hope of stopping Bellatrix, I need to find out what they are.”

Clearly nonplussed, Harry sighed. But he didn’t argue with her; instead, he just gave her a hard look and then he nodded.

Hermione left, calmly at first, and then after a few steps down the corridor she was suddenly running towards the elevators.

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There were only two things in Draco's life that could strip away his impeccable training and his reflexes, to make them come crashing down.

His ability to be on form, to be quick and efficient in a deadly, primal way, set Draco apart from the other Aurors. He was often requested for the most dangerous, high-stakes missions because of this fact. To the DMLE, there was nothing that could distract him, nothing that made him wince in fear. Nothing that would make him turn his head. He did what was needed to be done. Emotion never played a part in it, not when it came down to it.

Even for this mission, Draco knew that he would maintain an emotionless state in order to arrest his own mother. He would wait until he was alone, in a safe space and much later, before he would even show a semblance of the impact it might have on him.

He was excellent at it.

At least, he had been.

When Draco met Hermione's eyes across the atrium as he stepped into the fireplace to leave for his home, his emotion swelled, and he knew it then.

If she were in danger, it would cripple him.

Draco knew it for certain.

When he had found her on the floor, surrounded by her own blood, he had barely been capable of moving. His brain had shut down, his body refusing to take in sensation.

It was a dangerous thing for him to know, and it pierced him with a rare feeling of vulnerability, knowing what it could cost him—or her.

A flash of green flame, and Hermione's hazel eyes disappeared.

When Draco stepped through into the Entrance Hall of his home, he discovered the second thing that had the ability to stall him, to tear down everything he knew.

Bellatrix Lestrange stood in the middle of his Entrance Hall.

She looked exactly as he remembered, despite ten years having passed since Draco had last seen her in person, right down to the sly smile she would always wear when she thought she was about to get her way.

In the split second where he registered her presence and his steps fumbled, a cascade of memories descended on him.

The years Draco spent under her tutelage.

It had been his aunt's job to teach Draco to duel, how to properly respect the Dark Lord, how to torture. It had been Bellatrix's talon-like fingers holding his shoulders down as he screamed, body drenched in sweat, when he received the Dark Mark. She had set the Cruciatus on him countless times, punishing Draco until he was able to cast the torturing

Unforgivable himself. It had taken much longer for him to learn to *mean* it than Bellatrix had liked. He had watched her laugh and appear genuinely happy at the horror that Voldemort had brought into their house. She had hissed into his ear how useless he was, how disappointing, how pathetic. Draco had watched her torture his classmate, Hermione Granger, someone he had neither liked nor thought of much at that point in his life. But it had sickened him, made him tremble and sweat in the corner as her screams had filled the room. She had tortured countless others in front of him, teaching him, urging him.

If Draco had to look back on that time in his life, it would not be Voldemort he had been most afraid of. It had been her, Bellatrix. Because of her, every corner of his house, his mind, his soul had become haunted with relentless, debilitating fear and pain.

She was his blood, his family. And yet Draco had thought her a soulless monster. He had been happy when she died. Relieved.

Now she was in front of him, alive once more.

“Draco,” Bellatrix purred, her voice slithering unpleasantly down his spine just as the fire brightened behind him and he realized that his aunt already had her wand raised at him. His own hawthorn had flown from his shaking fist without Draco even hearing her utter a spell, so entrapped was he in the emotional scars that were tearing open, spilling every dreadful memory of his past throughout his mind.

Draco looked into her black eyes as the tip of her wand remained pointing directly at him. His body was locked into place, bracing for the Cruciatus, for the pain to lance across his body until he was a shivering mess on the floor, lying in a puddle of his own vomit as he had been so many times before.

It never came.

Instead, a red streak of light flew past him, hitting something behind Draco, something that fell to the ground with a dull thud.

His body flinched as feeling returned to him and his hand darted to his holster before he recalled that Bellatrix had already disarmed him. Draco realized, all at once, where he was and *who* he was. He was not the same helpless child he had once been, one who felt he had no choice but to obey. Draco would never be that boy again.

“So good to see you again, Draco,” Bellatrix said, a wicked glint in her dark eyes.

“I disagree, Bella,” he said coldly as his foot nudged something behind him, and Draco moved.

He lunged backward, turning on his heel just as he heard Bellatrix cast a spell. Draco flung himself to the side of Benson’s stunned body on the ground, the spell whizzing past his ear and narrowly missing him. His hand clasped around Benson’s wand, fisting it, and he rolled back to his feet in one quick move.

Draco stood tall, moving quickly across the dark wooden floors of his home as he spied Bellatrix across the room, already waving her wand to fling another spell at him.

His Protego was quick, efficient, her spell hitting harmlessly against it with a splash of red light.

Draco's shield dropped before he slashed his wand through the air with a snarl.

Bellatrix had been a master dueler, but it was clear she was out of practice as she tried to dodge and shield at the same time. She was nearly not quick enough, Draco's spell nicking her shoulder and causing her to take a stumbled step back with a hiss.

Bellatrix bared her teeth, and her next spell was green.

Draco spun his body away from it easily, a bitter taste in his mouth that his aunt had just sent a killing curse at him. He knew he should not be surprised. He had just seen in the pensieve how she treated her family members.

"Expulso!" The blast sent Bellatrix careening into the wall behind her, the impact knocking a large photo frame off of the paneling; it fell on top of her as she crashed to the floor.

Draco gritted his teeth, eyes fixed to the hateful woman on the ground, and he flicked his wand, an Incarcerous on the tip of his tongue, when—

"Expelliarmus," came another voice to his right. Draco's head whipped around at the same time as Benson's wand was ripped from his grasp. It flew into his mother's outstretched hand, and their eyes met for a heartbeat, before Narcissa uttered a word that sounded an awful lot like devastating betrayal. "Stupefy."

Draco's world went dark.

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Hermione stood before the pensieve.

The silvery contents shimmered in front of her as she pulled the two vials from the pocket of her jeans and looked down at them both. The gold essence of the blade, and a tendril of memory.

With a deep breath, Hermione tucked away the gold vial and unstoppered the other. Her hand shook only slightly as she poured the memory into the pensieve before she bent towards it and dipped her head inside.

She fell, her stomach swooping unpleasantly with the sensation.

Feet landed on the ground, and Hermione was standing once more in the center of Halpert's office. With a stuttered breath, she looked at the Horcrux before her, floating in the air as it had for days, the magical infinity floating around it like a light show.

A throat cleared behind her, and she turned quickly, finding Halpert standing before his desk. Hermione's heart clenched at the sight of him, bent over his desk, pouring over the documents he had spread out there. The very same ones she had seen on his desk only moments ago.

Hermione walked over to him, wondering what it was he had wanted her to see in this moment.

Halpert's face was pulled into a deep frown, brows scrunched and lips pursed as he pointed to one document, muttering to himself, and then pulled another one out from under a pile to consult. He looked suddenly frantic as his eyes scanned the paper.

Finally, she watched him drop the paper with a deep sigh, and it fluttered back to his desk as he slumped backwards into his chair.

With a shake of his head, he took up a quill and pulled a blank sheet towards him. Before he could begin writing, something caught his attention, and he looked up.

Hermione's eyes widened. Halpert was looking right at her.

"Hermione?" Halpert said, startled.

She opened mouth, utterly shocked.

*How could he see her?*

"Hello," came a voice from behind her.

Hermione jumped and let out a squeak of surprise, whirling around to find—a mirror image of herself right behind her.

Hermione quickly stepped to the side, almost stumbling in her haste to put distance between herself and the doppelganger that had appeared.

The girl who was not Hermione smiled softly at Halpert before she turned and looked at the dagger, watching the magic move around.

Halpert still seemed shocked to see her, but in a moment, it passed, and he sighed. "Actually, it's good that you're here while the others are having a quick break. I have something I need to tell you—and it's not going to be easy."

The other Hermione turned back to face Halpert. "Oh. Okay."

"Would you like to sit?" Halpert offered.

The imposter shook her head, electing to remain standing, hands clasping in front of her. Hermione narrowed her gaze on the outfit. Black pants and a silver shirt. She looked to Halpert, silently begging for him to realize that this wasn't her, that her clothes had changed, that she was going to—



“Finding out about the Horcrux has... changed everything,” Halpert said, sadness etched onto his face, “it’s almost unprecedented, what we’re facing here.”

The other Hermione just watched and listened, perhaps looking a little impatient.

“After what happened last night, I took a sample of your blood from the atrium—to test for what possible magical disturbance could be causing your illness. The results were...” Halpert trailed off, his face flinching as he looked down at the papers. He looked forlorn and almost unwilling to speak the remaining words, something that was unlike the Cursebreaker Hermione knew. “... well, your blood shows traces of the same darkness we can see working to take over the magic in the blade.”

Halpert stood then and moved closer to the girl, closer to the Horcrux. He glanced at the other Hermione, seeming concerned at the lack of response before he focused back on the spinning golden arcs.

“Some small part of Lestrangle’s soul must have found its way into you when you were cut,” he said, and then looked at her to gauge her reaction. When there was none, he frowned, but continued. “You can see here—” he pointed at the section where a dark rope of magic was twined with the gold, undulating around it, almost like it were fighting with it, “—this has been growing steadily over the past few days, and I think in a few more, it will be all black, swallowing the gold altogether.”

Hermione stepped a bit closer, her heart thundering with every word he uttered. The fake Hermione seemed perplexed, lip curling like she simply didn’t understand what was happening.

“Okay?” she said to Halpert.

Halpert winced and reached up to grip the side of her arm.

Hermione found herself touching her own arm, right where Halpert’s hand would have been, if it had really been her.

“The darkness in your blood is the very same, and it’s escalating,” he said softly, “I spoke with Harry a few hours ago about his experience with a piece of Tom Riddle’s soul within him, and he never experienced anything like what you are. I think... it is my understanding that a living being is not meant to be a home for someone else’s soul. But that living being can either accept it into themselves or reject it. Harry was only an infant, his brain and body pliable and susceptible to great change, and so... I believe his body accepted it willingly. You, Hermione... you are a fully-grown adult with your own belief system and—”

Halpert stopped and he suddenly stepped away from the other Hermione, clearing his throat and facing the blade hovering in the air. He shook his head at it.

“The way you’ve been sick, vomiting blood, blacking out,” Halpert said wearily, “I can only conclude that you are rejecting it. And the darkness will only grow as it continues to seek a home inside of you, and it will...”

Hermione didn't realize she had her hand across her mouth until her lungs started to beg her for air. She let her fingers drop away from her face and she pulled in a shuddering breath.

It was Bellatrix, her soul that was making her sick. It was within her body, writhing around and looking for somewhere to sink into. Halpert was telling her that her body was fighting it, rejecting it... but that she would lose, just as the blade was losing.

Hermione forced herself to breathe steadily and keep paying attention. Her capacity to deal with this news was frightfully small at that moment.

"Are you saying," the other Hermione said, the brilliant gold light shining on her face, "that I'm going to die because of this thing?"

Halpert looked at her then, *really* looked at her. His eyes flickered over her face and then down at her clothes, even at her shoes. He opened his mouth, and then closed it.

He cleared his throat and started moving back towards his desk. "I'm sorry, Hermione, that is what I believe is happening." Halpert slowly sat down, and took up his quill and began to write quickly on the blank sheet of paper he had pulled towards him before.

"Can it be stopped?"

Halpert underlined a word on the paper several times and then he looked up. "How did Harry eject Tom Riddle's soul?"

The fake Hermione paused then and looked at Halpert, something akin to fright passing over her face. "Oh, uh... I don't..."

Halpert just gave her a small smile, and then he picked up a vial and his wand and started to extract a memory from his temple.

"That's quite—"

The memory suddenly ended, and Hermione was pulled out of the pensieve with a quick gasp of air.

Hermione stared into the basin as she processed all that Halpert had just told her. Her body shivered, and she suddenly wanted to be sick, to get it out of her—this thing, this part of Bellatrix that she could imagine writhing through her blood, seeking a home.

Her lip trembled as she realized what it meant.

With a shaky breath and a shake of her head, Hermione's resolve hardened. She replaced the memory into the vial, and then pulled out the blade's essence.

Halpert's note had told her to '*Return to blade*'. She could only assume he thought that it might have more to show her, beyond what she and Draco had already seen. So without lingering on thoughts of her fate, Hermione tipped a small amount of the essence into the pensieve and watched as it flared a brilliant gold.

She took a moment to wish that Draco were there with her, as he had been before, and then she plunged inside.

Hermione was back at the Battle of Hogwarts, only this time, she was standing on the edges of the Great Hall. She looked around at the devastation. Everything she could see was broken and battered. Rubble lay everywhere; a wall to her right had entirely collapsed inwards. Tables lay upturned. A line of sheet-covered bodies spread across the floor.

The Hall was empty. It was night-time, so the battle must be over, and Voldemort must be dead.

Hermione swallowed as her eyes tracked over the sheets she saw ahead, trying not to think of all the lives lost that day. She started to move gingerly, wondering what the blade wanted her to see, her feet stepping carefully over bricks and other debris. Her foot kicked the edge of something, and Hermione looked down and sucked in a breath at seeing the box, half-hidden under bits of stone and dust.

She knew if she bent down and opened the lid, she would find the blade. It must have been lost here, and it had magically returned itself into its box.

A shuffle of movement, a shifting of a brick clattering. Hermione's head whipped up and she saw someone moving through the shadows quietly, heading for the bodies along the ground.

Hermione stood and started moving towards them.

As she neared, the figure's details became clearer and she noticed the hair first. It was Narcissa Malfoy, and she was bending to check the bodies under the sheets. She would lift the sheet, sob quietly, and then replace it before moving on to check the next.

Hermione was close to her when Narcissa seemed to find what she was looking for, and a gurgled sound of pain left the woman's throat as she fell to her knees. Her head fell into her hands and she began to cry quietly to herself in the otherwise empty Great Hall.

Hermione stepped closer, and saw that she was sobbing over her sister, Bellatrix, lying on her back, eyes shut.

"Oh, Bella," Narcissa said in between sobs, "how could you do this? How could you leave her all alone..."

Hermione tilted her head. *Leave who all alone?*

Suddenly, Bellatrix twitched on the ground, the sound so obvious because the rest of the Hall was so deathly silent. Hermione stumbled a step away at the same time as Narcissa paused, hands sliding away from her face.

"Bella?" she called quietly.

Bellatrix moved again, and this time her eyes opened, and she sucked in a loud, deep breath before she sat up with a speed that was unnatural.

Narcissa cried softly before she pulled her sister in for a hug. Bellatrix accepted the embrace for only a moment before she pushed Narcissa away from her.

Hermione had unconsciously moved a few steps away, so when the sisters murmured to each other for a moment, she missed the start of what they were saying. She hurried closer.

“... must get out of here,” Narcissa was saying quickly, “everyone will believe you dead and we need to keep it that way. For her sake.”

There it was again. Who was Narcissa talking about?

Bellatrix was standing now, her sister hurriedly following. “Where is she?”

“Safe,” Narcissa insisted, “but we must leave—”

The ground rocked beneath Hermione’s feet as the scene shifted around her. Without Draco there to keep her upright, she stumbled to the side and ended up down on one knee before the ground steadied under her.

She looked up, finding her desk in the Archives sitting before her, Hermione Granger behind the desk with a familiar box sitting atop.

Hermione pushed herself back to her feet and strode closer, watching herself inspect the blade inside the box, and pausing only to write notes. This was a memory from only a week ago, before all of this had started, yet it felt like a lifetime ago.

Hermione watched her past self pick up the blade from the box and squint at it, taking in all the fine details and the inscription. She wanted to yell at herself, to warn her what sinister things would lie ahead, but it was no use. There was no changing the past.

Footsteps echoed from behind her, and Hermione braced herself as Cormac McLaggen startled the girl behind her desk and—

The cut.

The blade sliced into Hermione’s hand.

The world around her seemed to tremble again, and Hermione thought that the scene was already changing. But it didn’t. Instead, the people before her, Cormac and Hermione, seemed to stall in their movements, like being hit with a slow-motion spell.

A light, so brilliantly bright, flared suddenly and Hermione flinched away from it, eyes scrunching shut and hand raising to shield herself.

When Hermione looked again as the light died down, she sucked in a deep breath at what she saw before her.

The past version of herself was still holding the blade, the sharp edge still against her skin, the cut having only just occurred. She could see the slight wince on her own face as the pain flared. But she seemed frozen in time. Cormac wasn’t moving at all, either.

The only thing that moved was a million golden particles, spiraling into a large infinity shape, as Hermione had seen so many times before. It was breathtakingly beautiful as she took in the way it moved and sparkled, so pure and promising.

She realized what she was seeing. The cut had sparked the ancient marriage magic to life. This was the beginning of it.

The infinity started to shift, morph and grow. The particles of gold started to come together, forming some kind of shape. It expanded, grew limbs, and then there was someone standing before her, made up of the brilliant light. Like an angel.

Hermione was hardly breathing as she took in the form, the being. But as it shifted and took a step towards her, she understood who it was.

It was her.

The light, the magic, had taken the form of Hermione.

“Destroy me,” came a whispered voice from the lights—a thousand voices all morphed into one, and Hermione sucked in a sharp breath at the sound of it. It shook her core and made her skin tingle. “The darkness will take over, but until it does, you can still control it.”

Hermione’s breath left her lungs as she realized it was speaking. To her. Like it knew she was here, and not just a spectator of a memory.

“How?” came Hermione’s strangled voice.

“I am strongest in the ‘tween hour,” it whispered, the voice skating down her spine, “I will help you there. I will help you find him. Meet me at midnight.”

The light flared until Hermione was blinded by it, and the ground shook beneath her feet once more. She fell backwards from the pensieve until she found herself staring up at the dark ceiling of the Ministry’s room.

Hermione pushed herself to sit just as a coughing fit seized her. She hacked at a clawing sensation in her throat, feeling her lungs suffering as she tried to pull in gulps of air. Eventually it passed, and she sat back, taking in measured, deep breaths. She ran the back of her hand across her mouth and it came away red with blood.

She stared at it, almost emotionless. Thanks to Halpert, she knew what it meant.

And suddenly, she knew exactly what she needed to do. To save Draco. To destroy the Horcrux—to destroy *both* of them.

*Meet me at midnight.*

The end is nigh - I anticipate another 2-3 chapters left of this story, but I've been wrong before so... basically ignore me.

Thank you SO MUCH to readers willing to brave a WIP, honestly I couldn't keep going without you guys. Every comment brings a warm feeling and a huge smile, as well as a desire to get back on my computer and keep writing. Truly, I thank you!

I hope to keep to my schedule of posting Tuesdays, so MEET ME ON TUESDAY (and to anyone confused on the days - it is Tuesday where I live in New Zealand when I posted this, perhaps for a lot of you it's Monday so perhaps my chapters are reaching you then... \*shrugs in timezone\*)

love to all xx

Forawhile

# SHE WHO SPEAKS TO SNAKES

## Chapter Notes

TW: mention of miscarriage/child loss - if this concerns you, please tread carefully.

Beta credit to the lovely MyPrivateInsanity xx

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

Hermione pushed open the door of the pensieve room and almost knocked Harry over in the process.

“Bloody hell!” Harry uttered as he jumped out of the way of the flying door.

She was startled to see him, but relieved at the same time. “Oh, Harry—I’m so sorry. I was just... I have so much to tell you.”

“And I you,” he said quickly, “there’s still no word from Malfoy, so we’re preparing to leave. I know you said you wanted to be included, but—”

“Harry,” she said hurriedly, “you need to listen to me.”

True to his nature, Harry paused and folded his arms across his chest to listen as she asked. Even if he looked perturbed while doing so. That look began to fade from his features as Hermione spoke, explaining most of what she had seen in the pensieve, momentarily putting off telling Harry about the dark soul stuck inside of her. His arms dropped to his sides, and he stared at her.

Harry frowned. “It spoke to you? And you think the other magic will... what? Take you to Malfoy at midnight?”

Hermione nodded and shrugged in unison. “That’s what it seemed to be saying to me. That while it battles the Horcrux’s darkness, it still wields some power that I can possibly control to take me where I want it to. Which would be to Draco.”

Harry shook his head. “Be that as it may, Hermione, my team will be going to the Manor. So, you don’t need to put yourself at risk—”

“Do you really think it will be that easy?” Hermione said, trying to rein in her frustration. “Bellatrix has stayed hidden for over ten years, Harry. And she was at the Manor the other night when I was transported there. You lot couldn’t find her, and your detection magic came up blank. Do you really think she doesn’t know how to hide from you?”

Harry paused, eyes darting between hers as he considered her words.

“We have to try,” Harry eventually said, “and if we fail, then we can talk about a next step.”

He turned to leave, but Hermione grabbed for his arm and stopped him. He looked at her over his shoulder, eyes hard with resolve.

“Harry,” she said quietly, and her voice cracked on the word, “how... how did you survive Voldemort’s killing curse in the Forbidden Forest? You—” she paused to clear her throat of the emotion sticking unpleasantly there, “—you never spoke about it, but how did you get rid of his soul and still survive?”

Harry’s eyes flared and he jerked his arm out of her grasp. “I don’t talk about that, and you know why,” he said, pain clear on his face, “I... why would you...”

She heard the breath leave his lungs as he searched her face. Harry took a step towards her, and Hermione could see the muscles along his jaw ripple as he clenched it.

“Hermione,” he said in a low tone, “why would you ask me that?”

She inhaled shakily, then reached up to place her hand against her chest and fisted at a section of her red jumper. She couldn’t say the words, but she didn’t need to. Harry’s face mirrored her emotion, and he shook his head before his eyes fell shut with understanding and resignation.

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Narcissa Malfoy née Black knew of loss.

It started early in her youth, when she would learn of the word, and her understanding of it would only grow as she became older. It grew like the roses in the garden she had kept so meticulously; wild, thorny, and when you cut it back, tried to control it, it would only come back greater and more prominent than before.

Her youth was a series of losses, ones you might associate with being young. Watching each of her grandparents pass, losing her innocence in an unimaginable way, realizing both of her sisters were despairingly different than she.

Realizing neither of her parents loved her.

But she had been Narcissa Black, and she kept moving and learning and growing.

When she became Narcissa Malfoy, she had thought her journey of loss was over. That she had gained something monumental: true and everlasting love. That nothing and no one could refute, and even fate could not intervene.

For she fell pregnant, blissfully so, and Narcissa felt the power of that gift in her very soul. It was the opposite of loss, and everything to do with being fulfilled in a way she hadn’t dared imagine before.

It had been a girl.



That loss had been the hardest she had borne so far in her lifetime. The child had not come to term, and that gift was ripped from her, no matter how desperately Narcissa wanted to hold on to it.

That loss changed the very fabric that made up who she was as a person.

It followed her, haunted her, into her next pregnancy. She no longer felt it was a gift, but a tentative flame that could be blown out at any moment. Tenuous and terrifying.

Being pregnant with Draco had not been a gift. Not until he was a squalling baby in her arms did Narcissa think of him as anything but a potential loss.

But she had him. He was hers.

Narcissa could not have braved through another possible loss, so Draco was her only child.

She would cherish Draco, Narcissa promised herself. He would never suffer, never want for anything. He would live a charmed life and would never know loss as she had.

She failed him in this.

Yet another loss for Narcissa, and it cost Draco several losses in return, such was her failure.

The return of the Dark Lord had brought unthinkable darkness for the Malfoy family. Narcissa saw her child's innocence stripped away, saw her home invaded and sullied, her husband and son terrorized and tortured. She had been powerless to stop it, to intervene in any way that would not cause a rebound of further destruction.

Yet from all this darkness, a light shone through.

Her.

The birth of a child, a girl.

Born with silver hair and bright, innocent eyes.

Narcissa had looked at her, took her up from the mother and held her—and whispered to her that she would always be protected. That she would never know loss like she had, like her son had. She swore it over and over as she looked at the girl as if she were the baby she'd lost.

Narcissa vowed she would not fail again. Never again.

When the time came, when the opportunity arose, Narcissa broke her allegiance without flinching, hoping it would bring about the end of the Dark Lord.

It had been the only way to finally keep her promise.

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“What were you thinking?” Narcissa hissed as she hurried over to her son, kneeling next to his motionless body. She sighed as she took in his vacant features, reaching to brush the blond hair away from his eyes. Narcissa heard her sister getting back to her feet with a growl, and she narrowed her eyes as she looked over her shoulder to Bellatrix. “Attacking my son, are we now, Bella—you swore!”

“He attacked me, Cissa,” Bella said sullenly as she brushed carelessly at her robes, flicking away the dust.

Narcissa scowled but turned back to Draco, picking up his limp hand with a mournful sigh. “I knew we shouldn’t have lingered here. He’s seen you now.”

“Yes,” Bella said, closer to her, “we will need to do something about that.” Her sister’s tone of voice nearly made her flinch.

Not lingering on what she could mean, Narcissa turned her head towards the fireplace. “What’s taking her so long? She should be back by now.”

Bellatrix sighed. “Patience, sister. You don’t give her enough credit. She is doing as I asked.”

Narcissa sniffed and let her gaze travel over her son’s face, her mind whispering apologies she knew he would not want to hear. “You ask too much of her. She’s too young for this.”

Bellatrix laughed then, low and cold, sending shivers of unease through Narcissa’s body. She ignored it as she gently patted at Draco’s hand and then began to set it back on the floor. A glint of gold caught her eye, and Narcissa saw with a start that Draco was wearing a golden band around his ring finger. She sucked in a breath in surprise and pulled his hand closer to her once more.

It couldn’t be.

Why was Draco wearing Lucius’ wedding band?

And—

*Who* had Narcissa’s? The matching golden ring, one which Narcissa knew held a deeply kept family secret—the ring concealed highly illegal magic, which could strip away the strongest wards and protective enchantments.

Narcissa considered it for a moment, wondering who might suddenly appear before them, brought here by the ring around his finger. Who might discover Bellatrix and...

*No.*

They couldn’t find out about her. No one could know.

Narcissa closed her eyes briefly before she pulled the ring off of his finger.

She stood and turned back to her sister, who was watching the fireplace intently, eyes narrowed.

“We must hurry,” Narcissa urged, “anyone can find us here. With Aurors in the Manor this week and now with Draco seeing you, we need to expedite your plans to leave the country.”

Bellatrix just waved a hand in her direction, unconcerned.

It was then that the fireplace roared to life in a swirl of bright green flames. Narcissa turned her head just as a figure stepped out of the hearth.

Out stepped a young man with wide eyes, and Narcissa waited. She waited to speak or move as the wide eyes met hers, and then the young man smiled as his features began to change and fade away.

Soon, a young girl stood in front of the fireplace, one with dark eyes and silver hair. Narcissa released a sigh of relief and rushed forward to capture her in a fierce hug.

“Well done, child,” Bellatrix praised calmly from behind them as they embraced.

Narcissa ignored her sister as she pulled back to look down at the girl, to rake her gaze over every inch of her face to be sure no harm had come to her.

“Are you alright, my love?” Narcissa asked softly, grazing a tender hand across her temple.

Delphini’s smile was small and tentative. “Yes, it all went to plan, I think.” The young girl then looked around Narcissa to meet her mother’s eyes. “Mum, I gave that man your potion and he collapsed. Will he be alright?”

Narcissa narrowed her eyes and whipped around to face Bellatrix. “What potion?”

“The first potion I dropped,” Delphini said to Narcissa, “and the man went to sleep on the floor. The second potion was to keep him asleep for a while, right mum?”

Bellatrix answered her daughter and ignored Narcissa’s questioning look. “He will be just fine.”

“Oh, good,” Delphini said with a sigh as she produced something from behind her— she held a dagger in her hands. One with an emerald pommel. Narcissa’s hand clenched into a fist as she watched the girl give it to Bellatrix. She was still furious that she had used a Malfoy heirloom for such a terrible act. Her sister slowly took the blade with a reverential look on her face, mouth curling into a satisfied grin.

“Oh, child,” Bellatrix whispered, “you have done well.”

Delphini nodded eagerly, hands coming to clasp in front of her. Her eyes moved to Narcissa, and it was then that she noticed Draco on the floor. She took a step sideways in surprise.

“Who—” she looked at Narcissa, “Aunt Cissa, is that Draco?”

She gave a shaky smile, her heart filling with sadness that this was how they would meet. “Yes, my love. He will be fine.”

Delphini stared at her cousin for a few moments, seeming confused, but she just looked back to her mother. “Mum...” she said to Bellatrix, “you said you would tell me more about this knife after I retrieved it for you—would you tell me now? That man said that it... that it was going to really hurt the girl you made me copy. That she was going to die because of it. Why?”

Bellatrix tucked the blade away before she looked at Delphini. “The Mudblood is no concern of ours, child. She meddled into things she shouldn’t.”

“Bella,” Narcissa hissed, reaching out to grasp at the young girl’s arm and pull her back, “don’t use that kind of language.”

Bellatrix merely rolled her eyes before setting them back onto her daughter with a look of glee. “You have made me very proud today, and soon you will make your father proud.”

Narcissa’s brows drew together at the same time as Delphini’s eyes widened, brimming with pleasure and hope.

“Really? How?”

Narcissa’s arm around Delphini tightened. The young girl was far too eager to please, and she knew the lengths she would be willing to go to for her mother.

“By following in his footsteps, just as I did,” Bellatrix said, her body practically vibrating with her glee.

Narcissa’s blood chilled in her veins. “What?”

Bellatrix sent her a scathing look before she turned a smile back on her daughter. “Before we leave, child, we will make sure your soul is as secure as we can make it. So that no one can ever take you away from me.”

Narcissa gripped Delphini’s arms tightly— so tight that the young girl turned and looked up into her eyes, frowning. She simply didn’t understand what it was her mother was saying, but Narcissa knew.

“Bella, *no*.” Narcissa said through clenched teeth, “there is no world in which I let you do that again, let alone make *her* do it.”

Bellatrix set her gaze on Narcissa, lips becoming a thin line of displeasure. Narcissa’s eyes widened as her sister took a few slow, measured steps in their direction until she was right in front of them. Narcissa held Delphini close as her heart pounded.

“Do you think you can stop me, sister?” Bellatrix said in a low, deadly voice, “do you think you can stop her destiny? Delphini is the child of Lord Voldemort—this is her legacy.”

Narcissa’s anger and disbelief vibrated through her body. She stepped in front of Delphini, shielding her from Bellatrix’s view.

“She is a *child*,” Narcissa said, voice trembling, “and what you’re speaking of is vile, dark magic. It has no place in her world, Bella—you should know that. After what happened to Tom—”

“He is Lord Voldemort,” Bellatrix said through her bared teeth, “do not use the name he has forsaken, or I will relieve you of your tongue.”

“Auntie Cissa?” Delphini said, voice unsure, “what’s going on?”

Narcissa ignored the shaky hand that held onto her and stared at her sister. “Bella... you swore to me. You swore you would always protect her—especially from things like this!”

“This is protecting her!” Bella roared. “This will ensure her survival, just as it did mine—how can you not see that? Are you blind?”

Narcissa shook her head. “No, Bella. I cannot allow it.” She started to back up, keeping Delphini securely behind her. She swore; she made a promise. Now Narcissa had to be sure she kept that promise. If she had known this was Bellatrix’s plan...

Delphini could not come to harm. She could not be forced to do something so downright evil and spirit-destroying. It was madness.

Bellatrix’s face took on a darkness that Narcissa had not seen in many years. She raised her wand, and Narcissa’s heart stopped.

It was pointed at Draco.

“No!” The word tore from Narcissa’s throat, her body suddenly doused with fear.

“Give me my child,” Bellatrix said steadily, “or I will kill yours.”

Her lip trembled as she looked over to her son, then back to her sister. “How could you do this? After all I have done for you, all I have done to keep you both hidden, safe. How... how could you...”

“You misunderstand me,” Bellatrix said with a tilt of her head, wand still pointed at Draco’s chest, “this has no bearing on my gratitude to you, sister. You are simply in my way.”

She felt her fingers loosen, and Delphini slipped from her grasp.

Uncertainty was her silent companion as Narcissa stepped closer to Draco, still lying unconscious on the floor.

Bellatrix’s wand arm suddenly twitched, and she opened her mouth. Narcissa felt herself scream, expecting the worst from her sister. A spell never came; instead, Bellatrix lowered her wand with a roll of her eyes. “I was only going to Oblivate him, Cissy, do you actually think so little of me?”

Narcissa pursed her lips, her heart still thundering as it reached out to both Draco and Delphini, the two people she loved the most in this world. “You did just threaten to kill him,

so forgive me for taking you at your word.”

“Draco will not be the one to die today,” Bellatrix said and then shifted her gaze to Delphini. She stretched out her fingers and beckoned. “Come, child—we will head to the cottage where we are safe, and I will tell you how you can follow in your father’s footsteps and make us proud.”

Narcissa shook as she stood next to Draco. Delphini moved warily toward her mother, casting an unsure look back at Narcissa.

“Why does someone have to die today, mum?” Delphini said, pausing.

Bellatrix waved a hand impatiently. “They are just a Mudblood, child—not worthy of this world.”

Narcissa blinked, processing, and then her next breath shuddered into her lungs. “Bella. You do not mean to kill Hermione Granger? You can’t possibly be serious.”

Bellatrix grinned wickedly. “I leave it up to fate, dear sister. It is the Mudblood who has been sent to me at the Manor two nights this week at the stroke of midnight. If she comes to me again, I will take the sign for what it is. The Mudblood will secure Delphini’s soul for us, and we will have her forever, Cissa. She will be safe forever.”

Narcissa felt her head shaking, felt illness roiling in her stomach.

Then something clicked in her mind. Something fell strangely into place, and her hand delved into her pocket, pulling out the golden ring. Narcissa kept it firmly in her clenched fist as she watched Bellatrix usher Delphini closer and place both hands on her daughter’s shoulders, smirking down at the young silver-haired girl.

*Hermione Granger.*

Perhaps that was who had the other ring. She was connected to Draco somehow, with her appearances at Malfoy Manor and her connection to the blade Bellatrix now had back in her clutches.

Narcissa felt the ring pressing into her skin like it was her lifeline, praying that if she kept it on her person, help would come. She had always wished to keep Delphini a secret from a world that would vilify her for her parentage. But this... Narcissa could not let Bellatrix force her daughter to take a life and split her soul into pieces. It was unnatural and wrong. She was just a child, with no understanding of what it would mean, of what it might do to her.

She couldn’t let this happen.

“Narcissa.”

Her eyes flew up to her sister’s, heart in her throat. Bellatrix almost never called her by her full name, using her nickname almost exclusively. She stared at Narcissa with a calculating gaze, head beginning to tilt, black eyes beginning to narrow.

Bellatrix found something she didn't like in her perusal of Narcissa, and she sighed. That small exhale had her fear escalating.

"I had hoped that you would understand, sister," Bellatrix said with a shake of her head, "it brought me back to you, didn't it?"

"I—I do understand, Bella, it's just difficult... she's so very young," Narcissa tried to sound sincere, to keep the disgust from her voice.

Bellatrix's answering laugh was cold, chilling the very air in the room around them. Then she raised her wand and Narcissa's heart stopped inside her chest. "You forget that I know you."

She didn't even hear the spell. The next thing she knew was darkness, and the ring slipping from between her fingers to clatter to the floor.

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Draco's return to consciousness was slow, sluggish.

Although his brain hadn't quite caught up, his body knew there was something wrong, jerking in place in a weirdly upright position.

His eyes flew open and understanding slammed into him.

Draco was stuck resolutely to a wooden chair by magic; none of his limbs would move if he tried. He was facing into a large room that looked both polished and well-lived in. His eyes blinked away the lingering effects of being unconscious and he quickly took in his surroundings.

Walls of dark wood, with ceiling-high windows spanning all around which showed little but the inky blackness of night-time. A large kitchen area to his left, sparkly and clean as though it were barely used. There was a black leather suite in the middle of the room, arranged to face towards where Draco was butted up against the wall in his chair.

Someone sat on the couch, facing him.

Draco frowned at meeting a pair of unfamiliar, dark eyes.

She was young, perhaps nearing Hogwarts age. She was wearing dark clothing that contrasted drastically with the vibrant silver of her long hair. There was something awfully familiar about her, but he couldn't quite place a finger on it.

The girl was staring right at Draco, taking him in just as he was doing to her.

Her brows pinched together and then her eyes flickered to the side of where Draco sat. He turned his head, wondering what she was looking at, and he sucked in a quick breath at what he saw.

His mother was in a matching chair next to him, slumped forward, unconscious.

The last thing he recalled was Narcissa disarming him when he was about to best Bellatrix. His heart thudded painfully at the recollection of it. Draco had considered her to be involved in some way, but he never would have thought that she would turn against him like that.

But what was she doing stuck in a chair beside him?

He turned his eyes back to the silver-haired girl.

“You’re Draco,” the girl said matter-of-factly. Her voice was low and gravelly and seemed more mature than he might have expected.

“I am,” he answered, eyes darting around the remainder of the room, wondering where Bellatrix was, “and who are you?”

She pressed her lips together for a moment, considering him. As she stared, her hair suddenly turned white-blonde, the exact shade of Draco’s own hair. He sat, stunned, realizing she was a Metamorphmagus, just as Nymphadora had once been. “I’m Delphini. Auntie Cissa calls me Delphi, though, so I suppose you can, too.”

He felt his eyes twitch at the word ‘auntie’, and his brain whirled. He considered his next words very carefully as he held Delphini’s steady gaze. He was about to open his mouth to speak, to confirm a terrible truth that he had reached, when a movement near the sleeve of her shirt made him pause. His eyes darted to the movement and saw with a start that the head of a snake was slithering quietly from her shirt sleeve and started to coil around Delphini’s wrist and hand.

She noticed his attention on the snake and looked down to it also. She gave the snake a soft smile and then started to hiss quietly as her hair slowly turned back to silver.

Draco almost choked on his disbelief as he heard the girl conversing with the snake in Parseltongue.

Delphini heard his small noise and looked back up to him. “This is Marvolo,” she introduced in English once more, “but mum doesn’t like me to call him that. I found him in the garden a few years ago— isn’t he lovely?”

The sincere gaze of Delphini—his cousin—made Draco swallow his horror and give her a tentative smile. “Yes... he’s quite lovely, Delphi.”

She beamed at him, but it faded quickly as he looked to his mother next to him. She looked sad all of a sudden. “It’s nice to have someone else to talk to, but I miss Cissa. Mum’s very angry with her, I think. She used magic to make her sleep.” Delphini looked at him curiously. “You’re Cissa’s child? Can you use magic, too?”

Draco’s hands gripped at the arms of his chair tightly. “Yes, I usually can. But I’ve lost my wand. You... wouldn’t happen to know where it’s gone, would you, Delphi?”

Delphini shook her head. “Mum has it, I think.”

“Can you use magic?”



She shifted on the seat, looking uncomfortable. Something caught his eye as she moved, and he saw the Malfoy blade sitting innocently on the cushion next to her. He flinched at recognizing the Horcrux, wondering how it was here. “Only a little. I don’t have my own wand yet, so I have to use mum’s. Sometimes Auntie Cissa lets me use hers to practice in the garden.”

Draco breathed out a sigh of frustration.

“Mum said she’ll be back soon,” Delphini said, “I... she has a task for me to do at midnight.”

Fear pulsed into his veins and the breath stalled in his lungs. His eyes fell to his left hand, and he noticed, with a deep relief, that the ring was no longer on his finger. Draco didn’t know where it was, but if it wasn’t on his finger, Hermione couldn’t find him.

He swallowed and looked back to his cousin. “Midnight? That’s a strange time for a task... why—what’s important about that time?”

Delphini shrugged a shoulder. “Mum said a Mudblood has been turning up at the big house at midnight.” Draco felt his hands start to shake with a crippling mix of anger and terror. “I’m not allowed in the big house. Auntie said it’s not safe.”

His mind raced and he looked quickly around the room until his eyes found what he was looking for. A clock on the wall to his right, sitting above a set of bookshelves. There were only fifteen minutes left until midnight.

Draco looked at Delphini, trying to manifest his usual calm, careful demeanor. “How far away is the big house?”

“I can see it from here,” she said, her eyes on the snake wrapped around her wrist. She reached for it and carefully stroked along its scaly head. “But no one can see us. Auntie says she has protected our cottage. She’s a keeper of secrets—that’s what she said.”

“A secret keeper,” Draco corrected her automatically, his mind half-removed from the conversation as he considered the position he was in.

“Yes, that’s it,” she said with a nod, before she tilted her head at Draco, “why does mum not like you? You seem nice.”

Draco tried to smile at her. “She’s my aunt, just like my mum Narcissa is yours. We have a... troubling history with one another.” He paused, eyes flicking back to the clock again, heart thudding in his throat. “Your mum doesn’t like people that I love. So it makes it difficult for us to... get along.”

Delphini seemed to be thinking as she stared at Draco. “People like the Mudblood?”

Draco raised his brows slightly. The girl was clever.

“Yes,” he said carefully, “calling her that is precisely what I don’t like about how Bellatrix thinks.”

“Oh,” she said thoughtfully, “is it a mean name?”

Draco nodded. “It’s very cruel actually. Her name is Hermione Granger and she’s the best person I know. I love her very much.” He paused to breathe in shakily and let it out slowly. “Do you know what your mum wants to do with her?”

A sadness passed over Delphini’s face. “Mum wants to use her for a spell, I think. One that will protect me like it protected her and my dad.” Draco’s blood ran cold. His grip on the arms of the chair tightened until his knuckles turned white. Delphini looked uncertainly down to Marvolo, her lips twisting to the side. “I’m not sure I want to do that. I don’t want to hurt anyone, but mum says I need to. I need to make my dad proud.”

“You don’t have to hurt anyone,” Draco said quickly, trying to keep the desperation from his voice, “not if you don’t want to.”

Delphini frowned as she looked back at him. “I have to do what mum says. That’s the rule.”

“What about what you want, Delphi?” Draco said, the desperation clear in his voice now, “you’re important, too. And what about Hermione? Do you think she deserves to be hurt?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “I don’t know much about her, but the man in the office told me she was dying anyway. Mum’s knife was killing her, he said. So, perhaps it doesn’t matter.”

Draco’s mouth opened, needing to know more, but a door opened, and in strode Bellatrix.

Cold eyes found Draco, and she smiled at him.

“How nice of you to wake,” Bellatrix said with clear delight, “just in time for your Mudblood to arrive.”

“Draco said that’s a cruel word, mum,” Delphini said in the same matter-of-fact tone she had used when Draco had first awoken.

Bellatrix cast a humored gaze over to him before taking a seat next to her daughter. “Draco is a traitor,” she explained to the girl in a quiet, yet commanding tone, “he doesn’t see the world like we do. He betrayed your father, did you know that? Don’t listen to a thing he says.”

Delphini’s eyes, just like her mother’s, darkened as she shot him a piercing look.

Draco looked to his aunt. “Bella. You can’t be serious,” he said with revulsion, “you’re going to force her to make a Horcrux?”

Her gaze snapped to his, and she stood quickly. “What could you possibly know of it?”

“More than you think,” he shot back with a snarl, “and you can’t have a child *murder* someone, let alone split their soul apart.” Draco knew the moment he had started speaking that there was no use. You couldn’t argue with crazy.

But, Draco thought that Delphini might yet have a chance at understanding. There was something in her eyes as they had spoken that showed she was not yet as dark as her mother

was, or her father had been. He looked away from his aunt's snarl to meet the young girl's questioning look.

"Delphi, please," he implored, before he glanced hurriedly at the clock. Only a few minutes of the day remained. He looked back at Delphini. "What your mother is asking of you is wrong. This is a person's *life*. You can't—"

"Quiet," Bellatrix said and produced her wand from a pocket. "I would love to have you watch this, but I will silence you if I must. The wards will tell us any second if the fates want the Mudblood to be the sacrifice."

"Bella," Draco said through gritted teeth, "*please*, don't do this." He glanced over at his mother, who was still unconscious, before he looked at the clock. His heart pulsed terribly fast as he silently pleaded with the Gods that Hermione would be sent anywhere but the Manor at midnight.

*Let her be sent to my bed, he thought, let her stay safe, far away from here.*

"I always knew you had a soft heart, Draco," his aunt said, disgust in her voice. "It was always going to be your downfall."

Draco clenched his jaw and glared at the hateful woman. He bit back his desire to rage at her, and instead pulled at his limbs, trying to unstick from the chair. Bellatrix merely laughed at him as he twitched and jerked in the wooden chair. Delphini looked at him with a growing sadness on her face, watching him struggle.

Seconds ticked down.

He looked at his mother one more time, almost hoping that she would be awake, that she would help him in a way that he should be able to expect of his parent. But her head was slumped forward, hair covering most of her face. And she had betrayed him earlier.

More seconds gone.

Midnight approached.

His entire body tensed as he stared at the clock.

The clock dinged loudly, and it echoed in the room. Draco blinked, terror sitting on his chest so heavily that he felt like he couldn't breathe.

A sharp cracking noise sounded.

Draco flinched, dread encasing him, as someone appeared directly in front of him. Someone in jeans and a red sweater, her braid barely holding her hair together any longer, the wisps framing her face chaotically.

Hermione faced him, breathing heavily as she stared down at him.

“No,” Draco whispered, pushing all the horror of the moment into that one word. His desperation leaked into that one word.

Bellatrix cackled from behind her, and Hermione heard it, her shoulders stiffening, eyes stuttering at the sound.

Draco didn't know what he expected. But it was not what happened.

She smiled at him, and her eyes softened into something he might consider to be a loving gaze. Her smile was soft, beautiful, lighting up the hazel in her eyes.

And then—

A brilliant light flared, right from where the dagger, the Horcrux, had been sitting. Bellatrix shrieked as the room was engulfed in the light, taking up every corner, until Draco could see absolutely nothing.

## Chapter End Notes

If you're missing Hermione's POV in this chapter, we will hear more from her in the next, I promise!

Hope you enjoyed this prelude to WHAT COMES NEXT :)

Kudos and comments are very appreciated - next chapter planned for next week Tuesday, however I am going on holiday to Australia this week so I may be later and I apologise in advance if that's the case.

xx

Forawhile

# WHEN DARKNESS CALLS, YOU ANSWER

## Chapter Notes

Beta credit to the wonderful MyPrivateInsanity xx

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

Hermione had always considered herself a practical, logical person. It spanned all the way back to her youth, when she had first discovered her love for absorbing knowledge, and then using that knowledge to sequentially solve any problem that presented itself.

Despite the threat to her life, and the life of the person she cared about the most, this was no different.

The problem presented itself to Hermione.

And she laid it out before her, seeking solutions until she had a plan mapped out.

The plan was tenuous, filled with imperfections. It reminded Hermione strongly of her days with Harry and Ron, running around the Castle or the countryside on missions that were often foolishly planned, with gaping holes that would allow for failure at almost every turn.

Yet they had always managed to survive, to come out on top.

When Hermione examined her plan to save Draco and put an end to Bellatrix, she saw the holes, the gaps she was missing in the puzzle, and wondered if they would come out on top this time. But she saw no other way. The puzzle was by no means fully formed, but to win the game, she still had to try.

Hermione was dying. She knew it with a clarity that was startling and frightening, yet made absolute sense. Ever since she had watched Halpert's memory explaining the strange 'otherness' she was feeling, and the reason behind her sudden illness and blackouts, it all clicked together.

When she had been cut with the blade, a piece of Bellatrix's soul had slithered inside of her, seeking a home. She was an unintentional recipient of the soul. Hermione didn't know if that made her a Horcrux, but that knowledge would not change the facts. The soul wouldn't find a home inside of her; her body was rejecting it completely, so unless she could expel it, Hermione would die.

She knew the ways to expel a foreign soul from an item or being. The Sword of Gryffindor, Fiendfyre or Basilisk venom.

Hermione sat at Harry's desk, in his private office. She had asked for a few moments alone as midnight ticked closer and closer. She had set a few things onto the desk in front of her and stared at them with an absent resignation.

Draco's ring. A Basilisk fang. Her vine-wood wand.

Her eyes tracked over each item, brain filtering through the plan over and over until she was sick of thinking about it.

A drop of blood landed onto the wood of Harry's desk. Hermione looked down at it, then felt the tickle above her lip before another drip landed next to the first. She reached up, pressing the side of her fingers underneath her nose and pulled them back to examine the fresh blood staining her skin. She sniffed a little, her heart turning over in her chest at the reminder, and moved her hand back to her nose and pinched at it, an odd numbness settling over her shoulders like a blanket.

There was a knock on the door before it opened, which had her eyes shifting upwards, and Harry entered the office, a grave look on his face. She let go of her nose and wiped at it, sniffing again before giving him a small smile as he took a seat in front of the desk and released a heavy sigh.

They sat in silence for a long moment.

After a while, Harry took his glasses from his face and placed them on the desk before him so he could rub at his eyes before he looked back at her.

"I hate this, Hermione," he finally said, and there was a tremble in his voice that had her heart sinking. She watched him take up his glasses and place them back on his nose.

"I know," she said softly, just as her eyes strayed over a moving photograph set onto the desk in front of her. Harry and Theo had their arms around each other, the looks on their faces entirely different. Theo was grinning broadly, while Harry looked strangely sullen. Then as the iterations of her best friends moved, Theo turned to his husband and planted a kiss on Harry's cheek, causing the moody look to disappear with rare immediacy, and then they were both laughing and looking up at Hermione with matching, crinkle-eyed grins before it looped and started over. She swallowed thickly, watching the pair. She couldn't help but wonder if she would ever have the chance to make memories with the person *she* loved.

Harry sighed again, drawing her attention back to him.

"When I walked into the Forbidden Forest, I went knowing that I was going to die." Harry said, eyes cast low as he blinked quickly. "Knowing that... it does something to you. It changes you." He looked up, meeting her eyes. "I want to save you from this."

"I know you do, Harry," Hermione said, "but this one isn't yours to fix. You sacrificed your childhood to fix others' selfish mistakes and you've dedicated your adult life to keep trying to save the world and make it a better place. But you can't take this problem and make it yours. This one is mine to fix."

He rubbed a hand over his jaw with his mouth pressed into a thin line. "I guess I know that. But it's going to be almost impossible to let you go in there alone. You're... you're my best friend, Hermione. I can't... I don't..."

His voice wobbled and he broke off, looking into the corner of the room, his throat working with his emotion.

"I can't promise anything, Harry," she said, reaching across the desk and opening her hand. Harry glanced down at the offering and placed his own hand on top of hers, clutching at her fingers with a shaky breath. "But I'll do whatever I can to save him, to stop Bellatrix, and to... come back."

His fingers tightened around her own. "It was a choice, I think," he whispered, reiterating a conversation they'd had an hour ago, "but I don't know if it will be the same for you."

A choice.

Harry had never spoken to Hermione in detail about it before. But they had sat down together as he told her what he had experienced after being hit with the killing curse by Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest. Harry had been taken to an 'in between' place, as he described it. A place that didn't exist, but felt as real as being there with Hermione as they spoke quietly to one another. He had seen Albus Dumbledore, spoken with him. Harry had been told he had a choice, to stay there, to move on... or to go back. He had made more sacrifices in his short seventeen years than most would ever make in their entire lifetimes, so if he had wanted to move on and find peace... he could have.

Harry had come back. He had chosen to live.

Hermione could only hope she was offered the same choice when the time came.

"I don't want you going in there alone," Harry said after a long pause.

She stared at him for a moment, wishing to agree with him. Hermione didn't relish the thought of being thrown into whatever nightmare scenario could be waiting for her. Yet there was an acute desire to see Draco, to be sure he was okay and would come to no harm. It was that desire, so strong and consuming, that had Hermione knowing with an utter certainty she would do this and face whatever might happen. For him.

"It will only take me, Harry," she reasoned with him, "and I'll send a Patronus with details if and when I can, but I have a feeling that wherever the magic might take me will be heavily warded, and protected. A Patronus might not be able to get out once I'm in."

"I know," Harry said, "it's just... this feels wrong. Sitting back and doing nothing."

"Harry..."

He sighed and then stood. "I'll go and fetch the vial. He should be finished with the extraction by now." Harry looked at her lingeringly, then turned and started to leave the office.

“Harry,” she called. He paused in the doorway and turned back to face her. His face was drawn into a mask of terrible sadness. Harry knew exactly what was going to come. Hermione felt oddly calm as she looked at her best friend. “Take care of him,” she whispered, her finger fiddling with the golden ring on the wood in front of her, “if this doesn’t go the way I hope—please make sure he... that he’s okay after all of this.”

Harry merely blinked at her, his green eyes betraying his sorrow even though he had little bodily reaction to her words. She watched his throat move as he swallowed, and his hand gripping tightly to the edge of the door. Finally, he nodded—a sharp jerk downward of his head. “Course, ‘Mione.”

Then he turned and he left.

\*\*\*

Harry had cast a magical countdown to midnight, and the numbers shimmered in the air before them all as they watched and waited.

The silence in the room was filled with a thick tension. Harry and the other Aurors were agitated in their frustration, feeling helpless as Hermione stood in front of them all. Several arguments had already broken out and been quelled, that this was madness, that relying on an unknown magic to take Hermione where she needed to go was idiotic, with no concept of what lay on the other side.

Hermione understood. She even agreed. But her argument had simply been: what other option was there? She was an adult, an adept fighter, and this was her choice.

Theo stood off to the side, flicking his gaze worriedly between Hermione and his husband, a permanent crease between his eyebrows. They’d already had a solemn conversation that had ended with tears, and even though she wanted nothing more than to pull both Theo and Harry in for a hug until her time was up, she refrained. Hermione didn’t relish breaking down into tears in front of all the eyes in the room.

With five minutes to go, she enacted the first part of her plan: an impervious charm on both of her hands, creating a protective barrier. Harry then handed her a small vial, and Hermione had stood back from him, looking down at it. A clear liquid lay within, a strangely pleasant pearlescent look to it. She took in a deep, fortifying breath and met Harry’s eyes with a grateful nod before she placed the vial into her pocket, where it clinked against the golden ring.

With that out of the way, there was nothing left to do but wait. She stood, trying not to focus on the fact that within a few more minutes, inexplicable danger awaited.

The seconds passed by, both too slowly and too quickly. It was maddening, the waiting.

But when there were only thirty seconds left of the day, Hermione felt her heart thudding in her throat, could feel it pulsing into her fingertips. Her nerve endings buzzed uncomfortably, and she quickly tried to shake the feeling from her hands before it could make her tremble.



“Patronus the moment you can,” Harry said, his voice thin with his worry.

Hermione nodded.

Twenty seconds.

“Please be careful,” Theo said, and she looked over to him to see his eyes were filled with tears once more.

“I will,” she promised.

Ten seconds.

Hermione looked to Harry standing before her. In those last few seconds, she thought of the moment when he had stood in front of her and Ron, telling them he was surrendering to Voldemort. She had understood. A part of her had already guessed what lay within him and what that had meant for him. But it had been so heart-wrenching, so incomprehensibly painful to release your best friend to walk alone into the forest towards certain death. Nothing can prepare you for a goodbye like that. Hermione had offered to go with him, knowing it would also mean her death. She had meant it. She would have gone, even if it was only to offer her comfort and support up until their last moments.

As his green eyes met hers, she knew it by the look on his face. Harry would offer the same, if only he were able to. The desperation on his face was utterly clear.

As the last few seconds counted down, Hermione closed her eyes, blocking out the worried faces in front of her.

Silver eyes danced at the front of her mind, and she let her thoughts narrow to nothing but him: Draco.

*Take me to him.*

*Take me to Draco.*

Hermione felt the pull, a tugging at her lower spine and she was whisked away from the safety of the Ministry and flung through space.

She had been moved, quite unceremoniously, every night for the past week at midnight. Either flung onto Draco’s bed, or to other, less desirable locations. You could have said that Hermione was quite used to the sensation by now.

Only this time, it felt different.

Rather than a tumble through time and space, with an immediate, disorienting landing, Hermione felt strangely like she was floating, flying.

She opened her eyes, blinking against a brightness that was unnatural.

Hermione tried to look around, but it was as though she didn't have any control over her body, like she didn't quite *exist*. It was bewildering, to feel so... detached from herself.

She could see nothing around, could sense nothing. All was merely white. No, not white. Golden.

Then there was a voice.

*"I have been trying to help you,"* the strange voice said with no visible source. It was like the voice was everywhere, surrounding her, within her.

*"He will be your guide back to the living, take hold of what he offers."*

Hermione blinked again, trying to make sense of what was happening, what the magic was trying to tell her. She tried to speak to it, but it was like she had no mouth, no voice.

*"I sent you to him, on those midnights. He is the key; love is the key. Focus on him, and I will show you the way to the dagger."*

Something started to shimmer around Hermione, the light fracturing.

*"I am love."*

The strange world she was in seemed like it shook, and then she could hear an awful noise, like something tearing apart.

*"The darkness is the opposite. I am almost gone. Please end this."*

The tearing noise escalated, screeching in Hermione's head, and if she knew where her hands were, she would have slapped them over her ears to try and block out the noise.

*"It is time now. Thank you, Hermione Jean Granger."*

The world around her split apart, the noise so loud she thought her head might shatter, like her skull would tear in two. She wanted to scream, to beg for it to end, but then—

It was over.

There was a sharp cracking sound, and she could feel her body again, her feet landing onto solid ground. Her chest heaved as she tried to make sense of her surroundings.

*"No,"* a whispered word from in front of her.

Hermione's gaze finally focused, and her body jerked to find Draco right in front of her, sitting on a wooden chair against a wall. Her heart tumbled over at the sight of him. The first feeling was a profound relief at seeing him alive. The second feeling was fear, because that very same emotion was written plainly across his face. He looked desperately terrified as their gazes collided and they stared at each other.

There was a laugh from behind her. A laugh Hermione would know anywhere, and she felt her entire body tense, memories flashing cruelly and unbidden across her vision.

But she wouldn't let Bellatrix destroy her focus.

Draco.

So beautiful and loyal. She could picture it: a future with him. It was almost too easy to imagine what it would be like if there were no barriers between them, and how they might find their way to build a future together. Waking up with him every day. Getting into his bed every night—by choice. Making memories together like that photograph of Harry and Theo. Hermione wanted it with every atom of her being.

She smiled at him, focusing on him and nothing else.

Hermione might have smiled even wider, with triumph, when the brightness erupted into the room. It was predictable now—how the dagger would shine when there was overwhelming emotion between her and Draco. It was no different today, it seemed.

She heard Bellatrix cry out from somewhere behind her, the sound one of wild fury as the room was consumed by the light from the Horcrux. It shuttered her vision, made it near impossible to see.

Hermione had her wand in her hand, undeterred from her plan, even by the chaotic wailing coming from somewhere in the room behind her. She thought she could hear another voice, small and confused, but she couldn't focus on that.

She took one step forward and reached out, finding Draco's hands affixed to the chair with both of hers. Hermione grasped at his hands for the barest of moments, only long enough to enact the second part of her plan and slipped a wand carefully into his hand. She could hear him breathing hard, felt his fingers spasm underneath her own and closing around the handle of the wand just before she released him and took a step back.

"Hermione—"

"No time," she uttered quickly, cutting off the desperate lilt to his voice as he had uttered her name.

She pointed her wand in his direction, even though she could see nothing more than a faint outline of him. "Finite Incantatum," she whispered, but didn't linger to make sure Draco was free from whatever kept him sitting in the chair. He had a wand now if it hadn't worked. Hermione whirled, towards the direction of the source of light. She needed to find the Horcrux.

"Hermione," Draco said again, clipped and roughened by emotion that she was unused to hearing in the usual inflections of his voice. He said something else, perhaps a spell, perhaps something to her—but she couldn't make it out. Then he said, rather clearly and with a shaky kind of frustration, "it won't work—Hermione, my wand."

She was making her way hurriedly across the room, the light already starting to fade away until some of the surroundings were coming into focus, just in time for Hermione to dodge a coffee table she was about to collide with.

She lifted her wand again. “Accio Draco’s wand.” Hermione held out her hand as she moved, waiting for the wand to fly into her open palm, but it never came.

“Nice try, Mudblood,” came a sneering voice, and Hermione could practically see the dark, heavy-lidded eyes surrounded by those black ringlets that haunted her so.

She looked around, blinking away the searing light imprinted into her vision as the light continued to ebb. Bellatrix suddenly came into focus in front of her, all darkness and wild hair, and Hermione could see her scrambling across a couch and reaching for—

She sucked in a sharp breath and raised her wand again. “Accio Horcrux!”

Bellatrix was fast, her hand wrapping firmly around the hilt of the blade, taking it up in her grasp before she faced Hermione. But Bellatrix hadn’t needed to pick up the blade. Hermione’s spell was never going to work.

She had seen something, a shimmer in front of her. Hermione had noticed it just in time to skid to a halt before she had slammed into it.

Just then the light entirely disappeared and the room became normal, the aid of the ancient magic leaving her utterly alone. She trembled at the thought. Hermione breathed heavily as she stared at Bellatrix Lestrange through a large ward that spanned the room, separating them from one another.

A deranged grin spread across Bellatrix’s face as she regarded Hermione through the magical barrier between them.

“Hello, Mudblood,” she said, “how nice to see you again.”

Hermione gritted her teeth and took a few shaky steps backwards as she assessed the ward before her. Clearly no spells would get through unless she could disable it.

“Hermione,” Draco growled.

She glanced behind her, seeing him still seated, and she frowned. It was only then that Hermione noticed Narcissa Malfoy was next to him in a similar chair. She looked unconscious.

She looked back to Draco. His face was lined with his anger as he tried to jerk out of whatever held him to the chair. The wand she had slipped him was held loosely in his left hand where she had put it, and Hermione watched him wave it, his face slipping into a mask of concentration to produce a wordless spell, yet nothing happened. She didn’t understand how that could be.

Hermione backed up towards Draco, keeping Bellatrix in her sight as she did.

“What spell?” she asked him quietly as she drew closer. It must be powerful and dual-purpose if it kept Draco attached to the chair and stymied his ability to use magic.

“I don’t know,” he said gruffly, shifting in his seat with aggravation, his fixture to the chair remaining steadfast, “but you have to get—”

“It wouldn’t matter what you tried,” Bellatrix said, cutting Draco off and pacing behind the magical wall with a small smile on her face as she looked at Hermione, “your magic won’t work here, unfortunately—for you.” Then she nodded towards her family members, both bound to their chairs. “Neither will theirs.”

Hermione frowned as ice chilled her veins. She looked down to her wand for a moment, not entirely believing Bellatrix, until she tried to cast a simple *Lumos*, and found her wand doing absolutely nothing.

Swallowing the building fear in her gut, she slowly looked back up to Bellatrix, whose smile had spread, her dark eyes staring at Hermione with glee.

“What is this?”

“A nullifying spell,” Bellatrix said and glanced down to casually check her nails, like this was an everyday conversation. “I found a piece of your hair in the Manor. It’s old magic, but within this home, your magic has been abolished.” She looked up and locked eyes with Hermione, a fierce look in her black eyes. “It’s the way it should be with people like you. Filthy thing. You don’t deserve magic.”

Hermione took in a deep breath and slowly put away her wand.

“Unfortunate as it is,” Bellatrix continued conversationally, “my own family appear to be lowering themselves down to your level—well, so be it. They can join the rabble like you and be magicless.”

With a heart-stopping realization, she found that she was rubbing her thumb against her forefinger agitatedly while she thought, and that she could *feel* it. The impervious charm she had cast before she had left the Ministry was gone. Dread flooded her as the first part of her plan—the most crucial part, was now destroyed. And without her magic, Hermione couldn’t recast it.

“Oh,” Hermione muttered, feeling utterly foolish for not considering the possibility that she couldn’t rely on her wand, or the wand that she had brought in for Draco. Suddenly, she saw her plan unraveling in her mind’s eye and she could feel the panic starting to seep into her veins, coursing through her until her chest pulsed with shallow breaths.

“Hermione,” Draco ground out as she stood, somewhat hyperventilating in front of him as she tried to piece another plan together in the space of a few erratic heartbeats.

She turned her head to look at him, finding his face blurry as she tried to focus on him amidst her rising panic. His eyes searched across hers, his face contorted by his own desperate helplessness in their situation.

“She’s planning to kill you, to make another Horcrux,” Draco said, voice low and hoarse. Hermione blinked slowly at him, and she almost wanted to say how unsurprising that was, that this realization seemed rather inevitable, but she said nothing. “Can you leave again?” he asked, hands gripping the arms of his chair tightly, his body leaning towards her as far as he was able.

Hermione stared at him, trying to understand what he was saying for a moment, before she shook her head with a sudden clarity. She turned back to Bellatrix, who stood with a manic grin as she fingered the sharpened edges of the Horcrux, just watching them interact like it was all some kind of stage show to her. “No,” she said with vehemence, “and even if I could, I wouldn’t leave you here.”

She heard Draco mutter her name again, this time sounding like a frenzied plea.

Hermione moved a few steps closer as she eyed the ward before her. A magical ward, clearly meant to keep them apart. She would never get to the Horcrux, would never have a hope in ending this if she couldn’t get to Bellatrix first.

“This is quite a fortunate turn of events,” Bellatrix said coolly, and then she looked over her shoulder, glancing to the couch behind her, “I had thought it extremely odd—you showing up at the Manor. Now, I see it for what it is—a gift.”

Hermione flicked her eyes to Bellatrix who had turned back to her. “A gift?” she asked a little absently, her eyes returned to scrutinizing the magical wall.

“From the Gods, perhaps,” Bellatrix said with an uncaring shrug, “delivered to me on a platter so you can ensure the survival of someone very important.”

She was only half-listening as Hermione’s hand slipped into her pocket, fingers touching the small vial before they closed around something smaller, the cold metal sending a shiver up her arm as she clenched it into her fist. She felt a tremble course along her spine at the hungry way Bellatrix was suddenly looking at her. “What do you want from me,” Hermione said through her teeth as she took one more, slow step towards the shimmering ward.

Bellatrix’s answering grin was so wide, Hermione thought she might have been able to count all of her teeth. “All in good time. Since I have you for as long as I’d like, and powerless as you should be, I’d like a few answers from *you* first, Mudblood.”

Draco made a growling noise from behind her, which they both ignored.

“Oh, yeah?” she answered petulantly, her eyes trailing across the bookshelves to her left, before the corner of her eye caught a movement beyond the couches and her head snapped back towards Bellatrix. There was someone else in this room, but Hermione couldn’t see anyone as she scanned the spaces behind the couch where she had seen the movement only a moment ago. Hermione’s eyes slid back to Bellatrix. Her hand curled even tighter around the metal she held while she glared at the woman. “Perhaps I don’t care to give you any answers,” she then snarled at Bellatrix before she lifted her arm and threw.

The golden ring arced through the air, and Hermione watched it with a narrowed focus, holding her breath and hoping that the magical properties of the ring would strip away the power of the ward Bellatrix had cast. The breath left her lungs, her heart leaping with both excitement and profound fear as the ring pierced the ward and went straight through it, as though the magic didn't exist at all.

Bellatrix was wide-eyed and dumbfounded, and seemed to raise her hand out of instinct, catching the golden ring easily in her left hand.

A few things happened as Bellatrix unfurled her fingers to look down at the ring now sitting innocently on her open palm.

Hermione breathed in deeply, reaching into her pocket and touching at the vial in a comforting gesture, reminding herself it was there.

Then Bellatrix and Draco both spoke at the same time.

"What is this—" Bellatrix said before her eyes narrowed on the ring with some kind of sharp recognition; her gaze flew up and landed directly on Narcissa Malfoy.

"Hermione, no!" Draco yelled at the same time, almost drowning out his aunt's confused garble.

Then, Hermione was clenching her hands, and she narrowed her focus to her own ring— the one secured around her left ring finger—and let the rings' magic pull her. The result was instantaneous. One moment, Hermione was on one side of the barrier with Draco and Narcissa, and in the next, she was standing directly in front of Bellatrix, who still had the ring in her open hand.

Bellatrix's eyes flew wide, but before she could react to the sudden appearance before her, Hermione was leaping onto her with a strangled cry, knowing that surprise and strength were her only options if her wand wouldn't work.

They both tumbled backwards into the couch, Bellatrix emitting a furious cry of surprise as they fell. *The dagger was in her right hand*, Hermione recalled as her vision was momentarily obscured by a wave of black hair in her face. She reared back, her body pinning Bellatrix's legs to the couch, just in time to see the older witch reaching for her own pocket—presumably to find her wand. Hermione grabbed for her wrist, circling it with a rough grip to stop her. Bellatrix snarled and twisted her body underneath Hermione, and they both toppled from the couch onto the floor with matching shrieks.

She could hear yelling from somewhere in the room, a deep, desperate voice that Hermione could not make sense of, but knew it was Draco. She could *feel* the icy fear in the tone of his voice without needing to hear the words.

Her blood pulsed in ever-quickenings waves through her body, the adrenaline making her feel light-headed as she pushed herself up by both hands just as she saw something shiny heading straight for her.

Hermione ducked back to the ground, the swipe of a sharp blade narrowly missing her. She brought her knee up, catching Bellatrix in the stomach, hard enough that the other witch let out a soft grunt, but it didn't deter her. She was on her knees above Hermione, and had the blade at the ready again, about to bring it down.

Another sharp cry came from within the room. Hermione didn't think that sound had been Draco, but couldn't focus as the dagger came straight for her chest. But the cry did something else; it made Bellatrix pause, for just a moment—and Hermione was able to roll haphazardly into the edge of the couch to again narrowly avoid it.

A low snarl, and then before she could regain her bearings, agony lanced across her head and Hermione felt her vision darken, her head lightening strangely. Bellatrix had her hair wrapped in her fist, tugging her mercilessly back from the couch and onto the floor beneath. She cried out from the sharpness of the pain, her eyes scrunching shut with it. Feeling dizzy and blinded by the pain and panic, Hermione tried to kick out at Bellatrix, but something heavy pressed into her torso and her legs became useless against the weight on top of her. Her head still throbbed from whatever had hit her, and then in the next moment her air supply was cut off. Her eyes opened, and she blinked away pained tears to see Bellatrix on top of her, leaning forward and pressing her forearm across her throat. One of Hermione's hands was pinned beneath the heavy press of Bellatrix's knee, her other hand was free and scrabbling at the arm at her throat, nails scraping against skin. Dark eyes twinkled menacingly at her from above, and Hermione was suddenly back there—on the Drawing Room floor, eighteen years old and being tortured by Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Bella—don't!" Hermione could hear Draco's petrified pleas above the roaring of her own panic in her ears, "I beg you—I'll do anything, please don't hurt her!"

Bellatrix tutted gently, tilting her head to regard Hermione with puzzlement.

"What have you done to him, Mudblood?" Bellatrix asked with what seemed to be genuine wonder, uncaring of the nails Hermione raked against her wrist, "to make him *plead* like a sniveling wretch for someone like *you*." Her head shook slowly and then she turned her head to look over in the direction of her nephew. "Such a disappointment."

Bellatrix relented only slightly, her arm releasing the pressure against her throat and allowing Hermione to pull in a rush of air. Then the dagger, the Horcrux was dangling in front of her before it was pressed softly against her cheek and run teasingly down to her jawline. Bellatrix was grinning at the fear in Hermione's eyes.

"Child," Bellatrix suddenly said, tilting her head away, but keeping her eyes on Hermione, "come here—I'll show you what you need to do."

Hermione's chest pulsed rapidly, and confusion flooded her. *Child?*

The press of the blade against her cheek was both a horrible and a thankful reminder of what needed to happen next. She had no more time to waste. The dagger was right there, and the vial was in her pocket. Hermione desperately wished there was more time, but her free hand snaked into her pocket.



More time to tell Draco how she felt about him, despite the egregiously short amount of time they had had with each other.

Her fingers closed around the vial, the glass cold on her palm.

Time to tell him that she was *glad* they were married, that he was her husband. That she had never seen herself as wanting to become a *wife*, but now she wouldn't change it for anything, because it was him.

Her chest stuttered as she started to pull the vial from her pocket, eyes unfocussing away from how Bellatrix was shifting her head again, like she was looking for someone.

Time to tell Draco that, against all sense and reason, she was in love with him. Ardently so.

The vial was free of her pocket and her hand clenched it tightly as her gaze focussed once more, narrowing onto the Horcrux, which had moved slightly away from Hermione's face and now hovered directly above her.

Time to wish. To hope. To dream of a future.

Bellatrix wasn't looking at her, so Hermione turned her head, allowing her eyes to move away from her target for just a moment. Just a brief pause so she could find silver eyes and see them one more time. Draco was looking at her already, body taut and straining in the chair, a look of pure anguish, the suffering on his face was so stark.

*Goodbye*, she thought with a resounding ache in her heart. Saying it aloud felt cruel beyond words—alerting him to the end.

Hermione swallowed raggedly and turned away, eyes finding the dagger dangling above her face.

Her face contorted with her own determination as her fist clenched with every ounce of strength she possessed, and the vial shattered in her hand, glass splintering audibly. She bit back the cry of pain as she felt the shards biting in her palm and felt the liquid seeping across her skin.

She had no choice but to ignore, quite resolutely, that Hermione had just willingly allowed Basilisk Venom onto her unprotected skin. The Impervious Charm was supposed to have protected her for this part, but there was no helping it. Plans changed, and Hermione had to accept that this part, her death, was going to come sooner than she had wanted.

She felt the burn almost immediately. Not the sharp sting of the glass, or the heat from her own blood welling against her skin. But the immeasurable burning sensation of poison sinking into her flesh, writhing into the open wounds and flooding her veins.

Hermione gasped as she felt her left hand already seizing from the blinding pain, feeling her wrist locking up with it shortly thereafter.

Time. There was almost none left already.

Bellatrix had heard the glass break as she had shattered the vial and had turned back to Hermione, eyes narrowed with distrust. The Horcrux still hovered just above Hermione's face, and with a sharp exhale as she tried and failed to ignore the pain, she moved her left hand.

Bellatrix held the blade by the handle, so Hermione went straight for the deadly edges themselves and closed her fist around it with such fierce recklessness, that she felt the blade slicing into her already damaged hand even further as she grasped it tightly.

Then it happened.

Chaos.

A scream of utter surprise, and perhaps agony..

Where light had exploded from the dagger earlier, this was the opposite.

It was like an explosion of darkness. A black cloud bloomed above them, hissing as it swarmed like an ominous storm.

Bellatrix was suddenly gone from Hermione, her weight leaving her all at once amidst a terrible cry.

Hermione's breathing was shallow as she lay back on the floor and stared upwards. The dark cloud formed a shape—one with wild smoky hair as it writhed and rippled in the air of the room. Her chest stuttered and gasped as she looked up at the apparition of Bellatrix, the piece of her from inside the dagger, expelled by the Basilisk venom.

The dark Bellatrix opened its mouth and uttered a terrible scream, one that set the room trembling, the windows shuddering in their frames, the books shaking on the shelves. Glass shattered somewhere in the room. A light exploded. Magic crackled menacingly. Then—it was gone, like a dark flame that had suddenly burned itself out. The black cloud, the soul, vanished into nothingness, and a deathly silence was left in its wake.

“No!” Bellatrix cried out from near her, the sound guttural and raw.

Something cold lay against Hermione's chest, and she reached for it with her undamaged hand, fingers scrabbling against the hilt of the dagger, which Bellatrix must have dropped when the soul was evicted. Her grip tightened around it.

Her entire left arm felt numb, detached from her body. Hermione swallowed thickly; the burning sensation was traveling through her body, like she was being set slowly aflame, the pain intensifying with every second that ticked by. She could hear her own ragged breaths, echoing in her ears along with Draco's yelled words from somewhere around her. He was calling her name, she thought, as she tried to make sense of what was happening. Hermione had little control over her body; a terrifying weakness was dragging her slowly towards unconsciousness. The only thing she knew for certain is that she was dying, and that as she died, the piece of Bellatrix within her would also die. Then Bellatrix could be killed. It was a small comfort, knowing this, but it was a comfort nonetheless.

“Delphi!” Hermione heard Draco yell, the sound pushing into her ears, “*please.*”

Pain. Then numbness. Then pain again.

Dying—she was dying. Hermione wished she had the time to say something profound, or even just to say goodbye to Draco. He didn’t deserve this...

Her right hand tightened suddenly on the blade, her awareness slamming back into her for one stuttered moment despite her vision darkening at the edges.

She would never know how she did it. There was almost nothing left inside of her. Her body felt numb, almost incapable of moving as her eyes refocused and she stared upwards at a dark ceiling. Yet Hermione managed to sit up, her back slumped against the edges of the couch beside her. Bellatrix was kneeling next to her on the floor, a dark, bereft look on her face. Like she could hardly believe what had just happened.

Hermione’s hand felt loose around the dagger, sapped of strength. But a deep hatred was curling in her gut, and it gave her one final surge. With the last vestiges of her energy, she pushed herself forwards to topple back on top of Bellatrix. The witch seemed to be stunned, whether by surprise, or weakened by the loss of her Horcrux, but she seemed to be hardly fighting back for the moment as Hermione brought the dagger up with a snarled promise of death. This was it—her chance to end this woman who had nothing but darkness in her heart. A woman who would kill Hermione without blinking. Who would kill Draco without care.

Hermione would kill her first. She would sink the Malfoy heirloom into her chest, her heart, and when Hermione was gone in the next few moments, the soul going with her, she could only hope that Bellatrix would be dead. Gone. Never to return.

Her body trembled from the effort of keeping upright. Black spots danced in her vision. The entire left side of her body felt like it had been cleaved away by a burning blade, like it no longer belonged to her.

She was about to bring the knife down, to sink it into Bellatrix’s chest, much in the same way Hermione had seen done to Nymphadora in the pensieve, when a small voice broke through her rage.

“Mummy?”

It was the voice of a young girl, and it made Hermione hesitate for just a moment as she looked up into a pair of dark eyes, a small face framed in silvery hair. A face stricken with terror. Hermione wondered if her vision must be more compromised than she had thought, for the silver of the girls’ hair suddenly turned such a stark black it looked like death itself. That brief pause, that small hesitation as she stared at the girl—it had been enough.

Bellatrix got hold of herself, the shock of losing her Horcrux fading, and she took up Hermione’s arm, overpowering her in that single moment of hesitation. Hermione was flung to the side, the dagger leaving her, useless arm flopping to the ground, all strength leached away.

*I failed*, Hermione thought miserably as she lay on the floor, unable to move any longer.

Her vision was dark around the edges. She could hear Draco yelling. He was pleading desperately, and she felt a tear slide from her eye and down her temple. This would be the last thing she would hear and understand. Draco's pain. She didn't want him to see her die.

*Draco*, her mind whispered because she couldn't part her lips to speak, *I love you. I'm sorry.*

One of her last thoughts was that her pain had gone and that she simply felt nothing. Her consciousness began to slip away, like sinking into a hot bath.

Death beckoned for her.

It took her in its relentless clutches, and pulled.

Pulled her down.

Down...

...

Until she was nothing and nowhere, all at once.

## Chapter End Notes

I'm back from Australia! Thanks to all those who left a lovely comment wishing me a good vacation, I had a wonderful time.

Here it is - only a day late! Hope you enjoy this one, and I'll gently nudge you in the direction of the HEA tags on this fic, just in case anyone is genuinely concerned about the endgame x

Ever thankful to anyone reading this, and for being here with me, it means so much.

Further update planned for next week Tuesday as per usual scheduling. Planned: two more chapters with an epilogue (so 3 more updates / 3 weeks to completion).

xx

Forawhile

# THE GIRL WHO LIVED

## Chapter Notes

Beta credit to the truly wonderful MyPrivateInsanity

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

Draco felt utterly, wholly helpless as he watched Hermione appear on the other side of the magical wall and grapple with his deranged aunt. He felt as though he was fragile, shattering, like a vase splintering into innumerable pieces. He felt paralyzed. Powerless. Incompetent. Weak. *Terrified*.

These were feelings he had long since buried, and ones he was not used to experiencing on such a large scale in his adult life. Draco had always been the one to join the fray first, to sprint headlong into danger without a care. Watching it, unable to help, felt like drowning. Like flailing in the water, unable to pull in enough oxygen as the heavy waves beat against his body, leaving him thrashing helplessly.

Hermione had the upper hand, taking Bellatrix by surprise as they were both flung back onto the couch cushions. His aunt was reaching for her wand, but Hermione had grabbed her wrist, stopping her. Then they were both lurching to the side and falling to the ground. Draco's heart stopped in his chest as Bellatrix landed on top of her this time.

"Hermione!" he heard himself roar, trying to fling his own body forward, desperately tugging against the confines of the spell that held him to the chair. "No—don't—" Draco jerked and strained, his anger and terror pulsating through him. He saw Bellatrix lifting the dagger, readying to bring it down and a word tore from his throat, "NO!"

Hermione ducked out of the way, narrowly missing the attack before she kned Bellatrix in the stomach. It barely slowed his aunt down, as she again prepared to find a home for the dagger in Hermione's chest. Draco's frantic gaze saw a movement above them, and spotted Delphini peering over the top of the couch, seeing her mother raising the knife to strike Hermione. The young girl let out a terrified cry, and Bellatrix was momentarily distracted by the sound of her daughter.

Draco's entire body pulled taut at another close miss as Bellatrix regained her bearings and struck again, Hermione rolling to the side. Delphini ducked back out of Draco's sight, but not before he caught her wide-eyed look of terror.

As he watched his aunt brutally bring the back of the dagger, the heavy pommel, glancing across Hermione's head, Draco clenched his teeth and wished he were cowardly enough to close his eyes so that he didn't have to see her get hurt. It felt like it were he, Draco, being

struck. Like a knife was slicing into his skin as he watched the woman he loved be dragged back by her hair and flung to the ground, Bellatrix's body crushing Hermione into the floor.

Horror surged through him like a tidal wave. "Bella, don't!" he urged, unable to help his continuous tugging against the chair, "I beg you—I'll do anything, please don't hurt her!" In this moment, for Hermione, Draco was not above begging. He would plead with his aunt, would hand himself over for whatever disgusting ritual she wanted, if it would mean Hermione might come out of this alive.

Bellatrix was muttering something to her before she sent Draco a wretched look of disgust as she pressed her arm into Hermione's throat. He could see her clawing at Bellatrix's wrist.

*Fight*, Draco silently pleaded with her, *Hermione, fight*.

"Draco."

Startled, his head turned swiftly to his right, seeing his mother staring back at him, a stricken expression upon her face as Narcissa realised what was happening in the room right in front of them.

"Mother," he said, voice hoarse.

A gasping noise had his gaze whipping back to the centre of the room. Bellatrix had removed her arm from Hermione's throat, whose chest was heaving with her quickened breaths. His aunt then began to taunt Hermione with the Horcrux, brushing the deadly edge against her cheek. Fury coursed through him.

"Can you move, mother?" Draco said quickly through his clenched teeth. He heard her shifting and straining at the bounds of the magic that held them both to their chairs.

"No," she answered in a wobbly voice, "is she okay... where is she?"

He flinched, realising Narcissa was asking about Delphini. Meanwhile, Hermione was fighting for her life without her magic to tap into. His cousin was clearly in no danger at this moment from Bellatrix... and yet it was what his mother was concerned with. Not whether he was okay. Not what her sister was doing. Draco had barely spared the young girl a thought since the moment Hermione had arrived. But of course, that was who Narcissa would care about. He understood, somewhat, but he still ignored her question, and ignored the lick of pain against already gaping wounds. He narrowed his focus back on Hermione.

With a jolt, he watched her turn her head to look at him. Bellatrix was saying something, but not to Hermione. And it was in that moment of distraction that she met Draco's eyes, trying to communicate something.

The stuttering of her eyes, mournful and terrible, told Draco he didn't want to know what Hermione was trying to say, that his heart might shatter if he understood the silent words in her eyes.

She looked away, and the breath left his lungs. He had the most dreadful, mournful thought flashing across his mind as their eye contact broke; that it would be the last time he would look into those beautiful, intelligent, and piercing hazel eyes.

Draco shook his head, unable to bear the thought, and let words pour from his mouth. “No—Hermione, no! Whatever you’re doing, stop it! Stop, *please*... don’t...”

He heard something break, as if someone had stepped onto a shard of glass. He saw Hermione flinch and his eyes narrowed, trying to fathom what was happening, his heart thudding in his throat and making it difficult to breathe.

A rough gasp left Hermione’s mouth, and Draco watched a shudder wrack her body before she reached up with a shaky hand. It was a slow movement, as though her arm were a heavy thing, like it cost her something terrible to move it upwards. He felt the horror on his own face, realising that he could see blood coating the palm of her hand as she exposed it in her reach—reaching for the Horcrux hovering above her, held loftily by Bellatrix, who was trying to usher Delphini out from behind the couch.

But it was not only blood on her hand. Her hand had turned a purplish colour, thin lines streaking out from her palm and snaking up the sleeve of her jumper. He sucked in a breath of wretched understanding. He had reviewed some photographs of the effects of venoms earlier in the day, after seeing what they had in the pensieve. Draco knew then that Potter must have been successful in securing the fangs from Hogwarts Castle, because he knew that’s what he was seeing on Hermione’s hand. Basilisk venom.

She would be poisoned by it. Dying.

*No.*

“Mother,” Draco choked out, feeling small like a helpless child as the word fell from his mouth unbidden.

He heard Narcissa say something, but his brain didn’t register it, for the moment Hermione’s hand made contact with the Horcrux, the room erupted with a discordant darkness. A gust of air hit Draco and his body was flung back against the back of his chair. The chill of the wind that had struck him felt so much more than simply *cold*; he sensed something viscerally evil as it washed over his skin.

Draco squinted against it and looked up at the pandemonium before him. A smoky cloud had formed above Hermione and Bellatrix, who seemed to have been torn apart from the sudden eruption. The cloud moved and shifted, and in the next heartbeat, Draco realised it was in the form of a person, and a large, gaping mouth opened before it emitted a piercing cry that made the blood freeze in his veins, chilling him to his bones. The ground beneath him shook, and the windows rippled dangerously in their frames. A mirror to his right exploded in a shower of glass. A lamp near them shattered, spewing sparks of flame in all directions. The cry began to fade away, though it lingered in his ears. And then—it was gone. The cloud vanished into the air, leaving the room feeling awfully quiet as it dissipated.

Hermione had described to him what it had been like, destroying a Horcrux. What she had witnessed when the soul of Voldemort had been torn from its home. She had said it was terrible and terrifying, something that she had seen in her nightmares for years after. Draco could understand her words now, having seen it himself. It felt as though something had slithered under his skin and changed him irrevocably.

His eyes moved from the now-empty space where the cloud had been and back down to Hermione, who was panting on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. A grimace of pain was on her face as she grabbed at the dagger that had been sitting on her chest with her uninjured hand.

Bellatrix was on her knees next to Hermione, looking stunned motionless, eyes unfocussed and staring as her chest heaved.

“Hermione,” Draco said, meaning to yell it, to get her to look at him. But it came out choked, his throat tightening as he watched her lying there as though unable to move.

He saw her again. Delphini, fingers gripping the back of the couch, was slowly standing to see what was happening. Her face was morphed into confusion mingled with fright as her wide eyes tracked over Hermione on the ground, and then over her mother. Her dark eyes raised to Draco, and their gazes met. “Delphi,” Draco said, his voice catching with an emotion he was incapable of keeping at bay, *“please.”*

Her narrow shoulders rose and fell with her quickened breathing, and Draco could see her lip wobbling, her uncertainty clear. Then she was looking over at something, her body turning and taking a step forward before she stalled, hesitating. He followed her gaze and the direction in which her body now faced. Draco saw a desk next to the large bookshelves. Atop it books and parchment were strewn haphazardly. There also looked to be several vials containing different coloured liquids.

Movement caught his eyes, and Draco turned his unwilling gaze back to Hermione, watching her struggle into a seated position, the knife clutched in her hand. She stared at Bellatrix, who still knelt motionless next to her, rage and vengeance written on her face.

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Delphini felt her breath shuddering in and out of her. She had never felt such inner conflict before in her short life.

She did not want to disappoint her mother.

She also did not want to watch someone die today.

Delphini liked Draco. She thought he seemed nice. And Aunt Cissa spoke so highly of him, and told her so many stories about her cousin that she sometimes felt like she knew him. Delphini had often wanted to meet him. She had always been told she couldn't, but she still felt oddly close to him.

So, she did not want Draco to watch someone he loved die. That seemed mean.



Delphini stared at the vials on the desk in the corner of the room, blinking in her state of hesitation and confusion.

*How badly will mum punish me if I help Draco and the Mud—uh, Hermione?*

She looked over her shoulder at Aunt Cissa. She was awake now—that was good. Delphini had started to get worried. Aunt was looking at her with a mixture of relief and desperation. Delphini thought, just perhaps, that Aunt would be proud if she chose to help.

Pride was something her mum was always drilling into Delphini, and she was eager to please, to make her family proud. But what should she do, if her actions might make one person angry, and another person proud? Who should she choose to please?

Memories flashed through her mind as she tried to decide. Aunt was always there, in the garden, with Delphini. She had helped with planting and caring for the roses. She let her keep Marvolo when she had found him among the dirt and leaves. Aunt had listened to every story Delphini ever had, even if it was only about the books she had been reading, or the snail she had discovered on the side of the house. Aunt would play games with her, read to her... she would hug her, tell Delphini she *loved* her. Her mum didn't do those things...

But she was her mother, and that—as Delphini had always been taught—was to be placed above all things in importance.

*What about what you want, Delphi?* Draco had asked her. *You're important, too.*

What *did* she want?

Perhaps she didn't know in that moment. And as Delphini looked at her Aunt, and then to Draco's face lined with grief, she thought that perhaps it was okay that she didn't know. As long as she knew what she *didn't* want.

A deep breath fled her lungs and then she was moving, running over to the desk, all hesitation eradicated. Delphini took up the first vial, and she thought it was the one that she had watched her mother place a piece of Draco's hair into. She threw it to the ground, listening to it smash on the floor as she reached for the next one. The one with Aunt Cissa's hair shattered on the ground next. The third and final vial, for Hermione, this she threw with particular fervour, hoping that she might live.

Delphini wheeled back around, feeling a strange kind of elation, which made her wonder if she had done the right thing. But what she saw made the blood chill inside her body, her stomach dropping right to her feet.

Hermione was upright, on top of her mother, and she was holding that dagger up as though about to... kill her mum.

A small whimper left her mouth as she felt truly frightened. "Mummy?"

Hermione seemed to pause, and then she looked up and met Delphini's eyes. Something was wrong with the older witch, Delphini was sure of it, in that moment that they looked at each

other. There were purple lines streaking up the left side of her neck and cheek and her expression was etched with what could only be pain.

Sadness passed over Hermione's face, and then she was torn from Delphini's view as her mum threw her to the side, where she lay back against the ground once more. The dagger skittered away across the floorboards.

Hermione didn't move again.

Now, with a sinking sensation, Delphini wondered if she had just done the wrong thing.

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Draco felt it, the moment the magic flooded his veins once more. It was like a lightning strike to his centre, and he jolted from the impact.

His fingers tightened on the wand Hermione had given him, and with his eyes on the woman he loved, he spoke a hurried *Finite* in his mind. His release from the chair was so immediate that Draco crashed to the floor from how heavily he had been leaning against the sticking charm.

His head jerked up as Hermione made a low, growling noise that seemed to encompass her rage. She was on top of Bellatrix, the Malfoy blade held above his aunt's chest. Something like weak hope surged through Draco as he pushed to his feet and began to run to her. His shoulder struck the ward first, and he bounced away from it with a growl of frustration. He had forgotten about the wall entirely.

Draco spat out every ward-breaking spell he knew, his eyes flicking manically between the magical wall and Hermione, so he didn't miss the moment Bellatrix regained the upper hand and shoved her to the ground.

Hermione landed on the floor, only metres from Draco, and he paused out of pure, unadulterated fear and dread.

Her eyes were open as he yelled her name, but she wasn't moving. Only her chest went up, so slowly, and then back down, just as slowly. No other part of her so much as twitched.

And then.

Her eyes closed.

Something wrenched inside of Draco at seeing it, the closing of her eyes, the way her chest didn't rise for another breath.

His mouth opened and a noise came out that didn't sound like him at all. It was a sound he heard as though he were watching someone else crumble, withdrawing inside their grief. It seemed impossible, unimaginable, to hear something so heart-breaking, let alone uttering it. Something shattered inside of him, and it became impossible to breathe, to think, to understand.

Draco fell to his knees in front of the ward.

The wand was torn from his numb hand.

He placed both hands to the invisible barrier.

His mother was next to him.

She spoke.

The ward fell.

Draco was moving forward, almost crawling, closing the distance between him and—

His mother spoke again.

She yelled something.

A flash of light.

Someone thumped to the floor.

His eyes were only on Hermione, uncaring of what else might be happening.

He reached her.

Unmoving.

Not breathing.

“Hermione,” he heard himself say, her name echoing in his ears.

He took her hand.

Still warm.

Someone said his name.

Someone *screamed* his name.

Awareness and sensation slammed back into Draco and he took in a deep, shuddering breath. “Mother,” he demanded, eyes seeking Narcissa, and finding her already moving to get closer to them. He could see Bellatrix immobile on the ground behind her, but barely spared her a thought. Draco couldn’t even care to be relieved that the mad woman was lying motionless. He could only care about Hermione. “Wand, now.”

His hand was held out, and Narcissa was there, handing it back to him with shaky fingers.

Draco turned back to Hermione, swallowing down the feeling of needing to choke. Her skin was unutterably pale, her face lolled to the side, where he could see dark lines skating over her skin. Her left hand was an awful purple shade, and there were several cuts upon her palm.

He started with every healing spell he knew, aiming first at the wounded hand, and then pointing to her chest. His fingers tried to find a pulse at her throat in the way he had seen Healers do before, but felt nothing wherever he pressed.

“Draco,” his mum was saying from her knees next to him, voice soft and shaky, “she’s... she’s gone, dear.”

He ignored her, trying every healing spell yet again, speaking them quickly and efficiently. When nothing happened, Draco turned to his mother.

“You’re secret keeper of this place?”

Narcissa swallowed and nodded, eyes flicking over to Delphini, who Draco realised was standing just above them. His young cousin’s eyes were on Hermione, blinking quickly, hands clenched by her sides. Her hair was raven black.

“Go straight to the Ministry,” Draco said in a low tone that allowed no room for argument, shifting his eyes back to Narcissa, “give Potter and the Aurors this address. Get them here, and every Healer available. Now.”

“But, Dra—”

“Mum!” he said fiercely, “go, *now!*”

Narcissa sucked in an unsteady breath, and then she stood. She stepped carefully over Hermione and pulled Delphini in for a brief embrace, whispered something into her ear and then moved quickly for the door. She only paused for one more moment to look back at the three of them, before closing the door behind her.

Silence entered the cottage after his mum left. Draco kept muttering healing spells, but he knew with an awful certainty that none of them were going to work. That she was dead.

“Will they find out about me now?” Delphini asked softly as she sank slowly to the floor, crossing her legs next to Hermione’s unmoving arm.

Draco’s wand arm lowered, his heart throbbing at the feeling of giving up. He flickered his eyes up to Delphini, hardly able to take her in, or comprehend her question. After a moment, he finally said, “yes,” in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

She just nodded, her eyes returning to Hermione. She seemed sad as she looked at Hermione’s face.

“That man in the Ministry,” Delphini then said in a low voice, “he said that her soul had been damaged by my mum’s soul. That she was dying anyway...”

Draco looked back to the girl blankly, her words not entirely making sense to him. He swallowed, feeling a numbness settling over him. “And you think that makes this okay? She was already dying so... who cares?”

Delphini flinched at his words, a look of uncertainty passing over her face. “No. No, I don’t think that’s what I meant. I was wondering about the healing spells you were just doing. I don’t know much about them, but it was her soul that was harmed, right? What about a spell to heal the soul? Is there anything like that?”

Her soul.

Draco stared down at Hermione, trying to let Delphini’s words sink into a part of his brain that would make sense of them.

“Why—” he had to pause to clear his throat, “—why do you say her soul was harmed?”

Delphini frowned at him. “It was that man in the Ministry. I saw him when I took the knife. I was pretending to be Hermione and he told me so.”

His face made no expression; he wasn’t sure he was even capable of it, but Draco’s mind was moving quickly as he took in the information.

“Told you what, exactly?”

She sat still for a beat, thinking. “He said something about my mum’s soul having accidentally gone into her when she was cut. That her body was rejecting it, and that’s why she was dying.”

Oh.

*Oh.*

Well, fuck.

He felt as though his body were deflating as he sat back, and his head dropped away from Delphini so that he could take in Hermione’s pale features.

A sick sadness filled him as he traced his eyes across her face, wondering if she had come here knowing that she wouldn’t be leaving. That *this* had been her plan once she found out about the piece of Bellatrix’s soul within her. It caused a well of terrible guilt, knowing that Hermione had been saddled with that kind of weight, and he hadn’t known, hadn’t said anything to comfort her... hadn’t screamed at her to change her mind.

“So...” Delphini said softly, “can you heal her soul?”

Draco shook his head. “I’ve never... no, nothing like that exists. Plus—she’s... she’s...” *Gone*. She’s dead. There is no coming back from death. Not even if there was some miracle spell that could heal a damaged soul. She would need to be alive for it to work.

“Mum said there was a spell she wanted me to do that would bring me back from likely death,” Delphini said, almost a whisper. Draco watched her as she spoke. There was a strange kind of hopeful curiosity on her face. “She said it would protect my soul. I didn’t want to do it, if I had to hurt someone, but would that help Hermione?”

“Delphi,” Draco said, trying to keep his voice steady, “that...” he sighed and fell back on his haunches, placing a hand over his mouth for a moment before he could respond. “That only works if you complete the spell *before* you... die.”

Delphini frowned down at Hermione, and Draco watched, a little stunned, as her eyes turned the exact shade of hazel that was so familiar to him. “Is she dead?”

He looked at her dispassionately. “Yes.”

“I don’t think she is.”

Draco gritted his teeth, a ripple of anger coursing through him.

“Look,” Delphini said, pointing to Hermione’s face. His eyes moved on instinct to where she pointed. “Her lip just moved. I think she’s breathing.”

Disbelieving, he was about to contradict her, but then he saw it, too. The slightest, most miniscule movement of her lower lip. His heart leapt in his chest so suddenly that Draco felt lightheaded. He leaned forward fast, placing his face close to Hermione, scrutinising her, desperate for it to be true, and not just a trick his eyes had played on him.

There was nothing for a long moment, and then—the smallest puff of air escaped her lips.

“Fuck,” Draco swore roughly, rearing back with disbelief as he placed his fingers into the side of her neck, trying to search for a pulse again. There seemed to be nothing, no rhythm of her heart that would indicate she was, indeed, alive. But then it was there—one small, weak thump—followed by nothing for several seconds, and then another. Slow, so very slow, and lacking any strength like she was clinging to life by the thinnest thread. His own heart began to thud unsteadily in his chest as he tried to desperately think what he could do to bring her back, to keep her alive.

No healing spells would work against Basilisk venom. Only Phoenix Tears would, but Draco knew there wouldn’t be any in circulation; it was one of the rarest elements in the wizarding world.

His eyes snapped up to Delphini.

“Do you know how Bella was going to have you make a Horcr—erm, do the spell that would save your soul?”

“She wanted me to hurt Hermione,” Delphini said, “she said it needed a sacrifice.”

“Yes,” Draco said quickly, “but what about the spell? Do you know the spell it required?”

Delphini nodded. “Not by heart, but mum has it written down.” She stood at once and hurried over to the desk where she had broken the vials, and released their magic. Draco watched her, but kept his fingers on Hermione’s neck, needing to feel the sick, slow thud of her lingering heartbeat. She rifled through a few of the pieces of parchment on the desk, and then seemed to find what she was looking for, bringing it back to Draco where she knelt back on the other side of Hermione.

Delphini was glancing at the paper, a crease between her brows before her features smoothed out once more and she held it out for Draco. He took it and looked down to the words on the paper. He almost hadn't wanted to look, knowing that it was something truly evil he would be looking at.

There was a passage of words, following by an incantation inscribed in Latin:

*None shall know save death alone  
It is with death, I am reborn  
So is one, now another  
To live hidden  
Forever  
In ignominy*

*Per mortum am renatus est to serva our anima sed solum per caedes et vive in aeternum cum ignominia*

He swallowed the bile rising in his throat as his eyes tracked over the disturbing words on the paper. Draco looked over to Bellatrix, lying stunned and unconscious. A sick hatred flooded him before he looked back at Delphini.

"Do you know how it works?" he rushed to ask.

Delphini seemed unsure. "Not very well, we hadn't much time to talk about it before midnight. But I think part of it was thought, and the other part was spoken."

Draco looked back down at the paper in his hand, noticing that it shook. He cleared his throat and looked back at Delphini once more. Her face appeared relaxed, clear of emotion, but there was something behind her eyes that was more intense, yet indecipherable.

She looked at him, and as she did, the darkness of her hair lightened again to perfectly match the shade of his own hair.

"Are you going to hurt someone to do this?" she asked, clearly trying to keep her voice steady. Her eyes, back to their usual dark colour, flicked over to the inert form of her mother before coming back to Draco.

He shook his head. "No—I'm not going to bring Hermione back with death. I... want to try bringing her back another way. I'm going to change the spell."

Silence settled between them as he quickly but carefully scanned the spell on the parchment, brain circulating ideas to extrapolate the properties of the spell, while changing the meaning behind it.

"Every spell once came from nothing, right?" Delphini asked, and he was again struck by the maturity she displayed.

Draco was skeptical, yet he found his head nodding at her words. He turned his body back towards Hermione's still form, steeling himself before he could look down at her pale face.

The purple streaks up the left side of her neck and fanning out across her cheek hit him all over again, and he wanted to keel over. He knew this wasn't likely to work, but what other options did he have? Wait for Potter to arrive—but then what was he going to be able to do that Draco hadn't already tried?

He took in a small, unsteady breath, and kept himself composed.

Not truly believing this could work, he placed a quivering hand over the centre of Hermione's chest, resolutely not thinking of the stillness of her body, all too aware how close she was to true death.

Draco looked at the paper, at the words that would make a Horcrux through death. He looked over at Bellatrix, and then at Delphini, before he closed his eyes and thought:

*All shall know with glorious life  
It is with life, I am reborn  
So is one, now another  
To live exposed  
Forever  
In graceful existence*

Draco's eyes reopened and he focussed on Hermione's face as he spoke the next words aloud, allowing his Latin fluency to overtake him as he translated:

*"Per vivos renatus sum salvare animam nostram sed solum per vitam et vivere semper cum gratia."*

He waited for several breathless moments for something, anything, to happen. Hermione lay still before him, her chest underneath his palm so painfully motionless. He withdrew his hand quickly with a sharp inhale, his dread sinking back inside of him. Draco checked her pulse almost frantically, wondering if she had left him while he was speaking a stupid incantation that he knew would never work. Wasting time.

"Did you feel anything?" Delphini asked in a small voice.

Draco blinked at Hermione, and only breathed when he felt the small, barely-there beat of her heart. He let out a harsh breath and shook his head. "Nothing."

He heard Delphini let out a small sigh. After another pause, she asked, "did you mean it?"

Draco turned his head back to her. The white of her hair had faded back to her usual silver.

"What?"

Her eyes cast over her mother on the ground before she looked back to Draco. "Mum always said for the powerful spells, you had to mean it, with your whole self, or it wouldn't work."

Draco forced himself to look back down to Hermione's face with Delphini's words circulating through his mind. He could try again—what harm could it do?



With his hand over her chest, he focussed his mind to the spell. To what he intended. To bringing her back through his own sacrifice, with life and not death. He focussed on the one thing Draco wanted above all—saving her. Having more time with her. Having a future that included her.

The words flitted through his mind as he sank into a deep concentration. Then he was speaking the Latin without pause, imagining his own soul connecting with hers, mingling, healing the parts of her that had been damaged. Draco imagined it with every fibre of his being, willing it to be so.

He stopped speaking, his breath catching in his throat.

For a moment, nothing happened, and he was close to retreating back inside his despair, but —

He felt it.

Something fracturing within him so sharply, Draco let out a choked sound and his body jerked forward like someone had pushed him from behind. It was indescribable, but he *felt* the moment that piece of him left his body, flowing through him and *out*.

And he also felt it.

As it entered Hermione.

\*\*

She had no idea how much time had passed since her eyes had shut, and she had known that death was embracing her.

When she opened her eyes, it was as though they hadn't opened at all. Darkness surrounded her.

Hermione was on the ground, in the same position she last recalled. Strangely, her body felt fine. No longer riddled with pain or weakness, she just felt... normal. Pushing up with her arms, Hermione sat up and looked around, seeing nothing but inky black darkness wherever she looked.

Swallowing her discomfort, Hermione shakily got to her feet.

"Draco?" she called softly into the void. Her last conscious thought had been about him, knowing that he was watching her die. Her heart constricted at the memory of his pained cries from somewhere near her.

"Hermione."

She jumped at the deep male voice, and whirled around. A man stood before her, smiling a familiar goofy grin.

“Halpert?” Hermione squeaked, and with a profound relief, she flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around his waist in a tight hug. Halpert chuckled softly in her ear and then she was pulling away from him and meeting his twinkling eyes. Something occurred to her, seeing him there, and dread settled inside her stomach. “Are you... am I dead?”

He smiled sadly down at her. “I don’t know Hermione—do you think you are?”

Hermione considered that for a moment, a chill seeping into her veins. “Yes... I think so. I mean,” she gestured around her, at the nothingness that surrounded both of them, “look where we are. What is this, if not death?”

Halpert merely shrugged. “I can’t tell you that, Hermione.”

She frowned at him, taking a step away. “Are you... real?”

His small smile returned. “Real enough.”

A sadness swamped her as she took in the Cursebreaker before her. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“What for?” he asked pleasantly, head tilting to the side.

She almost laughed at the ridiculous question. “You wouldn’t be here... if it weren’t for me. You died because—well, because...”

Halpert held up a hand, and she broke off, emotion clogging her throat.

“You bear no fault in my death, Hermione, you must know that,” he said gently, “and death comes for all of us, just at different times.”

She sighed and looked around again, not expecting to see anything different. “Yes, I suppose it does.” Hermione shook her head. “Harry said he had a choice... that he was given the choice to come back.” She looked back to Halpert. “I guess I won’t have that chance.”

“Are you so certain?”

“What do you—”

A flash of light erupted, searing at Hermione’s eyes, and she brought her arm up to cover her face against the intensity of it.

“Goodbye, Hermione,” came the echo of Halpert’s voice, “live well.”

“Wait,” Hermione said, disoriented and stumbling with her arm still covering her face against the sudden brightness.

She slowly lowered her arm, squinting against the sudden blaze of light.

As her eyes adjusted, Hermione’s hands flew to her chest in shock, her heart catching as she took in her new surroundings.

She was in Draco's bedroom. Everything looked exactly the same, except every surface was a shocking white, practically glowing so bright that it was hard for her to focus on anything as she looked around the room, startled.

Hermione stepped closer to the bed and lowered her hand to the bedspread, brushing fingers against the soft, white fabric. Puzzled, she straightened once more, and it was then that an awareness tingled down her spine, and she felt with a sudden clarity that she was not alone in the room.

"Hermione." The voice was so staggeringly familiar, that she almost sobbed at the sound of it. She turned quickly, and her heart stopped.

Draco stood before her, in the middle of the room.

"Draco? Draco, what are you doing here—you aren't supposed to be here," Hermione said, fear coursing through her at the sight of him. Halpert had been here, because he had been... but not Draco. Surely not...

There was a peculiar look upon his face. Almost as if he, too, was confused by his presence in the white room. Draco looked at her first, eyes tracking over her from head to toe, before he slowly looked around the room.

"This is odd, yes?" he said and a small smirk appeared on his face.

Hermione felt emotion rising in her chest at the sight of that familiar tilt of his lips, and it was a vast mixture of things. It was relief, sadness, love, fear. A maelstrom of feelings that had her running for him and almost collapsing into his arms. He caught her easily, enveloping her into his warmth. "What are you doing here?" she asked again, voice high-pitched but muffled against his chest.

Draco's arms were tight around her, and she felt him breathe in deeply and then release a long sigh.

"I don't think I am," he finally answered, "not really."

Her brows twitched together and she leaned back, looking up at him. "What do you mean?"

Draco's hand was suddenly at her face, the backs of his fingers brushing lightly against her cheek. "I was so sure I would never see you again," he said so softly that if she weren't right in front of him, she wouldn't have heard the gentle words.

"Draco," she said, "I don't understand what's happening."

"I'm here to help you," he said with a sure voice, yet his face looked uncertain.

"How? How are you here?"

"I... I'm not. Not really," he said cryptically, and Hermione searched his eyes for answers, "I'm not the Draco that you've known. I'm only... a part of him."

She leaned back further, staring up at him. “What do you mean?”

“I’m a piece of him,” Draco tried to explain, “a part of his soul, so that I can take up the spaces that were damaged by Bellatrix.”

Hermione’s gasp was loud, echoing in the white spaces of the room. She let go of Draco and took a few stumbled steps away from him. He let her go, his hands falling to his sides as he watched her warily.

“Hermione?”

“No...” she shook her head, an icy dread encasing her insides, “you... he killed someone? Draco killed someone to make me a Horcrux? I don’t—*Gods*—I don’t understand what’s happening.”

Draco’s uncertainty melted away and a small smile replaced the look. “No,” he said before he took a few steps to close the distance between them, “no one was harmed. It was a new spell, an iteration of the Horcrux spell, to offer a piece of him to you, to heal you... to save you.”

Hermione looked at Draco without really seeing him, as his words struck something loose inside of her brain, and she pressed a hand to her temple with understanding.

*“He will be your guide back to the living, take hold of what he offers.”*

That’s what the ancient magic had told her.

Hermione had rejected the piece of Bellatrix that had entered her body, and it had wreaked havoc inside of her. The magic was telling her to accept this piece of Draco, that it would... save her.

A choice.

Harry had been offered a choice. This was hers.

Hermione looked into Draco’s eyes, feeling the shock and disquiet writhing. “What will it mean for me, and for you—Draco—if I accept you?”

He seemed to think for a moment before he just lifted one shoulder in a small shrug. “This is new—unprecedented. How can we know what it truly means?” Draco stepped forwards one more step and placed his hands on both of her upper arms, fingers squeezing her gently. “But you’ll be alive. You’ll be with me. That’s all that matters.”

Tears formed in her eyes, and all of the things she had been wishing for before breaking that vial of Basilisk venom flashed before her. The time Hermione wished she could have had—with him. The memories she was desperate to make.

She stepped into him, her head falling into his chest.

“Did you really think,” he murmured into the top of her head, “that I would let death have the final say?”

Hermione shook her head against him. “I suppose not,” she said with a small hiccupped laugh, “stubborn as you are.”

He chuckled, the sound vibrating against her ear. “I’m stubborn? Did you not just sacrifice yourself, Hermione?”

She let out a small, irritated noise that held some humour. “Yes. And I would do it again for the people I lo—” Hermione broke off, having realised she hadn’t said those words aloud to him before. And this wasn’t really him, was it?

His arms tightened around her, like he knew what she was about to say.

She sank into him, eyes closing, breathing in his scent and relishing in the familiar warmth of him.

Hermione felt herself relaxing, piece by piece, her breaths evening out as she embraced Draco.

Even with her eyes closed, she could feel that her surroundings, Draco’s bedroom, was fading away, bleeding into some obscure landscape. Hermione, arms still around him, could feel that she was floating. Maybe flying. She wondered what would happen next, but she knew one thing for certain: this part of Draco that she held onto so tightly, it was part of her now. *He* was part of her. And always would be.

The next thing Hermione knew was that she was lying on the ground.

She could hear someone speaking quietly to her.

Another soft, childlike voice was saying something, pushing the words into her sluggish brain.

“... breathing. I can see her chest moving...”

Someone was holding her hand—squeezing it almost painfully.

She could *feel* everything. There were aches over her entire body, and a faint burning sensation on her left hand.

“Hermione?” a voice, filled with a desperate hope. A voice that was attached to a person she needed to see.

She opened her eyes.

And she lived.

Surprise! Had this ready a day early, so seeing as I have a monstrously busy day tomorrow, thought I'd leave this here for you!

Hope you enjoy this one - it was both heart-breaking and healing to write...

Also WELCOME to all new readers, this wee fic has had a huge surge in activity the past few days and to say I'm stoked and grateful is an egregious understatement. I'm so happy you're here with me / us xxx

Next chapter (so close to the end now!) is on track for the same weekly release on Tuesday next week. See you then! (or see you in the comments)

xx

Forawhile

# THE PROMISE OF A NEW DAY

## Chapter Notes

Beat credit to the ever amazing and truly wonderful MyPrivateInsanity x

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

The first thing she saw was a pair of grey eyes.

Grey eyes, holding a depth of emotion that was staggering.

Draco's face hovered above hers, and the moment she blinked her eyes open, something in his expression crumpled, fractured. Her brain was slow as she reoriented herself to the present, but something Hermione fully understood was that this man, Draco, was the reason she was alive. That understanding was like a fist squeezing at her heart.

Fingers brushed softly at the side of her face as a low noise escaped his throat.

"Hermione—" he said, and the emotion she had spotted in his eyes was audible in his voice, "—you're... are you..."

A cascade of memories barraged into her mind with a sudden force that had her eyes clenching shut. Within a single beat of her heart, Hermione remembered all of it and she gasped in a shuddering breath. Draco missing. Being a host for Bellatrix's soul. Waiting for midnight. Bellatrix, leering at her through a wall. Stripped of magic. Draco, helpless and watching. Basilisk venom. Destroying the Horcrux. '*Mummy?*' Dying...

But *had* she died?

Hermione had been in a place of complete darkness. She had spoken with Halpert, who was dead. And then—that darkness transformed into brilliant light. And... and...

"Draco," she croaked out, her tongue feeling strangely thick inside of her mouth. Her eyes opened again and she found him still above her, gazing at her with a worrying, searching look.

"I'm right here," he said quickly. The fingers against the side of her face smoothed across her cheek tenderly, "it's me—I'm right here with you."

As Draco looked fixedly at her, something strange occurred. Hermione's vision shifted, and it was as though she were looking down at herself from his vantage point. A spearing of emotion went through her, and she was suddenly swamped with overwhelming feelings of relief, love and an astounding level of fear that made her gasp a breath inwards.

“Hermione?” Draco’s voice embodied those very feelings. As Hermione exhaled, her vision returned to normal, and the emotions—which she now understood not to be her own—vanished from her. “I’m right here with you,” he said again, and fingers brushed over her cheek soothingly. She looked up to him.

He was.

And he always would be with her. A piece of him, anyway. Replacing the part of her that had been damaged by—

“Bellatrix?”

Draco’s eyes flashed a steely silver at the mention of her name. “Alive, but stunned and with a full body bind. She hasn’t woken up yet. Narcissa is getting Potter and the Aurors here.”

Hermione blinked slowly at him while his thumb swept across her cheekbone. “You... you saved me.”

Something like relief flashed across his face and it looked as though he were trying to smile, though it was more of a grimace. “Yes, well... you saved me first.”

Had she? It hadn’t seemed like it at the time, when she had lain on the floor, defeated and dying.

“Draco,” she said again, “you split your soul...” Emotion clogged her throat and Hermione needed to stop speaking.

His lips moved, opening and closing minutely as he searched over her face, as though surprised by her words. After a moment, he leaned forward, pressing his lips against her forehead where she lay on the ground. “And I would do it again,” Draco said in a low voice, lips brushing against her temple, “I would’ve given you all of me if I’d needed to.”

Tears formed in her eyes and she needed to swallow the thickness in her throat. An overwhelming sense of relief and love swelled in the centre of her chest. Hermione wanted to say something in response, to convey the emotion that blazed underneath her skin, but she suddenly became aware of another presence in the room.

Draco had drawn away slightly, which gave Hermione enough room to turn her head. Sat beside her was the same girl she had seen before—though her hair was back to a shining silver. When their eyes met, the girl smiled at Hermione a little curiously.

“That’s Delphi, my cousin,” Draco said in a soft voice, “she helped to save you.”

Delphi glanced up to Draco, and Hermione could see her cheeks redden with something like shy pride on her face. When the young girl looked back down, she spoke to Hermione herself. “I’m really happy you’re okay.”

Delphi had called Bellatrix Lestrange her mum, hadn’t she? As Hermione looked over the girl’s features, she could see the parts of her that were so similar to the woman she had been about to kill. The darkness of her eyes, the sharpness of her cheekbones. But there was



something else about Delphi, something that was wrenchingly familiar in a way that made her stomach curl unpleasantly, yet she couldn't seem to place it.

Despite this, there was an innocence behind Delphi's eyes, which were wide and shining with a kind of tentative hope.

"Thank you, Delphi," Hermione said before she turned her head back towards Draco. He was looking at her like he had never looked away. "Can you help me to sit?"

Draco's features pinched for a moment, and she thought he might argue against it, but then he nodded and carefully moved his arm in behind her shoulders and gingerly pulled her to sit. Hermione felt pain in her head and skating down the left side of her body as she moved. Her vision swam momentarily as she came upright, but it only lasted a moment.

"You alright?" he asked anxiously, his arm secure around her back.

She nodded, and then she was looking down, her eyes catching sight of her left hand. Hermione slowly lifted it to inspect the markings that sat on the palm of her hand and travelled up her wrist and beyond, disappearing under the sleeve of her sweater. She swallowed with discomfort, recalling vividly the intense pain of the Basilisk venom moving through her bloodstream.

"Does it hurt?" Draco asked, his voice pained.

Hermione stared at the purple lines as she flexed her fingers and moved her wrist. There was an undertone of pain, a lingering burning in her nerves somewhere, but it was almost nothing compared to what it had been. The memory of it had her stomach churning acidly.

"Only a little," she answered, lowering her hand back to her lap and turning her head to find his eyes once more, needing him to ground her, to help her move past the onslaught of memory which overwhelmed her.

Draco seemed to sense something in her, and pulled her close, gently tucking her into his chest so that her head fell into the crook of his neck. Hermione closed her eyes to let his warmth soak into the parts of her that felt cold, let his scent settle over her like a comforting blanket.

Before she could stave it off, or temper her emotions, Hermione felt her eyes filling with tears and her shoulders began to shake. Everything that had happened ever since she'd been cut by the blade crashed down on her all at once. It pulled her into a moment of melancholy as she allowed herself to mourn the things that she, and Draco, should never have needed to do or witness. It had cost them both terribly. It had cost Halpert his life.

Her body trembled as the anguished tears made hot tracks down her cheeks. The quiet but persistent sobs spoke of the suffering Hermione wished they could have avoided. The way she held onto Draco's shirt with a tight grip spoke of her intense desire to find peace for her heart that was swollen with grief.

He held her through it all, arms firm but gentle around her shaking body. She could hear him murmuring quiet words to her, but she couldn't interpret them through her own soft cries.

A sound eventually broke through, and Hermione could hear the door opening.

She looked up, spotting Harry through tear-soaked lashes—he stood by the open door. He stared at her through lenses that looked fogged up. His face was crumpled with his own terrible sadness, morphing into surprise and disbelief as he found her on the floor next to Draco.

“Hermione?” Harry’s voice was choked as they looked at one another, and then he was running over to her, almost tripping over the low table that he simply hadn’t seen because his focus was on her. Harry fell to his knees next to her, and Hermione let him pull her from Draco and into his own arms. “Narcissa said you were... I thought I’d find... Gods, Hermione.”

“I’m so sorry, Harry,” she mumbled into his dress shirt.

“You’re alright?”

“I’m alright, I promise.”

Hermione could hear other people entering the cottage, could hear mumbles of something nearby but didn’t care to try and make out the low conversations and the questions that they would likely have.

After a moment, Harry pulled away and then he was looking between her and Draco. “What happened? Why did your mother tell me that Hermione was... dead.”

Draco’s face was perfectly unreadable as he met Harry’s questioning gaze. “Narcissa was mistaken, Potter,” he said easily, “Hermione had been unconscious right before she left, and I managed to rouse her just before you arrived.”

Harry’s green eyes slid from Draco back to Hermione and searched her gaze. There was something knowing in them, like he didn’t believe that at all. She couldn’t imagine he would guess the truth, though— the truth being something wholly unexplored by the magical world. Hermione and Draco had no idea if there might be future repercussions for either of them.

“And, uh, my mother?” Draco asked, and Hermione heard the attempt at nonchalance in his tone.

Harry looked back to Draco. “Arrested.”

Draco nodded once and looked away.

“Arrested?” Delphi asked, and it was only then that Harry seemed to realise the young girl was in the room with them at all. He looked to her with surprise, his dark brows rising high and disappearing behind his fringe.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Delphini,” she said, cocking her head to the side and studying Harry in the same way that he was her, “who are you?”

Harry looked between Draco and Hermione before answering Delphi. “I’m Harry Potter.”

“Oh,” Delphi said, as though his name meant absolutely nothing to her. Her eyes shifted down to her hand, and Hermione felt her body pull closer to Draco on instinct when she saw a snake slithering out from Delphi’s sleeve and wending its way around her wrist and fingers. Delphi reached for the snake with her free hand, idly stroking along its scales as though it were perfectly normal. “Does that mean aunty won’t be back?”

Hermione heard Harry’s small intake of breath when he made the connection.

Harry then looked over to the bound form of Bellatrix, and something else flashed behind his eyes. The look was disturbing. Hermione watched him swallow as he slowly turned back to Delphi. His eyes were on the snake she held reverently when he addressed her once more.

Except it was not English he spoke to her.

Harry started to hiss softly, speaking to Delphi in... Parseltongue.

Delphi’s head shot up, eyes widening with disbelief as Harry spoke. Hermione felt the same, and her heart started to thunder as the pieces suddenly fit together.

*Oh, Gods...*

She was Voldemort’s child.

Hermione whipped her gaze to Draco, and the drawn look on his face as he watched the two converse with hisses told her that he already knew this. That his cousin’s father was the man who had forced Draco into a dark form of servitude, a man who had cast the wizarding world into chaos and division.

When she looked back to the girl, she looked sad, brows pulled together as she nodded at whatever Harry was saying. Delphi responded softly, and her chest shuddered with emotion, eyes filling with tears.

Harry finished speaking to Delphi, and then he turned his head to two other Aurors standing behind them. “Please escort Bellatrix Lestrange to the Ministry,” he said firmly, “and please let my husband know that Hermione and Draco are both alright.”

There was a shuffle of movement around them. Hermione tuned everything else out and set her eyes back to Draco. “Can we go?” she asked, almost desperate to leave this place, to find a quiet moment with him where they could finally rest.

“We should let the Healers have a look—”

Hermione shook her head. “No, please... I just want to go.”

“Hermione—do you think you’d be up for a debrief of what happened here?” Harry asked carefully.

“In the morning, Potter,” Draco said in a hard voice, his eyes never leaving Hermione’s face. He started to stand and took her by the elbows, helping her to her feet. She stood, a little wobbly at first, but she gained her balance quickly with his arm around her waist.

Hermione looked down at Harry. “I’ll give a full recounting and memories in the morning, Harry. Please... I’m so tired.” In so many unthinkable ways.

Her best friend’s face softened with understanding, and he nodded as he got to his feet. “Of course. Please take all the rest you need. Let me know when you’re ready.”

Draco started to move away, holding Hermione securely at his side, but then he paused and looked over his shoulder towards Delphi.

“What will happen with her?” he asked Harry.

Harry hesitated for a moment, and they all looked at the young girl. Her eyes were wide as she also waited to hear her fate. She looked so small sitting on the floor where they had all been moments ago. Now she sat alone, knees drawn up to her chest and eyes flicking between all of the adults standing above her.

“She will come back to the Ministry with me,” Harry said, and tried for a small smile at Delphi, “we can find you a place to rest for the night, and we can talk more in the morning, would that be okay?”

Delphi cradled the snake to her chest. “Can Marvolo come?”

Hermione felt her teeth clenching together at the name, and a shudder coursed down her spine. Draco’s arm tightened around her waist.

Harry visibly swallowed, and then he was nodding. “Of course, you can bring Marvolo.”

She breathed out loudly, a little wearily, but Delphi stood with a nod. “Okay, then.” Her eyes moved over Draco and Hermione standing huddled together. “Will I see you again?” she asked Draco.

Draco was silent for a beat, but then he was nodding. “Yes, of course you’ll see me again,” he said with conviction, “we’re family.”

A true smile, one that lightened her eyes, spread across Delphi’s face.

Draco turned them back towards the door, but before they reached it, Hermione had a thought and stopped him. She twisted in his grasp and tracked her eyes over the floor where she had been lying. After a quiet search, she found what she was looking for. With a thundering inside of her chest, she extracted herself from Draco and she walked across the room again until she was standing above the dagger.

The Malfoy family heirloom, an item that had once been used to bring lovers together in eternal bonding. It sat quite innocently, almost exactly the same as Hermione remembered—although she could see that the emerald fixed into the pommel had a thick, staggering crack down the middle. Fractured, broken.

Draco was suddenly at her side, his gaze also on the ground. He breathed in deeply and let it out slowly next to her.

“What should we do with it?” she asked

He was silent, contemplative. Then he shifted, pulling his wand from his pocket. With a few quiet spells, Draco sent wrappings flying around the blade, covering it from point to pommel. Then he shrunk it down before he bent to retrieve it, and placed it carefully into a pocket.

“The Cursebreaker department can see to it,” he said, his arm winding back around her shoulder, “I don’t really care what they do with it.”

Hermione turned into him and looked up at Draco. “No... I think we should keep it.”

He looked at her with a deep frown. “Why?”

“It hosted something pure once,” she said, feeling a strange connection to the old magic, which had been oddly sentient and helpful in the wake of the disasters that had riddled her since being cut, “and it might have been overshadowed by something evil... but, I don’t know—I feel like I want to keep it... to find some way to honour it.”

Draco brushed a kiss across her temple. “Whatever you want, love.”

His arm tightened around her shoulders before he turned them back towards the door and led Hermione away from the cottage.

\*\*

Draco lay awake in his bed, turned to his side, hardly able to blink let alone shut his eyes entirely. He never wanted to glance away from Hermione again. He wanted to be sure that she would never disappear again, that she would always be safe beside him.

She lay, quite peacefully, next to him.

They had spoken for hours, each whispering their stories to each other in the darkness while he held her tightly. It had been almost as harrowing, reliving it through their shared words, but it was important they spoke of it. For understanding and for eventually moving into acceptance. Draco had wanted to wait a little longer to discuss it, but the moment her head had hit the pillow, her words poured out, and he didn’t have the heart to stop her. If it was what she needed, he would give it to her.

Hermione had drifted to sleep some time after four in the morning. She had been describing what it had been like after succumbing to the Basilisk venom. It was strange to think of her having a conversation with the piece of himself he’d offered to her, a conversation Draco himself had no memory of at all, but she’d said it was like he *was* there.

Draco watched her lips part slightly as she breathed in deeply. It was almost sunrise, but he hoped she would sleep for as long her body and mind needed.

He would watch over her for as long as it took. Draco would never let anything like this happen to her again. He would—

Hermione's face scrunched slightly and he stilled his body, hoping his restlessness didn't wake her. Then, she murmured, "Draco... go to sleep. I promise you I'm alright."

Draco frowned at her as she slowly opened her eyes and found him in the darkness. Despite wishing she would sleep, the sight of her hazel eyes calmed him almost completely and he took his first deep breath in hours. He reached for her, placing his palm across the side of her neck as they looked at each other.

"I'm just making sure you're okay," Draco said quietly.

"I know you are, I can... feel it."

He searched her eyes, confused. "What do you mean?"

Hermione shifted closer to him, placing her own hands to his chest and lowered her eyes away from his face. "I think something's happening with the joining of our souls," she said softly, "a few times now, I've had these moments where I can... see what you're seeing and feel what you're feeling."

Draco swallowed, stunned by the prospect of Hermione being privy to his emotions. "Interesting," he said, mostly because he wasn't sure what else to say, "did that wake you just now?"

She nodded and then tilted her chin upwards, meeting his eyes again. "I think so. I had a sudden sense of protectiveness, and then I was seeing myself sleeping."

"Mmm," he hummed, "I didn't mean to wake you, I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay," Hermione said with a soft smile, "Draco, I promise you, I'm okay. You don't have to lay awake and watch over me... you should rest."

Draco felt incapable of responding at that moment, and he shut his eyes with a rough exhale. Seeing Hermione go through everything she had, watching on helplessly, it was rotting inside of his mind, festering there. He was trying to replace the thoughts with the moments after she had opened her eyes, the part where he knew she was going to be okay. But his mind was relentless at transporting him back to what had been the worst thing he had ever witnessed. And Draco had seen a lot of shit.

"Hey," she said, and he felt her hand clasping at the side of his cheek, "look at me." Compelled by her touch, her words, Draco's eyes immediately opened. Her gaze was warm, steady. "I know," she whispered, smoothing her fingers across his brow, "I know... but it's over. I'm not going anywhere, Draco. You can rest now."

He shook his head infinitesimally. Not because he disagreed with her, but because he wanted to tell her how he felt, which was not something Draco was used to doing. He was usually excellent at storing his emotions away, locking them into a safe and hardly bothering to inspect them himself, let alone express them to someone else.

But this was Hermione Granger. He knew what it felt like, even if it were only for a few minutes, to lose her. To be forced into imagining what life would be like without her.

“I thought you were gone, Hermione,” he said, and felt no embarrassment for the shake in his voice, “I don’t ever want to know that feeling again.”

Her expression turned pained as she shifted herself even closer, until their bodies were pressed together and his arms wound around her. His grip on her was tight, depicting his need to never let her go again.

“I’m so sorry,” she said into his neck where she now nestled.

“This world is dark enough,” he murmured into her hair. His arms pressed her into him and he clenched his eyes shut, the intensity of his love for her swelling within him. “And it would be immeasurably darker without you in it.”

He felt her shudder in his arms, her quick inhale audible between them. She moved her head back and met his gaze, her eyes shining with affection.

“I love you, too,” she said, voice so quiet he hardly heard it. But he did hear it. And the feeling in his chest expanded, swelling until he thought he might overflow with it.

He shook his head at her, trying in vain to hide his smile. “You couldn’t let me say it first?”

Hermione uttered a small huff of a laugh. “You didn’t need to say it aloud,” she said with humour, “your feelings were screaming it at me.”

It was strange, Draco thought, to consider that he would always be laid bare before Hermione in this way from now on. That sacrificing that part of him to keep her alive would now mean she would have access to him in a way that was wholly unheard of before. And as he looked at her, in the wake of her own confession of love, he decided in that moment that he was glad for that unexpected outcome of the sacrifice. Draco wanted her to understand him in every way. And he was glad that she was entwined with him irrevocably, because he certainly had no intention of letting her slip away from him again.

Hermione leaned into him, placing a barely-there kiss against his lips before pulling back again. “But say it anyway,” she whispered.

He smirked at her before coming in for his own kiss, taking the side of her face to slide his mouth over hers, soaking in the warmth of her. When he finished making her breathless, Draco left just enough space in between their mouths to whisper back, “I love you, Hermione.”

She grinned as her eyes opened, and belying the darkness that shrouded the room, her eyes were lit up like the sun. He found himself wishing that the connection went both ways, so he might feel what brought that lightness into her eyes.

“Good thing, then,” she said before pulling her bottom lip between her teeth and looking at him mischievously, “seeing as we’re married.”

Draco’s eyes widened a little.

*Shit.*

He hadn’t realised she’d known that and had been planning to break that news at another time, once things had settled from the night before.

“Uh, right,” he said, feeling a bit embarrassed now, “yes, sorry about that. The rings would only work if we were bound, see? And—”

Hermione just shook her head, that light still behind her eyes. “Really, Draco, it’s fine—more than fine. After you went missing, Harry told me about it, and honestly? I was… happy.”

Draco looked at her with disbelief. “Happy?”

She nodded.

“That I forced you into a marriage with me?”

She looked at him with a raised brow. “I think the dagger did that first. Besides, I know why you did it. In your position, for you, I would have done the same.”

Draco stared at her wonderingly. He hadn’t expected her to be angry with him, not after everything they had gone through to survive this, but he also hadn’t expected *that*.

Fuck. He loved her. So fucking much.

Hermione’s eyes stuttered and he felt her hand ball into a fist against his chest, and Draco knew that she had felt that.

*That* could be interesting. But for another time.

“You should go back to sleep,” he said softly, reaching to shift a curl and tucking it behind her ear, “I promise I’ll close my eyes and try to sleep with you.”

She looked at him for a moment before she nodded. “All right.” Her eyes shut and she burrowed deeper into him, tucking her head underneath his chin. Draco closed his eyes too, and pulled in a deep, calming breath. She was safe, in his arms. He could rest now, too.

“Do you *want* to be married to me?” she asked him, and he could hear the hesitation in her voice. *Had she not just felt how much he loved her?*

“You have no idea how much,” he answered honestly.



She wriggled as close to him as she could get, and placed a soft kiss near his collarbones. “‘Til death do us part?” she whispered to him.

Draco’s arms tightened around her. “Not even then.”

\*\*

Delphini liked Harry Potter.

She had decided that quite quickly, when he had entered her home and then started to speak to her in a language she had never been able to use with her mum or aunt before. It had been so strangely relaxing and pleasant to speak in Parseltongue with someone else. Her mum had told her it was a gift from her father, that it was rare and it made her special.

Harry had been so nice to her since they left her cottage. He’d spoken kindly to her before letting her rest in a nice room at the place her mum had called the Ministry. Delphini had been quite interested in the large room they had appeared in, having been there only once, and that time she had moved too quickly to be able to look at anything. This time, Harry had let her stop and look at almost everything. There was a fountain with some statues she really liked. Marvolo liked it, too.

When Delphini had woken, Harry was alerted and was there again. She was glad it wasn’t someone else. He ate breakfast with her and spoke with her in Parseltongue while she described her life in the cottage. He didn’t ask her much—Delphini had a lot to say and she hadn’t ever had someone else to tell it to. She enjoyed it, even, telling her stories to a fresh face.

Delphini knew now that her mum wasn’t considered a good person by people like Harry. That before she was born, her mum had done bad things. Harry was still kind when he told her that her mum would be going to a prison, and that Delphini would only be able to visit once a month. He was kind when Delphini had cried, knowing that a person she had seen every day of her life, her mother, would be gone.

She had asked a lot of questions, and he had answered every one with a patience she had never really seen before. Even her aunt had sometimes lacked patience for her abundance of queries about the world outside of her cottage.

The only things Harry hadn’t been able to answer had been what would happen with her aunt, and where Delphini would live now. He told her that these things were still being looked at.

She tried hard to hide it, but she was frightened.

The rooms she was led to, the bed she had slept in, the food she was given. It was all strange and new and overwhelming. The faces she saw as she walked with Harry through the halls, all brand new and looking at her with a curiosity and fascination that made her a little uncomfortable.

When it was lunchtime, Harry had given her the choice of eating lunch in their cafeteria or in his office. Delphini had just been stared at by no less than ten people within the space of a

minute, so she chose his office.

She sat and pulled the bread of her sandwich up, inspecting the insides before taking a bite. As she chewed, enjoying whatever sauce was in it, she glanced around at the things on Harry's desk. He ate quietly on the other side of the desk, sliding his own curious glances at her every now and then. It was odd, but Delphini wondered at the looks he gave her sometimes, like he understood something about her.

She saw a picture in a lovely wooden frame and moved closer to see the photograph moving inside. It was of Harry and another man. They were hugging, and the other man kissed Harry on the cheek, making him smile. Delphini blushed a little at seeing the easy affection. She looked at Harry.

"Who is the man in the photograph with you?"

His eyes went to the frame before settling back on her. "That's my husband. His name is Theodore."

Delphini looked at him strangely. "Do men marry other men?"

Harry smiled now, a wide one that made his eyes crinkle in the corners. "Yes, Delphi. See, love doesn't discriminate, does it? You love who you love."

She sat back in her seat, considering his words. After a pause where she looked back at the couple in the picture, Delphini nodded, deciding he was right.

"That's really nice," she said before taking another bite and continuing to look around his office. It was cluttered and messy, so there was plenty to look at.

They exchanged only a few more words while they finished their lunch, and then the door to his office was being pushed open, and Delphini turned to look over her shoulder. She saw the man from the photograph in the flesh walking into the office.

Theodore smiled easily at her as he entered, and it was the fastest she had ever decided she had liked someone. Even faster than Harry. Delphini smiled back.

"You must be Delphini," he said, and he came over to the desk and placed down a brown paper bag onto the surface, "Harry's told me all about you, I hope that's okay."

She nodded to him. "And you're Theodore—Harry told me about you, too, and how men can marry men, and I think that's nice."

Theodore's brows rose and he grinned before turning to look at his husband. "How right you are," he said as he faced Delphini again, "and you can call me Theo, if you like."

"Yes, okay," she answered, "you can call me Delphi."

"Wonderful, Delphi," he said before he grabbed at the paper bag, "tell me—do you like cookies? I happen to be excellent at—"

“Choosing cookies,” Harry cut in with a scoff, “from the bakery.”

Theo rolled his eyes but was smiling, before he held the bag out towards Delphini.  
“Regardless of their origin, they’re delicious.”

She eagerly reached into the bag and pulled out a chocolate chip cookie. “Thanks, aunt used to make cookies with me sometimes, but she always used magic. I read a book about a little girl baking cookies with her mum, and it seemed fun.”

Delphini took a bite, and it was delicious, as Theo had said it would be. She smiled gratefully, and looked between the two. They really were nice.

“Do you think I could stay with you?” she asked, the thought occurring to her almost at the same time as she spoke it aloud, “until you decide what to do with me, I mean?”

Harry’s smile slipped a little as he looked at Theo, who had paused halfway in reaching into the bag for his own cookie. Theo looked up at Delphini with surprise on his face. She was a bit surprised herself, but she felt a peculiar connection to Harry, and then Theo seemed so lovely. The only other person she might wish to stay with would be Draco, but she hadn’t seen him yet today. He said they would see each other again, that they were family, but she didn’t know when.

“Er... Delphi,” Harry said slowly, “that might be a little...”

Theo reached out and placed his hand over Harry’s, and he stopped speaking. They shared a look, some kind of secret message passing between them. Delphini tilted her head, trying to understand the way they were looking at each other. Then Theo looked back to Delphi and grinned once more.

“We would love to have you,” he remarked in a soft voice, “we just need to figure out a bed for you. Perhaps Hermione wouldn’t mind you staying in her room while she’s with Draco, would that be okay?”

She nodded and took another bite of her cookie. As she swallowed, she said, “do you think we could bake cookies?”

Something lit behind Theo’s eyes. “That would be a lot of fun, we would love to.”

Anticipation and excitement had her smiling back at him, and it was then that Delphini decided that things were going to be okay. That whatever may come, she would be okay.

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The day had been exhausting.

Hermione had woken, safe and comfortable enveloped in Draco’s arms, a smile still on her face from their shared moments before they had both fallen back to sleep. Their peace had been disrupted by Theo, barging into Draco’s room and jumping onto the bed atop both of them, to tell them how happy he was that they were safe. Then he proceeded to lay in between them, talking almost nonstop, to Draco’s growing ire and Hermione’s amusement.

But since then, the day had worn on with what felt like endless interviews, questions, and relinquishing specific memories from her night spent in Bellatrix's home.

Through her own questions, she discovered that Bellatrix was already being prepped for removal to Azkaban, where she would be serving her previous sentence while awaiting further trial to determine punishment for her crimes during the second wizarding war and after. Her sister, Narcissa, was being charged with harbouring Bellatrix, keeping her survival a secret, and the role she had played in the theft from the Ministry and Halpert's death. Although Narcissa had not known of Bellatrix's plan to harm anyone, she had still let Delphini mimic Hermione and steal the Horcrux from the Ministry, knowing exactly what that would mean. She would need to stand trial, but Harry had mentioned to Draco that house arrest was a possibility. Narcissa's memories and her interviews under voluntary Veritaserum had shown that her motivations had lain with protecting Delphini at all costs. That her choices had little to do with her sister, but instead with her niece. Narcissa had feared for the public outcry if they had known Voldemort had fathered a child, and what it would mean for Delphini.

Her trial was already set, for two weeks from that day, where the Wizengamot would decide her sentencing.

Delphini, being a minor with little choice behind her actions, had already been cleared. Her own memories of the day that she had infiltrated the Ministry had shown Harry and the other Aurors clear manipulation by Bellatrix. Hermione had been surprised to learn that Harry and Theo would house the girl until they figured out where she would live on a more permanent basis. Draco had pulled Harry aside not long after that announcement to make sure he was alright with it, and offered Delphini a place to stay on his Estate. Harry had been adamant that she was welcome at their flat, but would leave it up to Delphini to decide.

Apparently, Theo had made promises to bake cookies, so that decision had been a quick one for Delphini.

Though it was Draco who took her through the floo in the late afternoon to their flat, Hermione close behind them.

As she stepped out of the fire, Draco was showing her around the living room and Delphini had stopped by the bookcase, already pulling a book from the shelf. Hermione moved over to her.

"Do you like to read?" Hermione asked her kindly.

Delphini nodded, holding up 'The Wizard of Oz', a childhood favourite of Hermione's. "I read a lot, usually. Do you?"

"A bit," she said and Draco snorted behind her but tried to hide it with a cough. Hermione sent him a look over her shoulder and he just grinned affectionately at her. "You can read any of these books, whenever you like."

Delphini smiled brightly. "Thanks, Hermione."

“Do you want to see the room you’ll be staying in?”

She nodded, and Hermione led her to her room. It felt like it had been forever since she had slept in it. She flicked her wand to clean the sheets and make the bed, and Delphini watched her with interest as Hermione used her magic to tidy up the piles of books and other items that had been strewn a little haphazardly around the room.

Hermione sat on the edge of the bed, watching Delphini take in everything around her. She had a small bundle of belongings that they had picked up from the cottage, and placed it on the ground by the door. Her gaze was inquisitive as it traced over everything in the room. Hermione could see it now; what had struck her so completely about this girl. Her features were a perfect blend between Bellatrix Lestrange and Tom Riddle—the younger version of him. So reminiscent of two people who had brought Hermione countless nightmares, and it had made her uncomfortable at first. But after a mere handful of minutes in the girl’s company, Hermione had found that the similarities seemed to have stopped at her outward appearance. Delphini was curious and bright, taking in information quickly, and forming opinions that seemed free of the kind of prejudice that had come all too easily to her parents.

“How are you doing, Delphi?” Hermione asked.

The young girl had been busy flicking the lamp on and off. She stopped, leaving it on, and turned to Hermione.

“I feel sad,” Delphini said, her eyes dropping to the bed covers, her fingers moving over the patterns on the material. “I miss mum and my aunty. I know mum wasn’t a good person and wasn’t nice to you, though, and I’m sorry.”

Hermione appraised the girl, feeling a wave of affection for her. “That’s okay. You’re allowed to miss them. And you don’t need to apologize... we can’t control the actions of others, only our own.”

Delphini nodded slowly before she looked over at her. “I want to be a good person.”

Hermione noticed a movement in her periphery and looked to find Draco was standing in the doorway, a contemplative look on his face as he watched the two of them.

Delphini noticed him then, and straightened a little, eyes widening.

“You can be anything you want to be, Delphi,” Draco said.

“Do you think so?” The hope in the girl’s voice was undeniable as she looked at her cousin.

Draco stood a little stiffly as he glanced between them. Hermione watched him shift uncomfortably before he swallowed and moved into the room. She heard his deep, levelling breath as he quietly sat next to Delphini on the bed.

He cleared his throat before he spoke. “You know, Delphi, we have a lot of family history, and someday I’ll tell you all about it. For now, I’d like to tell you about my father and me. It

might help you understand that we can overcome bad influences—they don't have to shape your future. You get to choose what you do and who you become.”

Delphini was silent, her body twisting to face Draco with every word, face enraptured.

“Would you like to hear that story?”

Her hair, usually a shining silver, brightened to a white blonde so that as Hermione watched the two of them, she thought they could be siblings. Delphini certainly looked up at Draco like he held all the answers to any question she's ever had.

“Oh... yes, please.”

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Hermione and Draco stayed for dinner, so it was late by the time they stepped through the floo to his Estate. There wasn't even a discussion about it, regardless of the fact that her bedroom was now housing his young cousin; it seemed natural that she would be going home with him.

Draco certainly hadn't made any indication otherwise, especially as he took up her hand and practically tugged her over to the fireplace in a firm hold while they continued to say their goodnights to Harry, Theo and Delphini.

Hermione enjoyed very much seeing Draco's face as she walked from his bathroom and into his bedroom in the same 'Savage Garden' tee shirt that she had worn on a few occasions when she had started appearing in his bedroom. There were some... interesting memories attached to the shirt, and Draco certainly seemed to remember them as a tinge of pink crept into his cheeks.

But he was a perfect gentleman as they each tucked up into his bed, and he pulled her into his side as they sat.

Watching the clock.

It went unspoken between them, but they were waiting for midnight. Despite knowing that the Horcrux was gone, and that the old marriage magic had told Hermione that it was the end, they were both waiting for today to become tomorrow with trepidation.

Draco had her hand between both of his, pulled into his lap. He traced small patterns over the back of her hand as they sat silently. They had one lamp lit, and it was enough that Hermione could watch Draco's profile beside her, marvelling at the beauty of him. She finally felt like she had the time to truly appreciate the man next to her. Since it had all started, Hermione always felt the urgency, the time ticking, the pressure of not knowing what havoc they were causing by their proximity. Now, there was a feeling of peace between them, of ease—of a wealth of time to spend looking, touching, kissing, *existing* together.

“You're staring.”

She smirked a little, not looking away. “Tell me something I don't know.”

“That’d be difficult,” he said, his own signature smirk tilting his lips up, his eyes still on her hand as he continued to make idle patterns over her skin, “the know-it-all that you are.”

Hermione bit back her laugh. “You think you’re so funny, don’t you?”

“No, thinking has nothing to do with it—I *know* I’m funny,” Draco said, his voice low and teasing, “alas, I am also a bit of a know-it-all. I fear our marriage will never work.”

Hermione scoffed, her heart soaring at the playfulness of the moment. She had gravely missed this with Draco. “Of course thinking has nothing to do with it, because you simply don’t *think*.”

“Oh, you must be tired, darling,” he said with a small laugh. He then tilted his head back and turned towards her, finally meeting her eyes. The silver of his irises twinkled at her. “That wasn’t your best.”

“Thankfully it’s still better than your lack of a comeback.”

Draco smirked mischievously at her, before he leaned forward and captured her lips in a soft, warm kiss that had her sighing. When he pulled back from her, he was smiling.

“Well Miss know-it-all—”

“That’s Mrs know-it-all to you, thanks.”

His smirk only deepened. “Apologies, *Mrs* know-it-all, but I *do* know something that you don’t.”

“Is that right?”

“Mm-hmm,” Draco murmured with a nod, his nose brushing across her cheek before he pressed a kiss to her temple.

“Enlighten me, then.”

His mouth moved closer to her ear, and then he whispered to her, “it’s after midnight.”

Hermione uttered a soft gasp, and turned her head, seeing the clock and confirming that he was right. While she had been watching him, and then talking with him, a new day had begun.

And nothing had happened.

When Hermione turned back to Draco, there was a grin on his face, and there was a sense of relief so stark inside of her that she almost collapsed into his chest.

The lamp that had been on flicked out, his arms around her as he pulled them down into the bed. His embrace was warm, and his soft kisses were gentle.

And they spent the night with each other, finally knowing that nothing and no one was going to come in between them.

## Chapter End Notes

WOW OKAY SO ---- only one chapter left, which will be an epilogue :)

I can't believe we're so close to the end, such a bittersweet feeling! But I'm so grateful to anyone who has been here with me and following along, I truly couldn't do this without you guys.

I'll be back with that final chapter next week Tuesday!

xx

Forawhile



# IT ENDS WITH FOREVER

## Chapter Notes

Beta credit to MyPrivateInsanity - I'm so grateful for your support, the finished fic as it is would not be the same with you!! xx

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

\*~\* *Six Months Later* \*~\*

Hermione was never going to escape Draco Sodding Malfoy.

This was the thought that made her smirk as she glanced down at the fabric in her hands. It was a handkerchief, one that had been stowed away in a drawer of her desk without her knowledge. When she had opened the drawer moments ago, finding it there, Hermione had frowned and automatically reached for it.

Then she laughed loudly into the quiet air of the Archives.

Stitched into one corner of the handkerchief was a very familiar 'DLM', while in the other corner, he'd had stitched 'HJGM'.

Hermione shook her head, unable to conceal her mirth as little giggles escaped from between her lips, recalling so vividly the morning she had mocked him for embroidering his handkerchiefs. And Draco, being so very *Draco*, had mocked her right on back.

Draco. Sodding. Malfoy.

And fuck if she didn't love him more than anything in the universe.

Tucking the handkerchief into the pocket of her skirt, Hermione attempted to resume her work, though her lips kept pressing and rolling together as she tried to hide how ridiculously happy she was. It was silly, really, how every few moments, giddiness would flood her veins and she couldn't help but smile. It was hurting her cheeks (and productivity, but, meh), so she really needed to get a grip, but—*Draco*.

Smile.

Sigh.

Hermione shook her head again, willing herself to focus, and reached for the next item she needed to catalogue. It was labelled as pre-war, something wrapped tightly in cloth. She cast her now-standard Impervious charm over her hands and carefully unwrapped the item. When

she pulled open the last bit of cloth, she reared back slightly, heart jumping in her chest before she could control her reaction.

A little knife sat on the cloth. Small, unassuming, like a throwing knife. It was plain silver, with some small etching on the tiny hilt. The dangerous edge winked in the lamplight, almost like it was teasing her.

Despite the Impervious charm, Hermione just raised her eyebrows and flung the cloth back over the knife, re-wrapping it as she muttered, “not on your freaking life.”

She’d earned a little wariness.

Setting it aside to send to her colleagues instead, Hermione was reaching for the next item when a sharp *cracking* sound had her head whipping up, startled.

Draco was in front of her desk, a small smile on his face as his eyes took her in greedily and he automatically leaned forward onto the tabletop with both hands. He towered over her, grey eyes shining.

Her heart leapt again, though this time it was somersaulting with joy at the sight of him. Yet, Hermione still narrowed her eyes and let out a little sigh. “Draco... we said we wouldn’t use the rings in the Ministry while we’re working.”

Draco’s grin just widened as he kept her gaze like he wasn’t capable of looking away from her.

“That we did, but I’m an impatient man, and I didn’t know where you’d be.”

She sent him a look with a raised brow. “Because *at her desk* was too tough for you to puzzle out?”

His answering grin was almost feral, something darkening behind his eyes. Draco always loved it when she turned on her snark mode. Hermione loved it in return just as much; his sharp-witted words always *melted* her. He leaned closer toward her on the desk, his eyes roaming over her face and then down to the shirt she wore. Her heart tumbled and started a quicker rhythm; she knew he would appreciate the shirt she had chosen today.

“How am I supposed to know whether you’ve gotten lost somewhere in the rabbit warren you call a workspace?” he said, voice low.

“And of course it’s too much to just check my desk first *before* committing an illegal action *inside* the Ministry of Magic?”

Draco’s eyes lifted from perusing the gap in her shirt where the silky green tie sat knotted near the hollow of her throat. The silver of his eyes pierced her, sending her pulse thundering in the same way it always did.

Hermione swallowed at the look he was giving her, and before he could respond to her sarcasm, she huffed and told him, “stop looking at me like that.”

His smile had a wicked edge to it. “Like what, love?”

She shook her head, lips pursing in a bid to hide her smile. “We said we would wait,” Hermione chastised, only half-heartedly, “I didn’t sleep on a couch in my old flat last night for the fun of it, you know?”

He lifted a brow and smirked at her. “No? I thought you relished a slumber party with Theo and Delphi? Did they not promise you baked goods?”

Delphini had been very adamant on baking a very decadent chocolate cake, to Theo’s vigorous approval and Harry’s weary consent. Over the months living with them, Delphi had become quite the baking connoisseur under Theo’s watchful eye, and Harry kept grumbling that he’d had to go up a trouser size because of it.

“Yes, but still...” Hermione said with a stern look, “we’re still going to... wait.”

She was hesitating to speak the sentence, the word ‘*wait*’ coming out barely a whisper. Because the way Draco was looking at her promised all kinds of sinful things that made her skin tingle and insides warm immediately.

Hermione swallowed, eyes raking over his looming form. Draco had worn his black button-up, sleeves rolled up to bare his delightful forearms. His brown leather holster was fitted neatly and securely across his chest. She bit at her lip and tried to hide a scowl. Hermione knew he was trying to entice her on purpose—Draco *knew* all too well that the very sight of that damned holster had her weak in the knees. If he tried to kiss her, touch her... she would be done for. She would become a shivering mess under his attentions and Hermione wouldn’t be able to resist—wouldn’t want to.

And he knew it.

The glint in his eyes told her so.

“Whatever you say,” he said, cocking his head to the side as he held her gaze, “so... how are you doing?”

Hermione smirked up at him, knowing what he was asking. “As warm as can be—you?”

The grin he’d had was morphing, settling into something affectionate. “My feet have never been warmer.”

The warmth they spoke of glowed inside her chest.

She nodded, and then had to pull her eyes away from him—and that fucking holster—to glance back at her paperwork so she could attempt to get some work done. “Great, so I’ll see you... tomorrow?”

Hermione didn’t look up as her pulse raced around her veins. The thought of tomorrow had her giddy and nervous, but mostly so outrageously happy.

Draco's fingers tapped on her desk, and she pointedly refrained from looking at them, resolutely keeping her eyes glued to her paperwork.

"I'm not done seeing you now," Draco said in a rugged voice which forced her gaze back upwards, colliding with his. His eyes were roaming again over the silky Slytherin-green shirt she wore. "You say you want to wait, Hermione, and yet... you're wearing *that* today?" His head tilted to the side and his silver eyes narrowed. "Really?"

Her chest lifted with a sharp inhale.

Just like Draco wore... *that*, Hermione had also come armed to the teeth.

His fingers drummed against the wood of her desk again, as though agitated.

"Whatever could you mean?" she said, injecting innocence into her tone and blinking up at him with a sly smile.

Draco pushed out a small laugh and then shook his head slowly at her, all while keeping her gaze fixedly. His mouth opened as he ran his tongue along the edges of his teeth, the tip stopping at the edge of a canine. The look he gave her was pure possessiveness and need. Hermione shifted in her seat under the intensity of it, needing to rub her thighs together beneath the table.

He leaned a little closer to her, bracing his weight on one arm so that the muscles around his shoulder strained. "If you're wearing that stupid fucking skirt, Hermione, I swear to all the Gods..."

She breathed in deeply as her thighs squeezed together again... beneath the fabric of said *stupid fucking skirt*.

When Hermione didn't answer him, his eyes flared.

"Stand up."

Her heart leapt and something primal started to thunder through her at the command.

"Draco..." His name came out almost a moan, both from her own building need and from trying to maintain some semblance of self-control. Because people waited before the day of their wedding—didn't they? It seemed like a sweet thing to do, it seemed like... well, right now it seemed fucking stupid. Because she felt like she might die if Draco didn't put his hands on her, didn't slide inside her until she was crying his name.

"Stand. Up."

His voice, the demand, skated down her spine and she *actually* shivered.

Planting both hands on the desk, Hermione stared at him as she pushed herself to stand, the short black skirt she wore coming into his view.

The breath he exhaled was audible, and his eyes fell shut.

Draco kept his eyes closed, and he turned his head to the side and seemed to be contemplating something before he spoke. Finally, still not looking at her, he said in a thin voice, “is waiting really what you want, Hermione? Because if it is, I’ll turn around and walk away right now. I might have to run to keep my hands off you, but I’ll do it.”

The holster pulled taut across his chest in the way he was half-turned away from her, like he simply couldn’t look at her if he wanted to keep his control. Hermione buzzed under the desire, like a flame spreading across her skin, threatening to burn her alive.

Her mouth went dry and her hands curled into little fists against the desktop.

When she didn’t respond, Draco growled and said, “*Hermione*—do you truly want to wait?”

“Does it look like I do?”

Draco’s eyes snapped open, head turning, and he resumed the penetrating stare at her. He roamed his gaze over her, taking in the haziness of her own eyes, the tautness of her body as she leaned towards him on the desk.

“It looks like you want to go home wearing something else—because I’m going to tear those right off you and fuck you until you can’t stand straight.”

Hermione could have whined with what the words did to her, with the way she burned between her legs, her core clenching around nothing and demanding to be filled.

The desk between them was the only thing that kept her from leaping at him.

Draco’s jaw jumped as he clenched his teeth, then he was glancing behind him, sweeping his gaze around the empty spaces leading toward the elevators. When he turned back to Hermione, his eyes were dark, the smallest of smiles on his lips. It was something wild and dominating.

He pushed away from the desk and rounded it, so slowly that Hermione could only watch him as anticipation skated down her spine.

When Draco was on her side of the desk, he stopped, barely a metre away from her.

“One step, Hermione,” he said, voice low and guttural, “and I’m yours.”

She could see it in his eyes—the absolute feral need for her. His entire body seemed to vibrate with it. And yet, Draco still left it up to her, let it be her choice. It only made her want him more, so it was a simple choice.

Hermione started to step forward, and she had barely moved her foot a few inches when he descended on her.

Draco took her up in his arms, pulling her body into his tightly while his mouth took hers fiercely. His groan rumbled through him, vibrating against her chest. She felt it in every section of her body and her hands flew upwards, gripping onto the leather straps of his holster and pulling against them, demanding he get closer to her.

He kissed like he was starved of her, like he hadn't kissed her in months, mouth claiming her at a fast, hungry pace. She was panting and uttering tiny moans by the time his mouth left hers to trail a series of light kisses across her cheek until he was at her ear.

"I fucking missed you last night," he growled into her ear, before he nipped at the bottom of her lobe and began to kiss a pathway down her neck. Hermione's eyes fell shut and she tilted her head, the sounds of her heavy breathing loud in her own ears. "I never want to spend a night without you again."

She didn't know why she ever thought abstaining was a good idea. Because *this* was everything. *This* was the best idea ever.

"But... if I hadn't spent the night away," Hermione said in between pants, "I wouldn't have been able to surprise you with this outfit."

Draco hummed gruffly against her flesh before biting none too gently at the juncture between her shoulder and neck. She gasped in a breath, hands tightening around the leather against his chest. He gripped at the sides of her hips as he straightened and looked down at her, blazing heat behind his eyes.

"You could wear anything," he murmured, a hand gliding up the curve of her waist, "and I would need to ravish you."

Hermione released the holster and smoothed her hands up to curl them around his neck. She smirked up at him. "I'll have to test that out."

Draco's eyes flashed down at her and his head shook slightly. "You're always testing me, witch." His fingers tightened around her waist and pulled her lower body hard into his. Hermione pressed her lips together to stifle her moan at the feel of him against her.

His hand drifted down until she could feel his fingers brushing against the skin of her thigh beneath the hem of her skirt. Draco kept her gaze while he tracked back upward with his fingers, snagging the hem to drag it slowly up her thigh.

Hermione swallowed, and despite wanting his hands on her desperately, she removed her own hand from around his neck and slapped it over his to stop him.

"Draco," she breathed, looking past him at the darkened spaces of the office around them, "we can't do this here, anyone could walk in."

The look on his face turned wicked. "Quite right, love." Without warning, he bent and scooped her up, tossing her easily over his shoulder. Hermione squeaked in surprise, her wide eyes suddenly staring at his back—at the criss-cross leather where the holster knit together over the black material of his shirt.

"Draco!" Hermione protested as he started to move quickly away from her desk and into the sprawling aisles of the Archives.

Draco was breathing a little heavily as he strode, holding Hermione over his shoulder like she weighed nothing. “I’ve had many thoughts about you in this top and Gods-damned skirt, love, and *many* thoughts about fucking you against these shelves... two birds, as the expression goes.”

Hermione smacked lightly against his bum and she heard him chuckling as he continued to wend his way further into the depths of the Archives. “You and your idioms.” Another low chuckle rumbled from him.

Apparently satisfied with the darkness and silence around them, Draco stopped suddenly and slid her body back down his chest until Hermione’s feet connected with the ground, upright once more.

He walked her backwards, eyes blazing, until her back hit the shelf, and then his hands were back on her body and his lips were back on her mouth. Draco always managed to kiss her in a way that made her body tremble, made her blood boil with arousal, made her want to sink to her knees before him and beg for it. He kissed her like it was the first time and the last time, like he could never get enough.

Within a few passes of his mouth and sweeps of his tongue, Hermione was a writhing mess underneath him, breathless and gasping.

He moved back an inch and muttered, “turn around, Hermione—hands on the shelf.”

Face flushed and biting at her swollen lip, she spun without argument and reached up to grip onto a shelf just above her head.

Draco stepped back into her body, gripping at her hips and grinding himself into her, a groan escaping his lips. His head lowered so he could breathe into her ear, “last chance, Hermione—if you don’t ask me to stop, I’m going to rip this skirt away and take you right here.”

Her only possible answer was to push her backside hard against him.

“*Fuck.*”

Hands left her hips, and then she could feel him tugging at her skirt right before the sound of tearing fabric met her ears. The skirt was suddenly gone, flung away.

Draco’s hands were now circling to her front and tugging roughly on the two bits of silk tied at the hollow of her throat as he muttered, “such a stupid fucking skirt...”

The ties came apart, and Draco was pulling the sides of the green silk away until he was cupping both of her suddenly exposed breasts. Her head fell back against his shoulder, eyes closing, the riot of sensations taking her over entirely.

Her knickers went next, shoved down with little patience until they fell to her ankles. Hermione hastily stepped out of them and was kicking them away when she could hear Draco undoing the buckle of his belt.

An anticipatory tremble wracked her body.

Draco usually had two modes when it came to intimacy with Hermione: slow, gentle and tooth-rottingly sweet; or wild, fast and brutally erotic. She adored both versions of sex with Draco, but there was something inside of her that came undone at snapping his control, at having him *need* her in such a way that the manner of his movements became feral, almost manic.

That morning, Hermione had clearly unlocked the second version of him.

No sooner did she hear Draco tug ferociously at his belt, than he kicked at one of her legs, widening her stance. Hermione just had time to grip harder at the edge of the bookshelf before he was upon her, a hand snaking around her waist and pulling her ass towards him, forcing her back to arch. Then she felt him between her legs for barely a heartbeat before he slammed into her.

Her mouth fell open and a wild moan escaped her throat, his answering exhale sounding almost relieved. He stayed fully seated inside of her, unmoving, for just a moment, their ragged breaths floating around the dark aisle.

When Hermione couldn't take the feeling of fullness without the friction of him moving, she wiggled her hips and whimpered. Draco swore in a low voice as he began to move, the first few thrusts slow before his control seemed to shatter once more and he was pounding into her.

"Can't—get enough—of you," he said, voice strained. His grip against her shoulder as he pushed into her over and over was punishing in a delicious way, "Gods—you feel so—fucking perfect—"

His free hand slid from her waist and around to her breast, pinching and tugging at her nipple before rolling it around with his palm. He had certainly learned over the months that she both hated and loved nipple stimulation while he fucked her. It made her breasts feel heavy, nipples tight and sensitive. It made Hermione feel so many sensations that it was almost too much to take. She often found herself wanting to push away his hands, while simultaneously pleading for more. Draco seemed to take his own pleasure from the way she would writhe and moan and shiver under the ministrations.

He plucked at her nipple again and she bit down hard on her lip to stifle the embarrassing sounds that threatened to tear from her throat.

The growling noises he made himself took Hermione to the edge of her own control, and her body started to match his pace, pushing back against his every thrust, her body eagerly building towards something powerful.

His responding groan was animalistic, and then Draco was snaking a hand around to grip at the underside of her neck in the possessive way that Hermione loved. He used his hold under her jaw to pull her head back against his shoulder. "Such a good girl," he ground out beside her ear. Hermione whimpered as her cunt clenched around him, her body already on the edge, ready to splinter apart.



Her breath stuttered as she felt it coming for her, his cock ramming in and out of her in a way that her body greedily accepted, demanded.

It was then that Draco's own feelings slammed into her. She was usually good at blocking it out these days, after months of practicing to learn what the triggers were and finding ways to push them back: mostly to respect his privacy, but also because she was often overwhelmed by the barrage of his feelings. It often made her want to cry with severe delight at how intense his feelings were for her.

But now, Hermione was wholly distracted and susceptible to it in a mad kind of way. And boy, did it barrel into her. It was his love, his pleasure, his possessiveness, his pure carnal desire; all of it skittered through her and she was done for.

"Draco..." was the last coherent word Hermione was able to choke out before she fell apart. Her back arched against him, her mouth falling open while the most sinful noises escaped her. She could feel her body clenching around him repeatedly as the orgasm pulsed through her, and Draco's movements became hurried.

"Oh, fuck, baby..." he growled, and then she could feel him swelling inside of her before his own release hit and he was unloading into her.

After a few more shallow thrusts and low groans, Draco stilled, and he was letting out a long, slow breath.

His hand was still around her throat, but the grip eased somewhat, his mouth still beside her ear. "I don't know how you do it, Hermione," he whispered.

She was still panting, body tingling from her orgasm. "Do what?"

Another deep breath, before he said, "make me come like I'm a teenager having his first fuck."

Her laugh was throaty and breathless, and then Draco was sliding carefully out of her.

He helped to repair her clothes and soon they were both dressed and presentable, Draco smoothing down her flyaway hairs while he smiled softly at her. He was always so affectionate and attentive afterwards that it made her heart ache with happiness.

He took her hand and led her back to her desk quietly.

Before he turned to leave, he placed a loving kiss to her mouth, lingering there for a moment before pulling away.

"See you later, love," he murmured, his smile still in place, and then he was turning and beginning to walk away.

"Draco!" she called out and he turned back towards her, eyes glinting in the low lamplight. Hermione licked her swollen-feeling lips and delved a hand into her pocket, before pulling out the white square of fabric. Smirking, she tossed it at him, and he swiped it easily from the

air. With a small, confused frown, he looked down at the handkerchief. “For the mess in your trousers.”

His shoulders shook with his quiet laughter, eyes twinkling as he looked up at her. He fisted the handkerchief and stuffed it into his own pocket before he moved for her again. Closing the distance in two large strides, he captured the sides of her face and kissed her in a way that managed to be both soft and fierce. He pulled away slightly, lower lip still brushing gently against hers as their eyes blinked open and they looked at each other.

“See you tomorrow, love,” Draco whispered to her as he backed away slowly, hands sliding away from her face and making her shiver. “Meet me at midnight.” He winked at her before he turned and walked away.

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The day had felt long. Too long.

Draco had meant to sleep in for as long as he was able. It was going to be a long night, after all. Except his mind had other plans when he woke just after dawn, and the way his body itched with both excitement and nerves meant he would not be finding sleep again.

Not to mention that not half an hour later, Theo was bounding into his room, crackling with energy as he whipped the curtains open, and announcing loudly, “IT’S YOUR WEDDING DAY!”

As if he might have forgotten, as if he was ever capable of forgetting something like that.

It was the best fucking day of his life— he would *not* be forgetting.

The day passed slowly, filled with chatter, laughter, missing Hermione, wardrobe fittings, smacking Theo’s hands away from his hair, missing Hermione, a drink here and there, sharing stories, and of course... missing Hermione.

The sun had long since set by the time Draco, Theo, and Potter all made their way out from the second living room they had been inhabiting all day and out onto the moon-soaked grounds of his Estate.

Narcissa had certainly been busy, and while he had spied bits and pieces of the décor throughout the day in peeks through the curtains, he hadn’t had the opportunity to fully take in and appreciate everything she had organised for the big day.

Floating lights lit the evening, thousands of them bobbing in the air and casting a soft, romantic glow around them. Large brass urns were dotted everywhere, filled with white flowers that permeated the air with a light floral scent. A marquee covered in sprawling greenery housed a series of tables and chairs, as well as a large dance floor alongside the stage where a band would play later. A magical harp played, filling the air with sweet, restful music. The aisle was simple and elegant, with ropes of white silk adorning the sides of the pathway to where Draco would be standing.

He took in the entire scene, his heart fluttering in his chest.

“What do you think?” his mother appeared at his side, placing a gentle hand on the back of his arm as they both looked around under the soft glow of the lanterns above them.

He glanced away and down to Narcissa with a grateful smile. “It’s perfect, Mother, thank you.”

And he was grateful. Narcissa had been back on his Estate for three months now, having been released from prison and now under house arrest. She was able to leave the grounds as long as Draco was with her; otherwise, she was unable to exit the boundaries of the Estate for the next 18 months. Her return presence in his home had been uncomfortable at first, both for him and for Hermione. Narcissa’s role in what had happened still caused him pangs of betrayal, but the more time Draco spent with Delphini, the more he was slowly coming to understand that his mother had been frightened, protective, for the sake of his cousin.

Narcissa took her sentence with grace, and had admitted she deserved worse. For housing a literal murderer, Draco could agree with that. Hermione, being the general martyr that she was, hadn’t made any argument against Narcissa seeing out her sentence on their Estate. Regardless of her adamance that it was no issue for her, Draco ensured his mother was in her own wing, so that he and Hermione had their own space, and she could choose when, and if, she wanted to see Narcissa. Things had been strained between them, initially, but they all had dinner together most evenings, at Hermione’s insistence, and they seemed to get along well enough. Narcissa had expressed, on a great many occasions, how happy she was that Draco had found Hermione. He could, at least, agree with her on that.

Delphini had remained with Potter and Theo, and it seemed she would be there on a more permanent basis. The news of her existence had been quiet in the beginning, but the moment the media caught wind, it spread like wildfire throughout the wizarding community. Some of the articles had been more gentle than others, but there had been some that had set Draco’s teeth on edge and made his blood boil with rage. Not everyone was content to treat her like the innocent child that she was, incapable of controlling her parentage. Instead, some writers had brought up each misdeed that both Bellatrix and Voldemort had committed, splashing Delphini’s face, so similar to both of them, among the articles and questioning the likelihood that she would follow in their footsteps.

Delphini had been shielded from most of it, but it was impossible when they took her on outings to Diagon Alley, and most recently, Hogsmeade. She would be starting Hogwarts in September, so Draco had thought they should not try to hide her—she would need to be used to the stares and whispers before she was thrust into the world of Hogwarts. Potter had been instrumental in helping her deal with the kind of infamy that had heads swivelling towards her, necks bending to whisper behind hands. They had each been saddled with that kind of attention at nearly the same age, and Potter could always be seen sitting with her, or bending to speak gently with her. They had a bond that came from a shared experience, which Draco would never understand, but he and Narcissa both were grateful for Potter and how he and Theo treated Delphi like she was theirs.

Delphini took the worlds’ response in the way she seemed to with everything else: curiosity, followed by a careful introspection to decide how she felt about it. She had told Theo and

Potter that the attention could be overwhelming, but on the whole, she felt she could get used to it until the wizarding world got used to her.

Draco was proud at the way she faced the world she had been so meticulously hidden from, and also found her curious. She was strange to him in a way that was interesting, like a puzzle he wanted to understand. He often caught Delphini looking at him in the same way.

“I’m so happy for you, Draco,” Narcissa said softly, a wobble in her voice as she patted his arm and brought his attention back to the present.

He smiled at her, and before he could say anything further, Theo was yanking on his arm. “Come, groom—you’re needed in position, now.”

He was marched up the aisle, stopping several times on the way to speak to the guests who had gathered for the ceremony.

The entire Auror and Cursebreaker division had shown up, and they swarmed Draco with claps on the back and offers of ‘*congratulations*’. He stopped to speak to the Weasleys, who each wanted to shake his hand; Molly, Arthur, Percy, George, Bill, Fleur, Charlie, Ginny and Ron. Draco hadn’t seen the Weasley part of the Golden Trio in over a decade, so it had been strange to see him in person after so long. He and Hermione had kept in touch while he had travelled overseas with his Quidditch team, and he was still one of her closest friends, so Draco smiled pleasantly at Ron and shook his hand like he wasn’t one of her old flames.

Draco also stopped to speak with Pansy Parkinson and Neville Longbottom, who were now living together and engaged. He hoped for more time to catch up with them, and so many others, as Theo grumbled that he would ‘*miss your own bloody wedding*’ if he didn’t hurry up, and manhandled him to the end of the aisle.

Draco stood, a man who wasn’t used to nerves, and felt his body vibrating with them. He was eager to see her, to have her next to him, to be bound to her forever. Again.

He straightened the cuffs of his shirt and then tilted his head towards Theo next to him. “What’s the time, mate?”

Theo wiggled his brows at him. “Only a few more minutes.”

Draco pulled in a long breath and looked to his other side to grin down at Delphini. She was vibrating with her own excited energy. “How are you guys doing?”

Delphini bounced happily on her toes and wound her arm through Teddy’s, who was frowning slightly in his fitted suit.

“This is so much fun,” Delphini said, eyes twinkling in the light from the lamps.

“Is my suit supposed to be so itchy?” Teddy said, reaching up with his free arm to scratch at the back of his neck.

Delphini rolled her eyes but smiled at Teddy affectionately. Draco smiled at them both. They had been almost inseparable since introducing them months ago. They would be starting

Hogwarts together, and Draco felt better knowing she would have a friend and family member in Teddy while there.

A gentle hand in the middle of his back had Draco twisting to look behind him. Potter was grinning, straightening his glasses and then checking his watch. “It’s almost midnight, Malfoy—you ready?”

Draco blew out another breath and turned back to face the front, his smile slipping into something utterly content. “More than you know.”

Midnight. Something that had become a symbol for Draco and Hermione, something that had once brought them a sense of dread. No longer. They were taking it back for themselves, making it something they would remember fondly for the rest of their days.

The moment midnight hit, the lamps above flared a brilliant, bright light and—

There she was.

Appearing through the doors across the aisle, stealing the breath from his lungs.

She was radiant in her creamy dress, hair loose and spilling around her. Draco couldn’t take his eyes off her. She was smiling nervously—until she caught his gaze, and he watched as her shoulders relaxed and something like relief settled on her features.

They held eyes, and Draco swore he stopped breathing, his heart stopped beating. Everything just stood still while they watched each other.

Then Arthur was next to Hermione, offering her his arm. He had agreed, heartily (and with tears in his eyes), to walk her up the aisle.

She laughed at something he said, the sound reaching Draco’s ears. He felt it like a punch to the stomach and he started breathing again, like it had kick-started his system.

Then she was walking towards him, watching him again. He couldn’t take his eyes off her, not even when she was right there and he was moving forward to shake Arthur’s hand, never glancing away from her face.

Draco reached for her hand, warm fingers winding with his own, and then they were facing one another.

Time seemed to have stopped again, yet he knew it hadn’t. Potter was speaking, welcoming the guests, introducing the ceremony.

But Draco hardly heard a word of it. He could only watch her, her steady gaze settled on his, fingers holding his own. He tugged her closer to him, and she came without argument. He cared little for the procession of the ceremony, or for the guests surrounding them as he leaned closer towards Hermione to whisper to her.

“You are everything I’ve ever wanted, Hermione.”

He heard her breath stall, and her fingers tightened around his own. She leaned back slightly, so he could see her eyes, so Draco could see the sentiment shining right back to him. Hermione leaned back towards him.

Then she was whispering back, a smile in her voice. “How many times have we been married now?”

“Mmm twice up until now, but who’s counting?”

Her quiet laugh was full of warmth. “Guess third time’s the charm.”

Draco could hear that Potter was still chatting away, waxing poetic about love and marriage. He thought he might have just a few more moments to tell her in a way she might understand, just how deep his love was for her. He brought his mouth right up to her ear and said, “I would marry you countless times, in every iteration of our souls out there in the universe, if it meant we were together forever.”

When they leaned back away from each other, Hermione’s eyes shone with her emotion. He wondered if she felt it in his own emotions. If they mingled with hers, and made her feel as warm and elated as Draco did.

Soon Potter was joining their hands together and placing the tip of his wand against their skin, speaking a low incantation for irrevocable bonding. To twine their magic, their souls, for evermore. They had already been enduringly bonded, with the piece of him that lay within Hermione, but they had both still wanted this. The amalgamation of both Draco and Hermione, merged forever.

The golden rings they already wore warmed around their fingers as the bonding magic wound through their beings. He had returned Narcissa’s rings to her, and created his own for Draco and Hermione. He hadn’t been able to resist adding the same (highly illegal) magic that would bring her to him, or him to her, at the crack of apparition. After everything they had endured, Draco wanted to know he could get to her no matter what stood in his way. Hermione had allowed it, mostly because the gesture had included an engraving on the inside of the golden band: a small, intricate carving of an infinity symbol.

She had loved it. She’d even cried a little.

Now, they gazed into each other’s eyes as they felt themselves become bonded eternally.

Infinitely.

Draco bent to kiss Hermione amid thunderous applause, and he had never felt so whole, so completely full. He kissed her like she was everything he needed to survive. And she was.

When their lips parted briefly, she was smiling up at him.

“‘Till death do us part?” she asked, a twinkle in her eyes.

Draco’s gaze flicked between her eyes, his answer easy and on the tip of his tongue, something he had said to her before, and meant it with everything he had.

“Not even then.”

The End

## Chapter End Notes

NEW AUTHOR NOTE (as at 18/01/2025): This fic will remain up until June 01 2025, where it will then be removed from ao3. Thank you to all who have supported me x

Original author notes:

Firstly, to you, the readers: the support of this fic has been incredible and overwhelming. I'm so eternally grateful for it and how it's brought out an eagerness in me to be back in front of my computer, continuing to write. It's brought me so much joy - thank you!

Secondly, the Dramione community as a whole has been such a safe space for me. I hadn't written in years, and suddenly (since April) I've written a whopping 380k words, and it's been fantastic, like rediscovering a passion but finally having people to share it with.

Thirdly, I would be overjoyed if you wanted to find me on my socials: Instagram/Infinitybooks and TikTok/awritersproject - I post fairly regularly and love to interact with those who have the same interests as I do. Plus, if you're at all interested, I'm working on something I plan to self-publish early 2025 (YIKES), so updates will be there.

Lastly, I will be back on the Dramione / Ao3 scene. I'm addicted to it a bit, and I already have ideas in the back of my mind on what I'd like to write next, but I'll be taking a wee break first. Feel free to slam the user subscribe so when I do pop back in, you'll get a sneaky email to let you know, would love to have you along on the next fic journey!

Later, loves - it's been a blast.

xx

Forawhile

Works inspired by this one

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